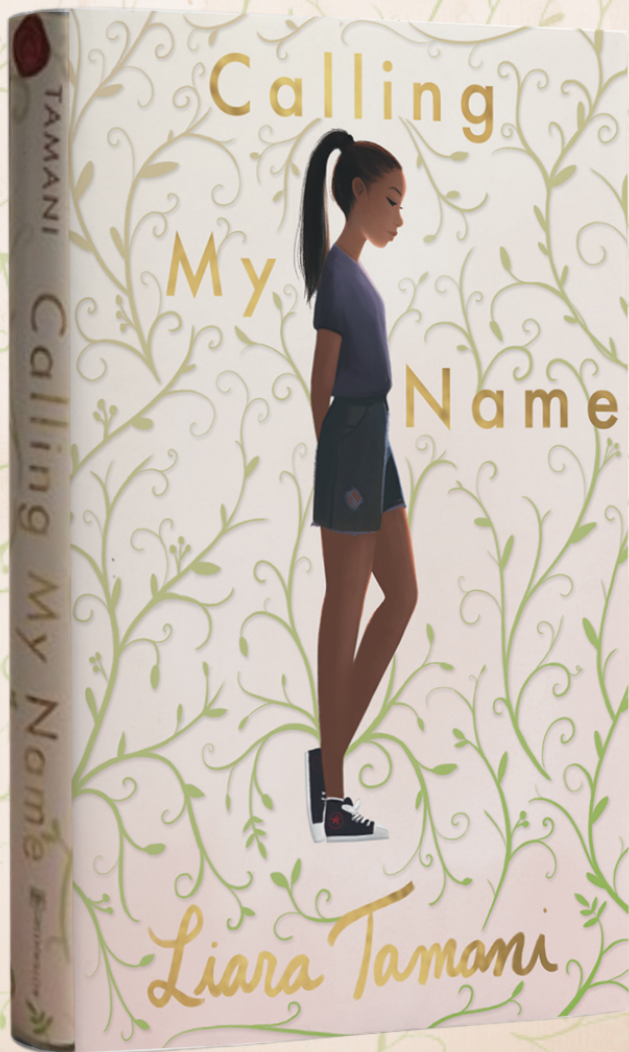
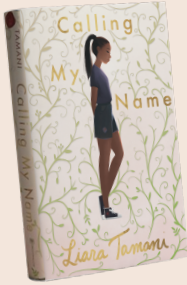


# Learning GUIDE FOR



A Standards Aligned Educator Guide for Grades 8 - 12  
CALLING MY NAME





## About the Book

**AGE RANGE:** 13 - 17 years

**GRADE LEVEL:** 8 - 12

**PUBLISHER:** HarperCollins Publisher

**ISBN-10:** 0062656872

**ISBN-13:** 9780062656872

*Calling My Name* is a striking, luminous, and literary exploration of family, spirituality, and self—ideal for readers of Jacqueline Woodson, Jandy Nelson, Naomi Shihab Nye, and Sandra Cisneros.

This unforgettable novel tells a universal coming-of-age story about Taja Brown, a young African American girl growing up in Houston, Texas, and deftly and beautifully explores the universal struggles of growing up, battling family expectations, discovering a sense of self, and finding a unique voice and purpose.

Told in fifty-three short, episodic, moving, and iridescent chapters, *Calling My Name* follows Taja on her journey from middle school to high school. Literary and noteworthy, this is a beauty of a novel that captures the multifaceted struggle of finding where you belong and why you matter.

# PRE-READING Activity

Create a dialectical journal to write down meaningful passages even if you cannot immediately match them to a literary strategy or device. How do you interpret the passages? What significance do they have in the story? Do they make you recall any aspects of your own life?

Look for examples of the following literary devices in the passages you choose: **Repetition** (*alliteration, cataloging, anaphora, assonance*), **sensory detail** (*sight, smell, touch, taste, sound*), **simile, imagery, metaphor, foreshadowing, flashback, motif**.

What impact do they have on the plot and for the reader?

Passage	Interpretation	Significance (analytical or personal)	Literary Device (if found)

## THEMES, PART ONE

**Self-Trust:** Throughout the novel, much of Taja’s journey is about learning how to trust her intuition, the deep knowing inside of a person that serves as a guide in life. With other people constantly telling her what to think and believe, learning to trust herself is a process that takes bravery. How do you feel when your thoughts and opinions differ from others? Are there times when you’ve gone along with other people, despite your difference in judgement, to be accepted? How did the experience make you feel? What are ways we can make space for people to hold different opinions?

