



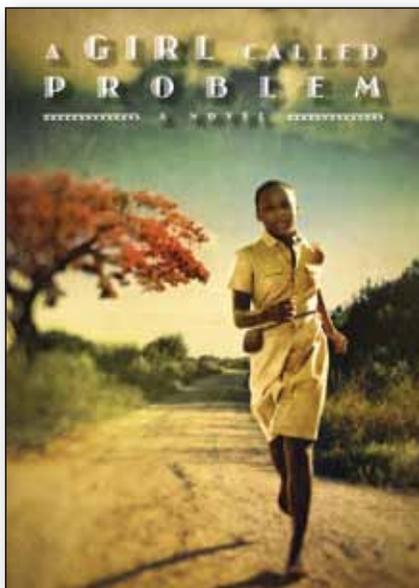
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EDUCATOR'S GUIDE

INCLUDES COMMON CORE
STATE STANDARDS CORRELATIONS

A GIRL CALLED PROBLEM

Written by **KATIE QUIRK**



Tum, tum, tum, ratta, tum, tum, tum. *The village's talking drums cut through the humid air, announcing a meeting, an important meeting. The elders of Litongo had been consulting in private for nearly two days. Whispers were floating around that the elders were considering moving the entire village, but no one really believed the rumor. The people of Litongo had lived in this place for generations, and moving the village made as much sense as moving the moon.*

Thirteen-year-old Shida has lived a life filled with problems. So when the elders of her Tanzanian village make the controversial decision to move to a new location, Shida welcomes the change, hoping for new opportunities. But not everyone in her village shares that hope.

ABOUT the Author

KATIE QUIRK wrote the middle-grade novel *A Girl Called Problem* after living and teaching in Tanzania. She currently lives in Maine and is working on a book about raising her son in India. Visit her website at www.katie-quirk.com.

PRAISE FOR *A Girl Called Problem*

★ "A mesmerizing read that expands young readers' worldview even as the pages turn."
— *Kirkus Reviews* (starred review)

"Smart commentary, an honestly interesting storyline, and sharp writing from start to finish, Quirk quickly establishes herself as one author to watch."
— *A Fuse #8 Production*

"Shida is a heroine whom readers will root for as she struggles to discover a way to help the people she loves."
— *The Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books*

"Welcome and worthwhile."
— *New York Times Book Review*

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If you have any suggestions for using *A Girl Called Problem* with young readers, we would be happy to hear from you.

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EDUCATOR'S GUIDE

THEMATIC CONNECTIONS

- ❖ Change vs. Tradition
- ❖ Family
- ❖ Mystery
- ❖ Tanzanian History

VOCABULARY USE AND ACQUISITION

In the first several chapters, you are introduced to a lot of new foreign words and characters — Sukuma, Swahili, Shida, *jembe*, Nyerere, *ujamaa*. Flip to the back of the book and look up these words in the glossary. Then pick one other glossary definition for a word that is not in the first two chapters and predict how that word will be a part of our story. (L. 4)

In chapter five, we learn where the word “Sukuma” comes from. What is the origin of this name? Look up the etymology of your country, town, or ethnic group’s name and then explain it to a friend or classmate. (L. 4)

KEY IDEAS AND DETAILS

Shida has a large family, and in many ways it is structured differently than most Western families. Make a list of Shida’s relatives, then draw a diagram of how they are all related. What makes their family structure different from yours? (RL. 3)

In the book, Shida first shows her healing skills with Baby Lewanga. What makes her talented? Describe someone in your own life — a doctor, counselor, teacher, or friend — who does a good job of making you feel well, either physically or emotionally. What makes them talented? (RL. 3)

When Shida and her mom move, they take just a few things, which they can carry with them. What are these possessions? If you were to move, you’d probably take a lot more with you. How would your life be better if you owned just a few things like Shida? What would you really miss? (RL. 1)

Shida’s mom can be quite difficult. List some of the challenges Shida has with her. Do you think Shida is more patient than she should be with her mom, or not patient enough? Explain why. (RL. 3)

Shida and Grace spot a long black string collar with a bell on it hanging somewhere at the end of chapter six. What is the place, and what do you think Shida and Grace suspect when they see it there? Do you think their suspicions will turn out to be true? (RL. 1)

People say Uncle Bujiko is up late working for *ujamaa*. Remind yourself of what that word means by googling it. Do

a little reading while you’re there. What have you learned? Would you want to live in an *ujamaa* village? (RL. 1)

We learn from Babu that Sukuma people believe witches have red eyes, but what else causes a person to have red eyes? Why is this important? Both Babu and Grace pose the question — do witches choose to become witches, or does society make them into witches? What do you think? (RL. 2)

