

I'll be the first to admit that not everything I've done in my life has been role-model material. I've been on the wrong side of the law. I've been in violent situations. I've also been a bully. I know how a person gets to be like that. That's why I wanted to tell this story: to show a kid who has become a bully—how and why that happened, and whether or not he can move past it.

curtis (aka 50 Cent) **JACKSON III**
New York, New York

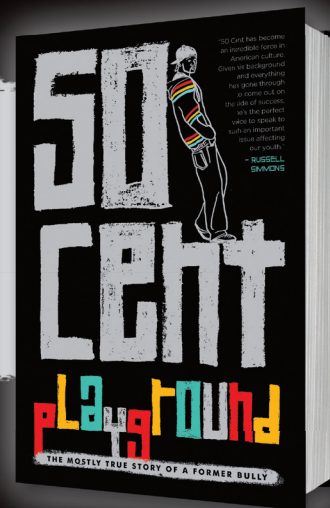
About the Author

Curtis Jackson III (aka 50 Cent; www.50cent.com) is an internationally successful hip-hop star, actor, writer, and entrepreneur. He rose to fame with the release of his albums *Get Rich or Die Tryin'* and *The Massacre*. He is the author of the bestselling books *From Pieces to Weight* and *The 50th Law*.



About the Book

Thirteen-year-old Butterball begins his story by shutting everyone out. Even though he has ended up in a therapist's office to avoid expulsion, he still isn't about to tell anyone why he used a sock full of D batteries to attack the only kid who'd been friendly to him at Watkins Middle School. Butterball is overweight, out of place, and alone, with no one to talk to at school or at home. Gritty and unflinchingly honest, *Playground* will speak to readers from an uncommon perspective. Butterball is a flawed protagonist who struggles to discover what made him a bully.



Playground

978-1-5951-4434-8 (HCL) - \$17.99

Ages 12 up - Grades 7 up

Praise for Playground

"An instructive and inviting look into the psychology of a young bully."

—KIRKUS REVIEWS

"The narrative offers an observant and aware character often brimming with deep insight."

—SCHOOL LIBRARY JOURNAL

"Butterball's unrepentant, unpretentious, and authentic voice is more than enough to carry the story."

—PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

- Prepared by Jerry Michel, Educator and Principal, Willard Elementary School (Evanston, IL)



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educator's guide
MEETS COMMON CORE STANDARDS



50 Cent

PLAYGROUND

THE MOSTLY TRUE STORY OF A FORMER BULLY

"50 Cent has become an incredible force in American culture. Given his background and everything he's gone through to come out on the side of success, he's the perfect voice to speak to such an important issue affecting our youth."

— RUSSELL SIMMONS

Discussion questions and activities

Hook #1: Real Life

Common Core State Standard 8.3, Reading: Analyze how particular lines of dialogue or incidents in a story or drama propel the action, reveal aspects of a character, or provoke a decision

Common Core State Standard 8.6, Reading: Analyze how differences in the points of view of the characters and the audience or reader (e.g., created through the use of dramatic irony) create such effects as suspense or humor.

Draw students into discussion by having them explore aspects of 50 Cent’s life that seem to influence the characters, actions, and thoughts shared through Butterball’s narrative. Encourage students to compare information taken from biographical sources (Wikipedia, for example) to events in *Playground*. To facilitate ongoing discussion and reflection, encourage students to use simple graphic organizers (such as Venn diagrams or story webs) to find intersections between 50 Cent’s and Butterball’s experiences. Prompt students to share their evidence as they discuss questions such as:

- How does 50 Cent’s own life story lend credibility to Butterball’s voice and story?
- In what ways does Butterball’s story seem especially realistic to you?
- What dialogue or narration feels most honest to you? Which scenes make you most uncomfortable?

Hook #2: What’s In A Name?

Common Core State Standard 9-10.3, Reading; Analyze how complex characters (e.g., those with multiple or conflicting motivations) develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme.

50 Cent has attributed his own nickname to being a metaphor for “change”. Throughout the course of *Playground*, Butterball comes to terms with both his nickname and his given name, a major turning point in the story. Encourage students to explore how artists express themselves through nicknames, lyrics, song and album titles, and the words and images they choose. Often, it is these images and expressions that help forge those first connections between an artist and their audience. Encourage students to:

- Share how they pull deeper meanings out the lyrics to one of their favorite songs through the personal connections they make with an artist’s message or imagery.
- Explore the changes Butterball goes through during the story by discussing his different turning points. Do the changes make him weaker or stronger as the story progresses?
- Create their own lyrics to demonstrate the changes Butterball goes through. If 50 Cent were to set Butterball’s story to lyrics, what would be the title of the song? What would be the hook, rhyme, or chorus?

Hook #3: Reel Life

Common Core State Standard 8.6, Writing: Use technology, including the Internet, to produce and publish writing and present the relationships between information and ideas efficiently as well as to interact and collaborate with others.

A large part of Butterball’s creative life is his movie-making. His love of movies is first communicated as a connection with his father but grows into a fresh start at a high school for the performing and visual arts. This transformation not only had Butterball

looking more carefully at his own life, but he became more aware of those around him, their feelings, and how to understand and accept different perspectives.

Visual imagery is a powerful medium through which to communicate metaphors. Animoto, a free online tool for turning photos, video, and music, into professional quality presentation videos, is a great online medium for students to show their creativity. Just as Butterball created his video, *The Superhero of Suburbia*, students can create their own videos to communicate important themes of transformation and change. Encourage students to use this tool to:

- Create a music video, complete with featured lyrics, that serve as a trailer to promote *Playground* to other students and readers
- Create a public service announcement with an strong, but honest, anti-bullying message with Butterball’s character serving as an inspiration for change
- Create a music video montage that chronicles Butterball’s change over the course of the novel
- Create a spoken word piece that promotes acceptance of other cultures, backgrounds, and sexual orientation
- Help guide student storytelling by encouraging the development of imagery that helps establish an accessible metaphor for the theme or message behind the video.

For further discussion

Reaching Reluctant Readers

“There’s a lot of me in Butterball,” 50 Cent shares in the introduction to his semi-autobiographical novel. Music fans will be drawn to *Playground* to get a little closer to the artist who delivered two multi-platinum albums, *Get Rich or Die Tryin’* and *The Massacre*. Hip-hop star, actor, writer, record producer, and entrepreneur Curtis Jackson III’s own life story will draw in even the most reluctant of readers. A drug dealer at age twelve, survivor of nine gunshot wounds at age twenty-four, 50 Cent’s built his rise from the streets of New York on street cred and sheer determination.

Why *Playground*?

Engaging students in a wide range of reading is crucial to their development, both intellectually and emotionally. To fully engage students in the pursuit of becoming lifelong readers, we must make sure our classroom libraries and curriculum reflect a wide range of experiences present in American culture. 50 Cent gives us a glimpse into the mind of a bully, ranging in emotion from unrepentant to remorseful.

“Life on the edge has taught me a lot,” 50 Cent shares in the closing lines of the introduction. “Like the fact that being mentally strong will get you ahead in life. But being a bully won’t get you anywhere. Some kids don’t figure that out until it’s too late.”

Many of the characters in *Playground* (including Butterball’s father) never figure that out, a source of rich discussion throughout this novel. Perhaps one of the most interesting conversations that can be held in conjunction with this novel is not the change that Butterball goes through, but the change readers see in themselves. Final discussion questions could include:

- What in our environment leads some of us to use personal cruelty as a way to improve our social standing or get what we want?
- Why is it hard to resist peer pressure, even when those choices conflict with what we believe?

