

New school. Old secrets. One girl stuck in between.

ARE YOU NOBODY TOO?



TINA CANE

EDUCATORS' GUIDE

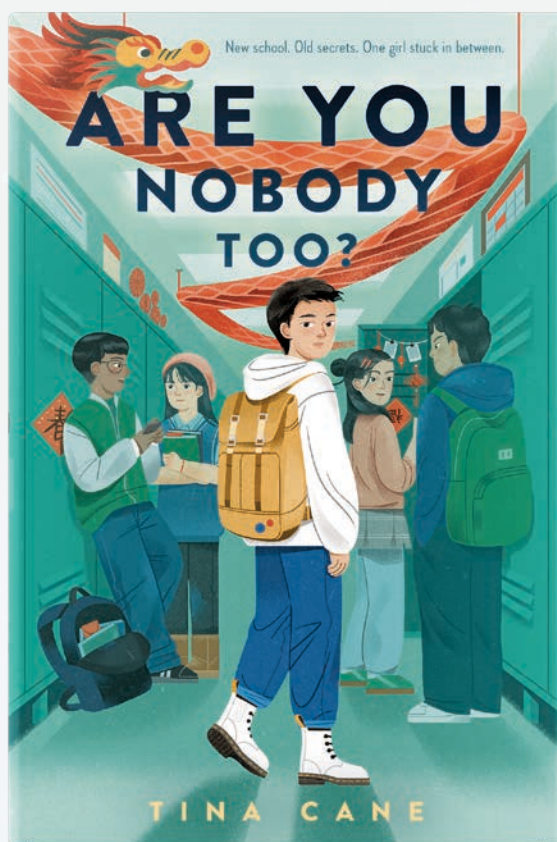
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ABOUT THE BOOK

After a year of distance-learning, Emily Sofer finds her world turned upside down: She has to leave the only school she's ever known to attend a public school in Chinatown. For the first time, Emily isn't the only Chinese student . . . but looking like everyone else doesn't mean that understanding them will be easy—especially an intimidating group of cool girls Emily calls The Five.

When Emily discovers that her adoptive parents have been keeping a secret, she feels even more uncertain about who she is. A chance discovery of Emily Dickinson's poetry helps her finally feel seen . . . but can the words of a writer from 200 years ago help Emily open up and find common ground with The Five?

Tina Cane positions classic Western writers and literature alongside Chinese historical figures in this contemporary novel in verse.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Tina Cane grew up in downtown New York City, and she draws much of her creative inspiration from her experiences as a city kid. The founder-director of Writers-in-the-Schools, RI, Tina was also the poet laureate of Rhode Island, where she lives with her family, who are a major source of inspiration.

ALSO BY TINA CANE



PRE-READING QUESTIONS

1. *Are You Nobody Too?* is a novel in verse; that means the story is told through poetry by the narrator, Emily. Tell students that one way to read poems is to pay attention to what they notice and feel as they listen. Poems can also be creative with spacing, word choice, and line breaks. (Poets can cut sentences up or not even use sentences at all!) Remind students of poetic tools that can help share an idea, image, feeling, or other experience with the reader.
 - a. Invite students to write a poem about a relationship that makes them happy or about an experience they've had today. If they would like some inspiration, they can open the book to any page, point their finger, and use the words they land on as a title. They may change the words around as much as they like.
2. The book's main character, Emily, works to create a sense of belonging for herself as she learns more about her adoption, changes schools, and changes friends and teachers. She has some good guides along the way, including family members, teachers, and a poet. Ask students to reflect on and describe changes they've been experiencing and on the people who have helped them navigate these changes. Ask: What gives you perspective? How do you know you're growing?
3. Chinese culture and language is an important aspect of *Are You Nobody Too?* Emily was born in China and adopted as a baby by white parents. Emily learns about aspects of her Chinese heritage, makes Chinese friends, and begins speaking Mandarin. She also learns about three major days: Lunar New Year, which is a big celebration based the first moon of the year according to the Chinese lunisolar calendar; the Dragon Boat Festival, which celebrates Qu Yang, a prime minister of a southern Chinese state from about 600 to 200 BCE, and is held in the fifth month of the Chinese calendar and is connected to good luck; and the popular Moon Festival, also known as the Mooncake or Mid-Autumn Festival, which is celebrated with lanterns and mooncakes and is connected to the goddess Chang'e.
 - a. Whether these important days are familiar to students or new to them, ask them to choose one and research its importance and how it is celebrated. Remind students to describe what they've learned in accurate, clear language. Invite them to ask questions they might have as they research.
4. The setting for this story is New York City just as restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic are loosening. Though nobody close to Emily passed away, many thousands of people lost their lives in New York City. During lockdowns, people were supposed to stay in their homes or wear masks to prevent the spread of the virus. Schools switched to Zoom or other online platforms that allowed classes to meet remotely. Many people of all ages felt scared and isolated. These details are important to Emily's story.
 - a. Ask students: Do you remember living through the pandemic? Share experiences in a group discussion, or students who don't feel comfortable sharing aloud can write their response.
 - b. Ask students to keep track of important moments in *Are You Nobody Too?* that are connected to the pandemic, holding this question in mind: How did the pandemic affect the characters in this story? Is this different or similar to how you or others you know were impacted by the pandemic?
5. *Are You Nobody Too?* is set in two neighborhoods in New York City: Chinatown and Greenwich Village. Ask students:
 - a. Where do you live?
 - b. What is your school like?
 - c. What is important and valuable to you about your cultural background, and how does your community (where you live and who you live with and around) influence, affect, and inspire you?
 - d. What is valuable to you about your community?
6. One major theme in this book is friendship. Pose these questions to students:
 - a. What do you think makes a friendship strong?
 - b. When, if ever, is it okay to let go of a friend?
 - c. What loving qualities do you bring to your friendships?

