

The activities in this guide align with Common Core State Standards and fit into the curriculum for grades 7-10.

## EXPLORING *NOBODY'S SECRET* THROUGH WRITING AND REFLECTION

The following questions may be utilized throughout the novel study as reflective writing prompts or alternatively, they can be used as targeted questions for discussion and reflection.

1. As *Nobody's Secret* begins, readers are introduced to Emily Dickinson as they observe her lying in a field of tall grass and wildflowers, hoping to entice a bee to land on her nose. What can readers infer about Emily from this opening scene of the novel?
2. The young man who Emily calls Mr. Nobody tells her, "I'm nobody important." Why do you think he describes himself this way? How does his anonymity ultimately drive Emily forward in her quest to learn more about him?
3. What is it about Mr. Nobody that catches Emily's attention from their very first encounter? Do you think he is equally taken by her? Why or why not?
4. When she questions him about whether he is a student at nearby Amherst College, Mr. Nobody tells Emily, "I've been too busy living. What could I learn in college that I couldn't learn traveling the world?" What do you think of his dismissive attitude toward formal education? Do you agree with his position? Why or why not?
5. Describe Emily's relationship with her sister, Vinnie. How are these two girls similar to each other? How are they different? Do you believe them to be close? Why or why not? Use textual evidence to support your position.
6. While discussing the possibility of her being stung by a bee, Emily tells Mr. Nobody, "It's a new experience. If you are sequestered at home, as I am, new experiences are to be savored." What are the ways Emily copes with her lack of freedom? Given what you've learned about her family, do you think her approach is the right one? Why or why not?
7. After accusing him of flattering her, Mr. Nobody tells Emily, "Better to flatter than to wound. That's always been my maxim." Though readers aren't given much time with this character, what can you infer about his character and approach to life?
8. Consider the lines from Emily Dickinson's poetry that are used to introduce the chapters; how do her words help set the tone for the story? Did you have a particular favorite or one you enjoyed most?
9. The Dickinson's family home sits next to a graveyard, which Emily considers one of the house's assets. How would you feel about living in close proximity to a graveyard? What is it about these "neighbors" that she appreciates?
10. Emily's mother is described as being capable of ignoring larger issues and fixating on highly unusual calamities, as well as her own personal health issues. Consider Mrs. Dickinson's condition; though medical diagnoses are greatly different now than they were during her lifetime, what type of medical condition do you suspect she suffered from?
11. In your opinion, why does Emily feel so determined to solve the mystery of Mr. Nobody? Do you think the danger she puts herself and her sister in is justified? Why or why not?

CONTINUED →

12. While sharing about her family's very visible presence at church, Emily states, "Wouldn't it be lovely if we could worship wherever we wished?" Why do you think she feels that way? Have you ever had a similar sense of obligation that stemmed from your family's expectation? What makes this so challenging?
13. Consider the visit of Ursula Langston and her mother to the Sewing Circle held at the home of the Dickinsons. Why is Mrs. Langston's behavior deemed so inappropriate? In what ways does her daughter try to censor her mother? Have you ever been in a similar position with a family member or friend? What did you do to deal with the situation?
14. Consider Horace Goodman's role in disposing and disguising the body of James Wentworth; in your opinion, why does Horace help the Langston family? Is he right to do so?
15. How does learning that Ursula makes her family's remedies foreshadow the climax of the story? Did you suspect her direct involvement in the death of James?
16. After getting confirmation of her involvement in their cousin's murder, Henry tells his sister, "Ursula, you have done a wicked thing." Do you think Henry is sincere in his profession to Ursula? Do you think he and the rest of the family should share the blame for James's death? Why or why not?
17. Using the phrase, "This is a story about..." supply five words to describe *Nobody's Secret*. Explain your choices.

**\*\* Correlates to Common Core Standard Reading Literature: Speaking and Listening; Comprehension and Collaboration S.L. 7.1., S.L. 8.1., S.L. 9-10.1., S.L. 7.2., S.L. 8.2., S.L. 9-10.2., S.L. 7.3., S.L. 8.3., S.L. 9-10.3. Writing: Text Types and Purposes W. 7.1., W. 8.1., W. 9-10.1., W. 7.2. W. 8.2., W. 9-10.2., W. 7.3, W. 8.3, W. 9-10.3.**

## ENRICH THE READING EXPERIENCE WITH THESE FOLLOWING EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

### CONSIDERING CHARACTER: CREATE AN "I AM" POEM OR A BIOPOEM

The purpose of this strategy is to help students demonstrate knowledge of a character by following written prompts to complete a poem about the individual. Students can be given the prompts to follow on a worksheet or alternatively, students may create an original slideshow using PowerPoint or Movie Maker.