**Spirituality and Religion:** As Taja seeks to understand the world around her and develop her own sense of spirituality, she questions her family’s thoughts about religion (“a **personal set or institutionalized system of religious attitudes, beliefs, and practices**”). As you read, keep track of her internal voice, which is often italicized, as well as the conversations and interactions she has with others that reveal her differences in thought.

**Southern Black Girlhood:** While Taja’s story is about her individual experience, it is also connected to the common experience that many black girls growing up in the South shared in the 1990s. However, the emotions she experiences along her journey are universal because they are human. As you read, notice how often you can relate to Taja’s feelings (no matter how different your background may be).

# THEMES, PART TWO

***Full Spectrum of Human Nature:*** Taja doesn't always do and say the right thing. At times, she lies, judges people, and acts selfish. She experiences fear, insecurity, and failure. But she also protects and empathizes. She's curious and loving. She wants to include people. She is brave and strong and is ultimately able to stand in the truth of herself. All of this shows the fullness of her humanity. Nobody is good all the time. We all make mistakes. And this novel shows the importance of not being so quick to judge ourselves and others as we all grow.

***Secrets:*** Though Taja is close to her family and friends, she also remains somewhat distant because of the secrets she keeps. The story reveals the power that secrets have to separate us from those we are closest to. It also shows the power of connection that comes from disclosing secrets to those who love us despite the information they may reveal.

***Guilt and Shame:*** Given the strict, religious nature of Taja's household, guilt and shame accompany her thoughts about nearly everything she perceives she is doing wrong. Feeling peace and stillness while not in church as she lies in the grass in her backyard under the December sun (9). Eating a Hanukah cookie offered by a friend and neighbor (15). And as she grows older, guilt and shame pervade her thoughts about sex and sexuality. While most of Taja's questioning of religion is a result of her curious nature and wanting to believe in something that can include everyone (not only "saved" people), some of her resistance to religion is a challenge to the guilt and shame so pervasive in the teachings of her family and church.

***Family expectations:*** Family plays a pivotal part in shaping individuals. Taja's biological family and church family shape her in various ways. Their love and moral teachings help guide Taja and occupy a sacred space in her heart and mind. But some of their expectations don't align with her, and departing from them to find her own way takes courage.

***Dreams and Reality:*** Taja's life is full of moments where she dreams of what she wants for her future. Her ability to navigate her current reality, while keeping her dreams alive, foreshadows her future of living a life that she's created for herself, one that she loves.



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS, JOURNAL PROMPTS, AND ACTIVITIES, PART ONE:

What does Taja mean when she thinks, “For the first time I’m aware that I’m the only one living inside my body, the only one who can feel, know.” (2) What does it mean to become aware of yourself? What is an inner being?

What is the “cool factor” that Taja refers to on page 21 while pleading for a bra? What is her mother trying to teach her about being an individual? In what ways do you think Taja relates to the crab on page 29?

What is Taja’s reaction to finding out someone loves her? (31) How is her perception of this love different from any other she has experienced? **Journal prompt:** *How do you define love? Considering the various forms of love (romantic; love of friends, family, or even strangers; love of hobbies; love of the world; love of life), how do you think love can help the world?*

What are Taja’s main challenges as she tries out for her first solo? (62) How do her own thoughts and fears shape her experience? What do you think has a greater impact on the situation: the ridicule from the boys or her own thoughts and fears?

What does Taja mean when she thinks, “I think Gigi’s words have turned too far from what we learn in our pews at church”? (74) What is the difference between being religious and spiritual?

**Activity:** On page 74, Taja talks to her mother about heaven, her ancestors, and whether “the God [she] feels inside [herself] when [she] gets still...is the same God [she learns] about in church.” List some of Taja’s experiences with spirituality. Use the following graphic organizer if you need to help organize your thoughts.

Finding Deep Meaning	Quote	Analysis Ex.
Connecting to Something Bigger than Herself		
Seeking Answers About Life		

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS, JOURNAL PROMPTS, AND ACTIVITIES, PART TWO:

**Activity:** On Pages 74-75, we learn that Taja’s family is descended from Cherokee Indians. Though there are black tribally enrolled members of Native American nations today, much of the documentation of these family connections have been lost. As a result, most evidence is passed down in the form of oral traditions from family member to family member. **Journal Prompt:** What are the oral storytelling traditions around family heritage and ancestry that exist within your family? How do they influence the way you see yourself?

