

Talking About Identity, Difference & Friendship
With the Novel *Unidentified Suburban Object* by Mike Jung

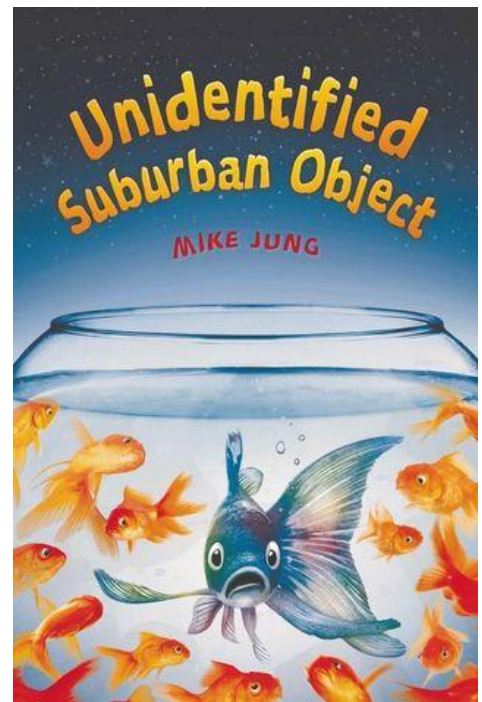
ABOUT THE GUIDE

This guide seeks to assist educators, librarians, parents, and other facilitators in using the novel **Unidentified Suburban Object** by Mike Jung (Scholastic, Inc.) to encourage conversations with readers about difference — especially how to be a friend across differences.

We all have different experiences and comfort levels with and methods for a conversation like this. This guide provides one possible method with sample kid-friendly dialogue, talking points, and resources for further facilitator exploration.

Why Have a Conversation with Readers About Difference?

- Because we need to create trusting and welcoming communities for all. In particular, students of color (and those with other minority identities) need to feel supported and free from harassment and white students (and those with other majority identities) need to be able to listen, ask questions, and learn how to be allies.
- Because this is where adolescent students live. This novel, using a powerful metaphor, gets to the heart of the oh-so-common adolescent experience of feeling like an alien.
- Because students have many experiences with and observations about race and other differences, but as these are often considered difficult subjects, they may have few opportunities to discuss them, especially in a safe, open, structured, and thoughtful environment.
- Because the variety of students' experiences can expand each other's awareness as they share.
- Because we need to build skills and confidence for cross-group relationships.



It's important for adults leading such discussions with young people to model comfort in exploring and sharing their own experiences and biases, so you may find it worthwhile to do some work on your own beforehand. Particularly if facilitating a conversation about race and differences is new to you, you might read the Anti-Defamation League's "Race Talk: Engaging Young People in Conversations About Race and Racism" (<http://www.adl.org/education-outreach/curriculum-resources/c/race-talk.html>) and consult the list of resources at the end of this guide.

"Being the only Asian student in town makes the horrible but universal feeling of not fitting in just that much worse...The similarities between being different and being alien make for a powerful message. And the strongest protection against both is still your very best friend."

—*Kirkus Reviews* on **Unidentified Suburban Object**

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Why Have the Conversation with this Novel?

Publishers Weekly says, “Jung excels at showing how racial insensitivity can isolate even a student who is doing everything she can to fit in. Chloe's life teems with microaggressions: a hanbok she wears is called “exotic,” strangers assume she is Chinese or Japanese, and a well-meaning orchestra teacher calls her “my Abigail Yang,” a famous Korean violin virtuoso. It's easy to imagine Chloe's story starting conversations about how seemingly innocent remarks can make a minority student feel like an alien in the only home she's ever known.”

Jung's story examines the complex topic of racial identity through a highly-relatable, humorous lens that invites everyone into the conversation. At the center is the challenged-but-resilient cross-race relationship between BFFs Chloe and Shelley, offering a model for how we can hang onto each other even when things get tough.

What Does This Guide Explore?