#### "I AM" POEM

##### FIRST STANZA:

- I am (name the character)
- I wonder (something the character is actually curious about)
- I hear (an imaginary sound the character might hear)
- I see (an imaginary sight the character meet see)
- I want (something the character truly desires)

##### SECOND STANZA:

- I pretend (something the character actually pretends to do)
- I feel (a feeling about something imaginary)
- I touch (an imaginary touch)
- I worry (something that really bothers the character)
- I cry (something that makes the character very sad)
- I am (the first line of the poem repeated)

##### THIRD STANZA:

- I understand (something the character knows is true)
- I say (something that the character believes in)
- I dream (something the character might actually dream about)
- I try (something the character really make an effort about)
- I hope (something the character actually hopes for)
- I am (the first line of the poem repeated)

##### BIOPOEM

- Line 1: \_\_\_\_\_ (First name)
- Line 2: \_\_\_\_\_ (Three traits that describe the character)
- Line 3: Relative of \_\_\_\_\_
- Line 4: Lover of \_\_\_\_\_ (three things)
- Line 5: Who feels \_\_\_\_\_ (three things)
- Line 6: Who needs \_\_\_\_\_ (three things)
- Line 7: Who fears \_\_\_\_\_ (three things)
- Line 8: Who gives \_\_\_\_\_ (three things)
- Line 9: Who would like to see \_\_\_\_\_ (three things)
- Line 10: Resident of \_\_\_\_\_
- Line 11: \_\_\_\_\_ (Last name)

**\*\* Correlates to Common Core Standard Reading Literature: Key Ideas and Details R.L. 7.1, R.L. 8.1., R.L. 9-10.1 and Craft and Structure R. L. 7.5., R.L. 8.5, R.L. 9-10.5, R.L. 7.6., R.L. 8.6, R.L. 9-10.6**

## FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE SCAVENGER HUNT

At the beginning of *Nobody's Secret*, MacColl states, "Emily lay perfectly still, hidden in the tall grass, her eyes closed tight. A chain of wildflowers lay wilted around her neck. But no matter how quiet she was, the bee would not land on her nose. Emily, she told herself sternly, bees are *special*. You can't expect the first one to accept your invitation." These opening lines are a fine example of how the author infuses her story with rich, figurative language. In order to take figurative language to the analytical level, students must be given the opportunity to determine the reason for an author's choice of figurative language and its effect on the audience. Begin by having students practice discovering and identifying figurative language. Model the following lesson.

- Give students a variety of magazines from which to choose so that they may explore advertisements and cut them out.
- Explain to students that figurative language is not just used in fictional text. In fact, it is used frequently in the copy of advertisements. Have students find a pre-determined number of examples of figurative language in the copy of advertising text.
- In order to fully analyze the figurative language, students must **LIST** them.

**L** - Label (What type of figurative language did you find?)

**I** - Identify (Quote the actual figurative language written in the text.)

**S** - So what? (So what's the big deal with this language?)

- What makes this language effective?
- Why not choose a different type of figurative language? Why wouldn't something else work better?
- Who is the intended audience?
- What effect would this figurative language have on the audience?
- Is this an appropriate effect?
- What is the author's overall purpose?
- How does using the device help or hurt the author's overall purpose?

**T** - Talk (Share your analysis with the others in the class in order to model analytical thinking.)

Finally, place students in small groups and assign each group a specific chapter *Nobody's Secret* to analyze for examples of figurative language (similes, metaphors, hyperbole, and personification). Allow them to creatively display their findings.