### *Further Resources about Black Native Americans*

[Black, Native American and Fighting for Recognition in Indian Country: An Ancestry of African-Native Americans | History](#)

On page 78, Muslims visit Taja’s church. How does she feel about the visitors at first? How do her feelings change by the end of the church service? She initially recognizes that they are of a different religion by the way they are dressed. What other groups can you think of that use clothing as an outward sign of inner religious devotion? List as many world religions as you can and write down what you know about them?

On page 84, Taja notices eight “For Sale” signs in her neighborhood, noting that, “Now that one too many black people have moved into Inwood, For Sale signs are everywhere.” How does her life change as a result of “[White Flight](#)”? **Journal Prompt:** *What are the demographics of your neighborhood? Have they changed over the time you have lived there? If so, how?*

**Activity:** Create a visual timeline of your childhood and early adolescence. Where did you live? How long did you live there? How did your environment influence your life? On the timeline, indicate places you frequented, the people you hung out with, and/or details about your neighborhood and community. Reflect on the following questions in a spoken or written narrative. Do you live in a neighborhood or go to a school that is racially, ethnically, and/or culturally diverse? If so, what have you gained by knowing people who are different than you? If not, where are other places you could go to connect with people from different backgrounds?

What is the test Taja has taken every day since the first day of school? Does she pass the test? How do you know? What do her peers mean when they call her a “black white girl”? (86) Where does Taja find the strength to dismiss what the girls are saying about her? Instead of ignoring them, if Taja focused her energy on defending herself from their verbal attacks, how might this have distracted her from accomplishing her own goals and dreams?

On page 94, why do you think the other girl in the bathroom won’t look at Taja even though they are sharing the same experience? What feelings accompany how Taja perceives girlhood and womanhood this moment? Why do you suppose she has these feelings?

What are the “lost dreams packed away in a black case”? (105) What does this scene reveal about Taja’s father’s life? What impact do you think witnessing her father in this moment has on her own life?

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS, JOURNAL PROMPTS, AND ACTIVITIES, PART THREE:

What connections can you draw between Taja, Tanisha, Damon, and the Beauty of the Week from *Jet* magazine on page 114? Consider making connections to the themes in this guide and any others you recognize. How do Taja's feelings toward Tanisha change after she discovers her brother's insecurity?

What does Taja mean when she says, "God don't like ugly"? (117) What types of actions does Taja think God would deem "ugly"?

Why does Taja feel ashamed when she says, "I don't care," on page 126? What does this chapter reveal about the opposing feelings Taja holds toward her sister? Relationships are nuanced and often hold a variety of feelings. Which feeling wins at the end of this chapter? Why do you think it wins?

What does Mr. Franklin tell Taja to watch for in the world around her? How is this related to Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*? (138) **Journal Prompt:** *What are the ways the world communicates messages to people about how they should look, what they should think, what's cool, what's right, etc.? What impact do you think society's messages have had on you? On those around you? How conscious do you think people are of the messages they constantly receive? Who do you think controls the messages? And how?*

What are the words Taja says, "feel weird coming out, like they belong to someone else"? (143) What new information does this reveal about her dreams for the future? What does her teacher say to her that underscores thoughts she is already having about herself?

What is the importance of the quote Mr. Franklin shares with Taja? Why is this moment embarrassing for her? (145) **Journal Prompt:** *What is a moment that you realized you were not being authentic? Describe it with as much sensory detail as possible. What did you learn through this experience? Do you consider some people in your life to be more authentic than others? Why?*

What does Taja understand about her brother that her parents don't? (166)

Explain the double standard that exists for Damon and Taja on pages 182-187. **Journal Prompt:** *What is the double standard for girls and boys regarding sex and sexuality that social norms perpetuate? Does this vary depending on race, ethnicity, or culture?*

What is the parental motivation behind asking Taja to sign the purity pledge? (209) Explain the connection to double standards that goes through her mind.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS, JOURNAL PROMPTS, AND ACTIVITIES, PART FOUR:

Why does Taja lie to Cassie on page 218? How does this connect to some of the novel's overall themes? *Activity:* Make a list of reasons you think people lie? By hiding the truth, how do you think lies can hurt people, relationships, and the world at large? How do you think the truth can heal and connect (again think micro and macro)?