This guide provides a map for an inclusive conversation, appropriate for a classroom or book club setting with racially diverse or same-race students, through these five topics:

- EXPLORING CHLOE'S IDENTITY & OUR OWN
- ONE OF THE CROWD VS. ONE OF THE FEW
- MICROAGGRESSIONS, OR “WHY IS CHLOE SO ANGRY?”
- BEING CURIOUS
- BEING AN ALLY, BEING A FRIEND

Notes on Using the Guide

Again, this is one of many methods to use! As you are reviewing this guide, know that:

- Regular type can be used as sample dialogue.
- **Bold type** indicates questions to be posed to readers.
- *Italic type* marks relevant excerpts from the book.

This guide was created by Anne Sibley O'Brien, children's book author and blogger at Coloring Between the Lines: Reflections on Race, Culture and Children's Books, and by CuriousCityDPW.com, the home of free guides to engage children in their literature.

You can share thoughts about and experiences with this guide with author Mike Jung at mike@mikejung.com, Anne Sibley O'Brien at annieob2@gmail.com, and/or Curious City at curiouscitybooks@gmail.com.

**Talking About Identity, Difference & Friendship
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ABOUT THE BOOK

Unidentified Suburban Object

By Mike Jung

Published by Arthur A. Levine Books / Scholastic, Inc.

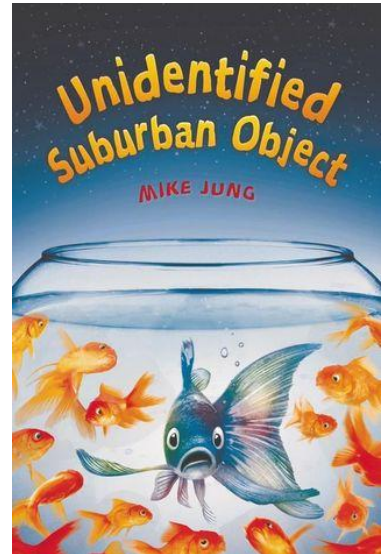
ISBN-13: 9780545782265

Lexile: 830L

Age Range: 8 - 12 Years

The next person who compares Chloe Cho with famous violinist Abigail Yang is going to HEAR it. Chloe has just about had it with people not knowing the difference between someone who's Chinese, Japanese, or Korean. She's had it with people thinking that everything she does well — getting good grades, winning first chair in the orchestra, et CETERA — is because she's ASIAN. Of course, her own parents don't want to have anything to DO with their Korean background. Any time Chloe asks them a question, they change the subject. They seem perfectly happy to be the only Asian family in town. It's only when Chloe's with her best friend, Shelly, that she doesn't feel like a total alien.

Then a new teacher comes to town: Ms. Lee. She's Korean American, and for the first time, Chloe has a person to talk to who seems to understand completely. For Ms. Lee's class, Chloe finally gets to explore her family history. But what she unearths is light years away from what she expected.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mike Jung is the author of **Geeks, Girls, and Secret Identities** and contributed to the anthologies **Dear Teen Me**, **Break These Rules**, and **59 Reasons to Write**. He is a library professional by day, a writer by night, and a semi-competent ukulele player during all the times in between. Mike is proud to be a founding member of the #WeNeedDiverseBooks team. He lives in Oakland, California, with his wife and two young children. Find Mike at www.mikejung.com.

Talking About Identity, Difference & Friendship
With the Novel *Unidentified Suburban Object* by Mike Jung

EXPLORING CHLOE'S IDENTITY & OUR OWN

Unidentified Suburban Object is a novel about identity. Chloe tries to first understand herself as a Korean American and then must adjust to the truth that she's actually an alien!

1) What is Identity & Where Do We Get Ours?

Our identities define who we are and what groups we belong to. Each person has all kinds of identities: race, gender, age, sexual orientation, culture, language, religion, economic class, and so on.

Identity can also be defined by what you are good at or how you spend your time. Your identity can be linked to your involvement in sports, academics, art, theater, music, clubs, or other things.