DISCUSSION AND WRITING QUESTIONS

1. What facts and details do we learn about Emily's life from her first five poems: "I'm Nobody," "I Understand," "It Should Have Been Easy," "Fact," and "Books"?
 - a. As a class make a list of these details. Then discuss the impression we have of Emily so far. Ask students what they believe she might be struggling with, and why? What might be important to her, and why? What do you think her personality might be like, and why? Use references in the text as evidence.
 - b. Ask students to use the same titles to write five short creative pieces (for example, poems, stories, and/or memories) that describe them, their thoughts, and their life right now.
2. In "I Understand" (p. 2), Emily writes, "I want / to be seen / but also wish / I were a little bit / invisible / like a lunar eclipse / fully present / but also masked / by shadow." This is a simile, a phrase that uses like or as to create a comparison between an abstract idea (here, a complex feeling of wanting to be seen by others and also wanting to protect herself from others), and a tangible thing you can observe with one or more of your senses (here, a solar eclipse, which you can see with your eyes). Emily frequently uses similes in her poems throughout *Are You Nobody Too?*
 - a. Ask students to write or discuss, using their own words, what feeling or emotional experience Emily is describing in this simile. Then draw on imagination and experience to explore some possible reasons why she might be feeling this way.
 - b. Invite students to create a simile about one of their current feelings. What tangible object is happiness, sadness, confusion, anger, or boredom like? Students may illustrate, share aloud, or write down their simile.
3. Emily Dickinson's poetry is quoted by our narrator Emily throughout *Are You Nobody Too?* Emily Dickinson was a poet who lived in Amherst, Massachusetts, from 1830 to 1886. She wrote many, many poems. Only a few (about seven) were published in her lifetime, but hundreds of others were published after her passing. She often wrote

on envelopes and small sheets of paper, and wrote different versions of the same poem. If you are curious to see some of Emily Dickinson's poetry in her own handwriting, [explore an archive of her work](#). The title of the book, *Are You Nobody Too?*, is a quote from an Emily Dickinson poem. Here is the entire poem:

*I'm nobody! Who are you?
Are you nobody too?
Then there's a pair of us—don't tell!
They'd banish us, you know.*

*How dreary to be somebody!
How public, like a frog,
To tell your name the livelong day
To an admiring bog!*

- a. In "Incredible," Emily comes across this poem in *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson* that she's borrowed from the I.S. 23 library (p. 56). She feels a "crackling" when she realizes this is the same poem her beloved Meadowlake teacher, Ms. Franklin, taught her class in "I'm Nobody," the first poem in the book. How does Ms. Franklin interpret this poem? Why is this poem important to Emily?
- b. Ask students what they notice in this poem? What lines, images, spacing, and punctuation seem important? What images do they picture and what sounds do they hear? Invite students to read the poem aloud to themselves—what do they notice? They can express themselves in art or words.



DISCUSSION AND WRITING QUESTIONS

CONTINUED

4. Emily thinks about Emily Dickinson's line: "Are friends delight or pain?" (p. 67). Ask students:
 - a. How do you interpret this quote? What do you think Emily Dickinson is saying? What does the quote remind you of from your own life? Finally, do you think friends are delight or pain or something else? If something else, please describe that something else through illustration, a short story or poem, or write a short essay answer.
 - b. Emily, having moved to a new school, is experiencing a lot of change. She's away from her two best friends from her old school, Meadowlake, and doesn't yet know anybody well enough at her new school to call them a friend. What do you imagine Emily's answer to Dickinson's quote might be, and why? Use evidence from the book to support your answer.
5. Emily writes, "I mean ghosts don't make me angry / they make me curious and maybe a little sad" (p. 91). In "The Actual Thing," Emily sees Emily Dickinson at the opposite end of the gym during the Dragon Dance. In "Nope," wind blows the pages of *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson* and lands on the same poem that her mother had written an essay on years earlier. Discuss with students:
 - a. What do you imagine Emily Dickinson may have wanted to communicate to Emily during either or both times? Use evidence from the text to offer some support to your imaginings.
 - b. Do you believe in ghosts? Does your family? What are your cultural and personal beliefs? Describe your answers in writing as if your audience is from a different cultural background and is curious about you and your beliefs.
6. In "Assumed," Emily writes, "no one here wears white combat boots / and almost everyone speaks Chinese / so it feels like there's this giant gap / no one can see as if everyone is on / the opposite side of a canyon calling out / messages I can't understand" (p. 25). In "First Day" (p. 29), Emily writes, "everyone stared at my hair that Dad insists / on calling *badass* almost as much as they stared / at my parents like they'd never seen a Chinese / girl with white parents or a crew cut even" (p. 29). Later on, Grace's mother says to Emily, "*You do realize . . . Grace is fascinated by you / Your cool hair / Those boots you wear / The way you're always reading poetry*" (p. 172). At the start of her school year at I.S. 23, Emily felt out of place because she didn't speak Chinese, she wore different shoes and had a different haircut from her classmates. But these are the same qualities that "fascinated" Grace. Discuss with students:
 - a. Were you surprised when Grace's mother, Anne, shared this insight with Emily? Why or why not? Use evidence from the text to support your answer.
 - b. Sometimes the things that we feel make us stick out the most in a bad way are the very same qualities that show other people who we are and allow others to become interested in us and become our friends. Are there qualities that you have that make you different from others? What about these qualities might be fascinating to a person who is curious about you and wants to become your friend? Draw or illustrate, make a detailed list, or write (or tell) a story to answer.