**\*\* Correlates to Common Core Standard English Language Arts: Literacy L. 7.5, L. 8.5, L. 9-10.5**

## HOST A LITERARY BANQUET

In the spirit of Emily Dickinson's work as a poet, begin by having students write a poem from a character's perspective. The poem may focus on the character's personality and role in the story, a major theme, or a major conflict experienced. It must demonstrate the changes the character made throughout the story. While composing the poem, consider:

- Poetic device, form, and diction
- Must be textually accurate
- Poem must have a clearly defined voice
- Spelling and grammar must be correct
- Most, if not all, of the poem must be memorized

After students have crafted their poems, plan a literary banquet where each dresses in a costume that enhances his poem. At the banquet each student will perform his poem. Serve food and drink that have a strong connection to *Nobody's Secret*.

**\*\* Correlates to Common Core Standard Reading Literature: Key Ideas and Details R.L. 7.1, R.L. 8.1, R.L. 9-10.1, Craft and Structure R.L. 7.4., R.L. 8.4, R.L. 9-10.4, R.L. 7.6., R.L. 8.6, R.L. 9-10.6 and Language Arts: Literacy L. 7.5, L. 8.5, L. 9-10.5**

## CONSIDERING CHARACTER: HOST A MOCK TRIAL

After reading *Nobody's Secret* as a class, students will brainstorm "crimes" committed by the characters from the novel. Have groups of students will work together to act as the prosecution or defense for the selected characters, while also acting as the jury for other groups. Students will use several sources to research for their case, including the novel and Internet resources on judicial proceedings and roles of the members of a trial. All the while, students will be writing a persuasive piece to complement their trial work. Additional teaching resources for literary mock trials can be found at [www.readwritethink.org](http://www.readwritethink.org).

**\*\* Correlates to Common Core Standard Reading Literature: Key Ideas and Details R.L. 7.1, R.L. 8.1, R.L. 9-10.1 and Craft and Structure R.L. 7.5, R.L. 8.5, R.L. 9-10.5, R.L. 7.6., R.L. 8.6, R.L. 9-10.6**

## ESSENTIAL QUOTES ANALYSIS

The language that an author uses in his work is essential to getting across the intended meaning. Select four quotes from *Nobody's Secret* that seem to signify key ideas that the author hopes that readers take from the text. These might be quotes spoken by characters or might be from the narration, and page numbers should be included with the quotes. Have students develop a chart with the following four columns:

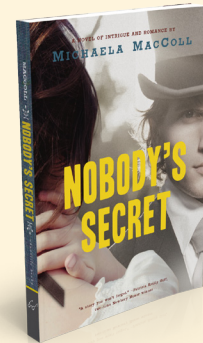
- Quote
- Page Number
- Relevance to the Novel
- Intended Meaning for Readers

The intended meaning should have relevance not only to the characters in the text, but to the lives of anyone who reads the book.

**\*\* Correlates to Common Core Standard Reading Literature: Key Ideas and Details R.L. 7.1, R.L. 8.1, R.L. 9-10.1.**

## ABOUT THE BOOK

One day, fifteen-year-old Emily Dickinson meets a mysterious, handsome young man. Surprisingly, he doesn't seem to know who she or her family is. And even more surprisingly, he playfully refuses to divulge his name. Emily enjoys her secret flirtation with Mr. "Nobody" until he turns up dead in her family's pond. She's stricken with guilt. Only Emily can discover who this enigmatic stranger was before he's condemned to be buried in an anonymous grave. Her investigation takes her deep into town secrets, blossoming romance, and deadly danger. Exquisitely written and meticulously researched, this novel celebrates Emily Dickinson's intellect and spunk in a page-turner of a book that will excite fans of mystery, romance, and poetry alike.



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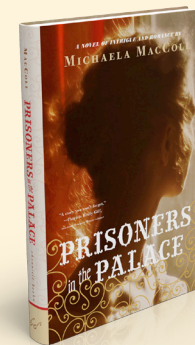
- ★— *Publishers Weekly*, starred review
- ★— *School Library Journal*, starred review



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

MICHAELA MACCOLL studied multi-disciplinary history at Vassar College and Yale University, which turns out to be the perfect degree for writing historical fiction. She lives with her husband, two daughters, and three extremely large cats in Connecticut. To learn more about Michaela and her work, please visit [www.michaelamaccoll.com](http://www.michaelamaccoll.com).

*This guide was created by Rose Brock, a teacher, school librarian, and doctoral candidate at Texas Woman's University, specializing in children's and young adult literature.*



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