There is your identity within your family. You may be the oldest, middle or youngest; brother, sister; son, or daughter.

You can also be identified by your personal style, what kind of music you like, and so on.

Q: How do you define yourself? Which identities are most important to you? Why? How do you think other people define you?

2) Are We All Longing to Belong?

Throughout the book, Chloe Cho thinks a lot about her Korean identity: She teaches herself to make Korean food, she listens to K-pop, and she keeps trying to get her parents to tell her stories about Korea.

I decided to wear my hanbok, the one I'd saved up for almost a year to buy. I'd been reserving it for my birthday, when I planned to make my next try at convincing Mom and Dad to take Shelley and me to the city for Korean food, but hey, sometimes a girl needs to change the plan.
[*Unidentified Suburban Object*, p. 71]

Q: Why do you think being Korean is so important to Chloe?

*Shelley pointed at the grid of classes on her schedule. "Social studies with Ms. Lee."
..."My dad went to the school board meeting last night—her whole name's Su-Hyung Lee."*

Whoa.

"Seriously?"

"Seriously. I think that might mean she's..."

**Talking About Identity, Difference & Friendship
With the Novel *Unidentified Suburban Object* by Mike Jung**

"Asian." My mind was blown. All of the teachers I'd ever had in my entire life were white. Every single one of them.

"Yeah, and you know the thing about people with the last names Park, Kim, or Lee. She must be—"

"Korean!" [p. 13-14]

Q: Why does Chloe get so excited when she finds out Ms. Lee is Korean? Why does she want to connect with her? Have you ever met someone with whom you really wanted to connect because of your identity?

3) Can We Sometimes Feel Disconnected from our Identity?

"I'm Korean, too," [Ms. Lee told Chloe] "...but I was born in the U.S., so I'm no stranger to feelings of disconnection from my heritage." [p. 33-34]

It's often hard for people whose families have come from other countries to keep their connections to the place they left. With each generation that is born and grows up in the new country, it's less likely that the old language and culture will be preserved, as it is replaced by the new country's language and culture.

Q: If you don't know the language and culture of "your people," are you still a member of the group? Why or why not?

Q: Have you ever felt as if you were an imposter, as if you didn't really belong to some part of your identity? Has someone ever said you weren't _____ enough?

"I liked being Korean," I said. "It was like...I knew who I was, at least kind of. And now I don't, and we don't have any family, and we can't ever visit the places you and Mom lived when you were kids, and... I don't get to have any of that." [p. 229]

Chloe's parents are posing as Korean immigrants in order to protect their true identity as aliens. They avoid telling Chloe stories about Korea by pretending that it's "too hard" to remember. But they are actually covering a much more painful truth, that their home planet and everyone on it was destroyed. Their reluctance to share stories with Chloe mirrors that of some people whose experiences as refugees — or veterans — were so traumatic that they go silent.

Q: Do you know anyone who can't go back to where they're from? Or who can't talk about where they're from or what happened to them?

**Talking About Identity, Difference & Friendship
With the Novel *Unidentified Suburban Object* by Mike Jung**

Yeah, it was different. I didn't look like anyone else, but I'd still been human. I'd been a Korean human. Now I wasn't anything. [p. 153]

"What does that even mean, this isn't like you? I'm not Korean, I'm not even human — everything I thought was me was all just made up." [p. 218]

When Chloe discovers that she's not Korean after all, she's devastated. Her reactions to this news end up also threatening her identity as a model honor student and as Shelley's best friend.

Q: What kinds of events can change our identities?

Q: How might you feel if something happened that meant you were no longer who you thought you were? How do you think you would react?

ONE OF THE CROWD VS. ONE OF THE FEW

The thing is, I'm the only Asian kid in the whole school. In the whole town, actually. Rumor has it a bunch of Japanese kids flew over the town in an airplane once, but other than that it's just me, waving my freak flag solo. [p. 24]

Q: Based on your own experience, what does it feel like to be the only one or one of a few? When have you had that experience?