DISCUSSION AND WRITING QUESTIONS

CONTINUED

7. In “Fake” Emily sees a picture of Quinn and Alice with Emma, who behaved in a racist way towards her by asking “every day / of fifth grade if I *liked Chinese food*?” Emily explains that it was not okay for “Emma to ask me that each morning / for the whole entire year even though she wasn’t / saying anything technically offensive.” She also describes her parents not getting it at first but then understanding it, and that her own “discomfort only increased when the teachers had / a huge meeting with all the families about *cultural sensitivity*” (p. 147). Pose questions to students:
 - a. What aspects of Emily’s experience with Emma and with the Meadowlake’s response are familiar to you, and what is unfamiliar to you that would you like to learn more about? Discuss or write.
 - b. Can you imagine a situation in which Meadowlake protected and supported Emily and educated Emma? What might that have looked like? How might a useful approach to helping Emma behave differently have impacted Emily’s embarrassment, rage, and discomfort?
8. In “Photo,” Emily finds a photo of her mother pregnant and happy (p. 87). In “Strong,” Emily describes herself “silently questioning / why they’ve never mentioned a baby thinking how / it makes me feel a little left out of their world . . . it makes me / wonder if I truly belong to anyone” (p. 96). In the morning, she tells her father she’s found the photo, and in the afternoon, comes home to her mother.
 - a. Point out the spacing of “Mom / opens / her arms / to me” (p. 125). This is the only time in the book that Emily writes a poem with this kind of lineation, meaning line breaks and spacing—the way the spaces work around the words. Ask students what they notice and what effect this has. Why do they think the author chose to write the words like this?
 - b. In #647, Emily Dickinson’s poem leads and Emily’s poem follows. What do students notice about the two poems? How do they connect to the events of Emily finding the photo and her parents talking with her about it? What is Emily communicating in her poem?
9. Compare Emily’s schools—Meadowlake and I.S. 23 Chien-Shiung Wu School.
 - a. What does Emily share about the meaning of both names? How does Emily describe the activities and culture of each school?
 - b. Ask students to draw, discuss, or write how they imagine Mr. Chin’s and Ms. Franklin’s classrooms?
 - c. Invite students to compare their school to Meadowlake and I.S. 23 Chien-Shiung Wu School. Ask students: If they could spend a year at Meadowlake or I.S. 23, which would they choose, and why?
10. Throughout *Are You Nobody Too?*, Emily is searching for friends and for a sense of belonging.
 - a. Discuss how and where has she felt belonging, and with whom? Think about her parents, her aunt Edie, her grandparents, her reading of Emily Dickinson’s poems, her friends and her teachers at Meadowlake and I.S. 23. Ask students to pick three examples from the book that show Emily experience a sense of belonging. You can describe or illustrate those moments.
 - b. Ask students: If you were to write a poem about a moment when you experienced a sense of belonging in the last year, what would the title be? What and who might be included in it? Encourage them to be brave and write that poem.

POST-READING QUESTIONS

1. Emily learns the I-Ching and finds inspiration and guidance in Emily Dickinson's poetry. Mr. Chin calls the I-Ching a "machine of uncertainty," which is a line he pulled from an Emily Dickinson poem. Ask students:
 - a. If the phrase "machine of uncertainty" described some lesson in the book, what lesson might that be? Why?
 - b. Where do you go for inspiration? How does it help? If it's a person—how do they help? Why?
2. Discuss with students: What does the title mean now that you've read the book in its entirety? What does "are you nobody too?" mean to you? What do you believe it means to Emily? Use examples from the text for all your responses.
3. Pick one of the Emily Dickinson poems in the book and write a response (the way Emily did with #647). Then consider: Why did you choose this poem? What meaning do you make or what do you notice about the poem? And how is your own response related to the original poem? What meaning do you make from the poem that you've written?




Christina Olivares is a longtime educator and author of the poetry books *No Map of the Earth Includes Stars* (2015) and *Future Botanic* (2023).



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