"They need to be perfect." (244) Why do you think Taja feels such immense pressure for her college applications to be perfect? Is perfection ever possible? At what point can doing your best turn into over-doing? How can over-doing work against you and your goals?

"...guilt rises up and takes a seat on my chest." (247) Because our bodies and our minds are connected, negative emotions can manifest in physical ways. *Journal Prompt:* *Have you ever felt a negative emotion physically? In what ways (headache, stomachache, anxiety)? How long did it take the negative emotion to manifest into something physical? What did you do to make yourself feel better? What are tools people can use to make themselves feel better generally?*

Why do you think Andre acts the way he does on page 252 when Taja is beginning to see some of her dreams come true?

When Cassie confronts Taja about lying (254), how does it test their relationship? What does Cassie's honesty force Taja to see about herself? In which ways is honesty an act of love?

"I can feel her coming toward me. Judging me. Pitying me. Blaming me for being stupid enough to love him. I hate her." (257) Why do you think Taja ignores the true source of her emotions in this moment and blames Naima? How does finally telling the truth help her?

*Activity:* Research water as a symbol in literature, then using what you have learned, analyze the scene on pages 274 and 275. Describe what Taja feels as she goes down and then as she comes up. What religious rites include water? What connections can you make between what is physically happening and what may be occurring spiritually or mentally for her?

What happens to make Andre look different to Taja on page 293? How is this indicative of a change in her overall attitude towards him? And what does this reveal about how she values herself?

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS, JOURNAL PROMPTS, AND ACTIVITIES, PART FIVE:

**Activity:** Take all of the words on pages 299-302 and make a word cloud. The words that appear the most frequently should appear larger. What inferences can you make from the word cloud about the values in this particular church? If you have a sermon, poem, song lyrics, or other words from someone you consider to be a leader, make a word cloud with the text and identify which words stand out the most. What inferences can you make about the messages they are trying to convey?

**Journal Prompt:** *What do you think the title, **Calling My Name**, refers to? Who do you think is doing the calling? Has something deep inside you ever called your name? Did you listen? If yes, where did listening lead you? If no, did you ever stop hearing the calling?*

### Standards:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.1

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.2

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.3

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.4

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.5

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.6

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.B

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.D

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.9.A



# About LIARA TAMANI

*Liara Tamani* (www.liaratamani.com) lives in Houston, Texas. She holds an MFA in writing from Vermont College of Fine Arts and a BA from Duke University. She is the author of the acclaimed young adult novels *Calling My Name*, a 2018 PEN America Literary Award Finalist and SCBWI Golden Kite Finalist, and *All the Things We Never Knew*, a 2020 Kirkus Best YA Book of the Year. Her third novel, *What She Missed*, is forthcoming May 2023. Before becoming a writer, she attended Harvard Law School and worked as a marketing coordinator for the Houston Rockets & Comets, production assistant for *Girlfriends* (TV show), home accessories designer, floral designer, and yoga and dance teacher.

## Praise For CALLING MY NAME

- “Luminous episodic debut...a complex portrait of a young woman trying to reconcile what she’s been taught, both in church and out in the world, with what she truly believes.”  
— **CHICAGO TRIBUNE**
- ★ “An excellent portrayal of African American culture, gorgeous lyrical prose, strong characters, and societal critique make Tamani’s debut a must-read.”  
— **BOOKLIST, starred review**
- “This lush debut novel is written in distinct prose that reads like poetry. Young adults will connect with this protagonist and this dynamic new voice. A great selection in any library collection.”  
— **SCHOOL LIBRARY JOURNAL**
- “Tamani’s debut novel brims with heart and soul, following its African-American protagonist, Taja Brown, as she searches for spirituality, love, and a sense of self. Absorbing.”  
— **PUBLISHERS WEEKLY**
- “Tamani creates a raw, relatable, and eloquently-told coming of age story about finding your place, beliefs, and identity.”  
— **BUZZFEED**
- “If there’s one book I wish I could reach through time and hand to seventeen-year-old me, it’s this one. *Calling My Name* is a treasure.”  
— **NIC STONE, New York Times bestselling author author of Dear Martin**
- “In *Calling My Name* we bare witness to a young girl finding her power and realizing that she alone is enough. A true gift to young readers.”  
— **RENÉE WATSON, New York Times bestselling author of Piecing Me Together**