Q: How about belonging to a group that's in the majority? What is that experience like?

Sociologists tell us that our identities are formed by the “mirrors” in which we see ourselves reflected when we’re young. These mirrors are not actual mirrors, but what other people show us about who we are. In words and actions other people communicate whether we belong and how we belong. The people around us and the mirror they hold up to says, “You’re just like us.” or “What are you?”

If you look like most people around you, you blend in — for instance, a boy on the boys' soccer team. The mirror that’s held up for you says, “Normal.” As a result, you may not think much about that identity, and other people are unlikely to point it out. In a way, it becomes invisible.

But if you’re one of a few — say, the only *girl* on the boys' soccer team — the mirror people hold up says, “Different.” You don't blend in; you stand out. People are always noticing, commenting on, and responding to the fact that you are different. As a result, that identity, that difference, becomes highlighted, and you might think about it a lot. It may become a very big part of how you define yourself.

**Talking About Identity, Difference & Friendship
With the Novel *Unidentified Suburban Object* by Mike Jung**

Q: Which parts of your own identity make you blend in, as one of the crowd?

Q: Which identities make you stand out? What feelings come up when you notice that you are one of a few? When does it feel good? When does it feel hard?

MICROAGGRESSIONS, OR “WHY IS CHLOE SO ANGRY?”

Oops, there was Angry Chloe again. Sigh.

“I’m sorry, Chloe, geez! You’re such a Crabby McCrabberson!”

“I...just forget it, Lindsay. I’m sorry, okay?” [p. 23]

Q: What are some of the reasons Chloe gets angry?

Yes, I’m good at math. All Koreans are, didn’t you know? [p. 1]

In Chloe, author Mike Jung created an Asian character who is a good-at-math, violin-playing honor student whose parents are scientists.

Q: Why do you think the author chose to give Chloe a number of qualities that are often used as stereotypes of Asian people?

Q: Can you think of any ways Chloe challenges stereotypes of Asian people?

“Even Abigail Yang lost a few competitions on her way to the top!” [Mr. C said.]

Something went KABLOOEY inside my brain.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I said, and it came out REALLY loud, because the room went completely, pin-drop, algebra-test silent. I suddenly had Mr. C’s undivided attention.

“Excuse me, Chloe?” he said in a voice that was a little too calm.

“Do you not know I’m not Abigail Flipping Yang, or can you really just not tell us apart? That would be stupid, since I’m actually here.” [p. 204]

Q: Why does Mr. C continually use this reference to Chloe? What does he mean when he uses it?

Talking About Identity, Difference & Friendship
With the Novel *Unidentified Suburban Object* by Mike Jung

Q: Why do you think being compared to Abigail Yang bothers Chloe? What does it mean to her?

Q: Why does Chloe react so strongly to the comment this time, when she's heard it so many times before?

Mr. C's comment is an example of a microaggression, which the dictionary defines as "a subtle but offensive comment or action directed at a minority or other non-dominant group that is often unintentional or unconsciously reinforces a stereotype."

Q: Have you ever felt like you said something hurtful to someone different from you, even if you didn't mean to?

Such a comment or action can bother someone else even when you don't mean to hurt them. It's important to distinguish between the *intention*, which is what you think you meant, and the actual *impact*, which is how it felt to the other person.

Such comments and actions make people feel that they're not one of the group, or that they're not "normal." Some people describe microaggressions as "death by a thousand paper cuts."

Q: "Death by a thousand paper cuts" is a funny phrase. What do you think it means? How does it apply to Chloe?

One of the hardest things about experiencing microaggressions is that it's often difficult for other people, especially those who've never been one of a few, to understand why such comments and actions are so hurtful. If someone makes a comment about you and you complain, even a friend may respond, "It was only a joke." "They didn't mean anything by it." "Why are you overreacting?" Comments like this only isolate you more, making you feel as if your experiences are being minimized or denied. It also makes you and your reaction the problem, rather than the comment or action itself.