Shida is delighted to hear Mama tell Babu, “The sun knows you’ve brought us to the right home.” Why is this statement from Mama particularly moving for Shida? What does Mama say earlier in the book that contradicts this statement or, more importantly, marks a shift in Mama’s current thinking? (RL. 3)

What does Shida learn about Mama Malongo when they meet in the field? What does she learn about her mother? About Babu? Do you think Shida’s thoughts about witches are changed in general? Why? (RL. 3)

Shida makes reference to her rock pyramid several times throughout the story. What does it symbolize? (RL. 2)

Babu says, “Your mother needs this” to Shida when he tries to convince Shida to take her mother with her as a witness to Uncle Bujiko’s fields. Why does Shida question bringing Mama? Why does Babu believe Mama needs to come along? (RL. 1)

CRAFT AND STRUCTURE

Notice that all the chapters begin with an African proverb. Pick several chapters, and then write a paragraph for each about how you think the proverb connects to the events of the chapter. For some chapters, the meaning is not entirely obvious, so you and your classmates might come up with very different answers, and that’s okay. (RL. 5)

The climax of a novel is the dramatic turning point in the story. Which scene provides the climax for *A Girl Called Problem*? Explain your choice using specific references to the story. (RL. 5)

The author has chosen to use many Sukuma and Swahili words throughout the book. How does this affect the tone of the story? (RL. 4)



EDUCATOR'S GUIDE

SPEAKING AND LISTENING / WRITING

Shida wonders at the end of the first chapter if she could be cursed for leaving Litongo. At that point, write down a prediction about whether you think she will be cursed. Explain why or why not you think she'll be cursed. If she is cursed, what might the curse be? **(W. 1 / W. 3)**

Shida sees Njia Panda for the first time in chapter four. She is excited by a lot of what she sees. Pick the moment when you think she is most excited and draw what is in front of her. Show your drawings to classmates and describe what Shida is looking at. **(SL. 2)**

Several characters in this book are against the idea of having girls in school. Discuss the following questions with your classmates: Why do you think this concerns them so much? What makes the idea scary to them? Imagine you live in the same time and go to the same school, but you live in a world where either only girls or only boys go to school. What would be some of the effects of excluding an entire gender from school? **(SL. 1)**

Shida helps the nurse take care of Baby Lewanga. What skills does she offer, which the nurse doesn't have? If Shida hadn't come to the clinic that day, what do you imagine might have happened? Write out a short exchange of dialogue between the nurse and Mama and Baby Lewanga to describe how things might have gone without Shida. **(W. 3)**

Shida and the nurse talk about early marriage in chapter fourteen. Both of them want to avoid getting married, at least for a while. Why do you think that is? Imagine if you were married by age fifteen. List ways in which your life would be different. **(W. 1 / W. 3)**

Uncle Bujiko is extremely angry at the end of chapter nineteen. Why do you think that is? What do you think is going through his head? Write out some dialogue that puts his thoughts into voice. **(W. 3)**

Read all of the Author's Notes at the back of the book. Take notes about one of the topics discussed there that is of interest to you. Write down three questions for further research about *ujamaa*, Nyerere, girls in development, or even another subject inspired by the book. **(W. 7)**

Moving to Njia Panda has come at a great cost for Shida, but consider how she will benefit in living here. How do you predict her future will be different as a result? Discuss with your classmates what you think Shida will be doing when she is twenty years old. **(SL. 1)**

INTEGRATION OF KNOWLEDGE AND IDEAS

Traditional Sukuma stories help to shape Shida's sense of her world and to inspire her: she tells the story of Masala Kulangwa to her mom to motivate her finally to leave Litongo; and Babu tells the story of the first Sukuma ancestor to Grace and Shida, encouraging them to stay strong at the beginning of their move. What stories inspire you? What forms do they come in: books, movies, friends' stories, or something else? **(RL. 9)**

A Girl Called Problem is historical fiction, but it is also in many ways a mystery novel. Think of other novels you have read from each genre. Make a list of characteristics that this book has in common with stories from each of the other genres. Do they have similar plots or types of characters? Do they deal with any of the same themes? **(RL. 9)**

SUPPLEMENTAL ONLINE MATERIALS

Visit www.katie-quirk.com and follow the links for *A Girl Called Problem* to find the following resources and more:

- ❖ Author pictures of Tanzania
- ❖ A video depicting the life of a modern Tanzanian girl
- ❖ Even more discussion questions for each chapter of the book
- ❖ Suggestions for further reading