Q: Can you give an example of something that has happened to you where the impact on you was different from what the person intended?

Q: Now that we have a better understanding of microaggressions, what microaggression examples can you remember from the book?

[mispronunciation of Chloe's name (p. 21); assumption that she knows Ms. Lee (p. 22); conflating Korea with China or Japan (p. 25, 50, 64, 74, 147); absence of people of color in science fiction books (p. 173+); assumption of difference in educational outlook (p. 210) and the phrases "ours" and "our own" (p. 210, 212); a classmate wondering if she has to bow to Chloe's parents (p. 235); etc.]

Talking About Identity, Difference & Friendship
With the Novel *Unidentified Suburban Object* by Mike Jung

Q: Have you been the target of comments or actions that made you feel as if you didn't belong? What kinds of comments?

Q: Let's brainstorm some examples of microaggressions. Now how about some solutions for responding to such comments and actions in an effective way that doesn't get you into trouble: What could you do if the comment was directed at you? At someone else? What if the person making the comment was another student? What if it was a teacher?

BEING CURIOUS

"Is it ...hard hanging out with her?" Lindsay asked. Sigh. That didn't sound like a promising question.

"Sometimes," Shelley said.

"I'd worry about, I don't know, offending her," Lindsay said, getting it right for once. "Like, do you have to bow to her parents and stuff like that?" [p. 235]

With all this talk about microaggression, should you be hesitant to ask questions about someone who is different from you? No. You can be curious about someone without making assumptions about them.

Let's look at what Lindsay says.

"I'd worry about, I don't know, offending her," Lindsay said, getting it right for once. "Like, do you have to bow to her parents and stuff like that?"

Lindsay has heard or seen that in some Asian cultures, people bow to one another in greeting. But Chloe is not "some Asian," she is Korean American. Lindsay could have said to Shelley, "I worry a little bit about going to Chloe's house. Since they're Korean American, does her family have different rules than mine?" Why is saying it this way different? Instead of making an **assumption** that Chloe's parents bow, Lindsay is asking a more common question that does not mention Chloe's race or culture. She avoids an assumption and uses a question that has more commonalities.

Q: "Why are Asians always so good in school?" How can we reframe that question by taking out an assumption and exhibiting curiosity and commonality?

**Talking About Identity, Difference & Friendship
With the Novel *Unidentified Suburban Object* by Mike Jung**

"Can I ask you a question?" Mrs. Fenwick said. I tensed up, because usually when people say that it means they're about to ask donkey-brained questions about where I'm 'really' from or is it true Korean people eat dogs and stuff like that.

"How do you feel about being the only Korean student at George Matthew?"

Whoa, that came out of nowhere — a question that I could actually give a real answer to! I was so surprised that I forgot to be tense.

"Lonely, I guess." [p. 97]

Chloe expected a donkey-brained question. She was surprised by a question that contained no assumptions about her Korean heritage, but one that was genuinely curious about exactly who she is, "the only Korean student at George Matthew."

Q: What is the difference between Mrs. Fenwick's question and Mr. C's calling Chloe by the name of a famous Korean musician?

So, it is not hard to ask questions of people that are different than you. You just have to identify your assumptions and approach new people with curiosity and commonalities. Not bad advice for all interactions!

And... when you do make a mistake — all of us do! — and something comes out wrong, the best thing to do is apologize, quickly and honestly, without being defensive: "Sorry, that came out wrong. I really want to know more about you, but I'm not sure how to ask."

Appropriation vs. Appreciation

"Why are you and Shelley best friends? Why did she pick you?" [Dad asked.]

"I told you, because I'm Korean. And probably also because nobody else will hang out with her."

Dad stood up, put his hands on his hips, and put on his "Wut?" face.

"In preschool?? Do you really think Shelley had some kind of Asian fetish when she was three years old?" [p. 223]

Shelley enjoys making mandu and exploring Korean culture with Chloe. When people admire another culture, they sometimes want to make things from that culture a part of their own life. There's appreciation, and there's appropriation, which means taking something that does not

**Talking About Identity, Difference & Friendship
With the Novel *Unidentified Suburban Object* by Mike Jung**

belong to you and making it yours. There is a lot of talk — and a lot of strong disagreement — about what is appreciation and what is appropriation.

Q: Do you think it's okay to borrow things from other cultures? Is there a line between cultural appreciation and appropriation? What do you think the difference is?

BEING AN ALLY, BEING A FRIEND

Chloe and Shelley have always had a fantastic friendship. They have a hard time for awhile because neither one understands the depth of the impact of Chloe's discovery that she's not who she thought she was.

Q: In what ways is Shelley a good friend to Chloe? In what ways does she make things harder for Chloe?

Q: Could Shelley have pushed Chloe harder to figure out why she was so mad? Or if Chloe didn't feel like talking, is there any other way Shelley could have gotten more understanding about what was happening for her friend?

All good friends create a safe place for each other to share what they are angry about, what they are sad about, and what they are worried about. If both friends can stand by each other as they tell their truths and be patient with misunderstandings, then the difference of race, culture, economic class, and other traits can make them stronger friends.

"Is it ...hard hanging out with her?" Lindsay asked. Sigh. That didn't sound like a promising question.

"Sometimes," Shelley said.

"I'd worry about, I don't know, offending her," Lindsay said, getting it right for once. "Like, do you have to bow to her parents and stuff like that?"

AAAAAAGGGGHHHH...and then Shelley stepped up.

"That's stupid," she said, and I heard Lindsay huff out a breath of air.

"Why is that stupid?" ...

"Because Chloe's parents are like everyone else's parents, that's why. They're just normal people." [p. 235]

Talking About Identity, Difference & Friendship
With the Novel *Unidentified Suburban Object* by Mike Jung

If both friends can see microaggressions and talk about them, friendships can be stronger. If a friend from the majority group can tell others about how the microaggressions are hurting her friend, then not only does the friendship get stronger, but the whole community gets stronger.

Q: How does Shelley start to finally see the microaggressions against Chloe in this encounter with Lindsay? How does Shelley's response help both Chloe and Lindsay?

Q: Can you think of how you could have been an ally for a classmate when people were making assumptions about them?

"Can I ask you a question that might sound... weird?"

"I specialize in answering weird questions," [Ms. Mutch said.]

"Do you know if there are any science fiction books where the aliens look like Asian people?"

Ms. Mutch sat up really straight and rubbed her lower lip with her thumb.

"Well, Chloe, that is a VERY interesting question. Very, very interesting. I can't think of any off the top of my head."

She got up and came around to my side of the circulation desk, then stood facing me with her arms crossed and a huge grin on her face.

"Let's take a look, shall we?" [p. 166]

Chloe's librarian, Ms. Mutch, offers another model for being an ally.

Q: What are some of the particular things Ms. Mutch says and does to support Chloe?

Q: What are other concrete ways that people in a school community can act as allies for each other?

Talking About Identity, Difference & Friendship
With the Novel *Unidentified Suburban Object* by Mike Jung

RESOURCES

These resources can help inform your conversation with readers.

VIDEO:

Comedian Jay Smooth has two delightful, insightful videos on navigating race, from a biracial commentator:

- “How to Tell Someone They Sound Racist”
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CNKMFduSnFw>
- “How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Discussing Race” (TEDX talk, Hampshire College)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MbdxeFcQtaU>

ARTICLE:

“Critical Practices for Anti-Bias Education,” Teaching Tolerance
<http://www.tolerance.org/critical-practices>

BOOKS:

Tatum, Beverly Daniel, *“Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?” and Other Conversations About Race; A Psychologist Explains the Development of Racial Identity*

Marsh, Mendoza-Denton & Smith, editors, *Are We Born Racist?: New Insights from Neuroscience and Positive Psychology*