

NOT MY PROBLEM

Ciara Smyth

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Suitable for ages 14+

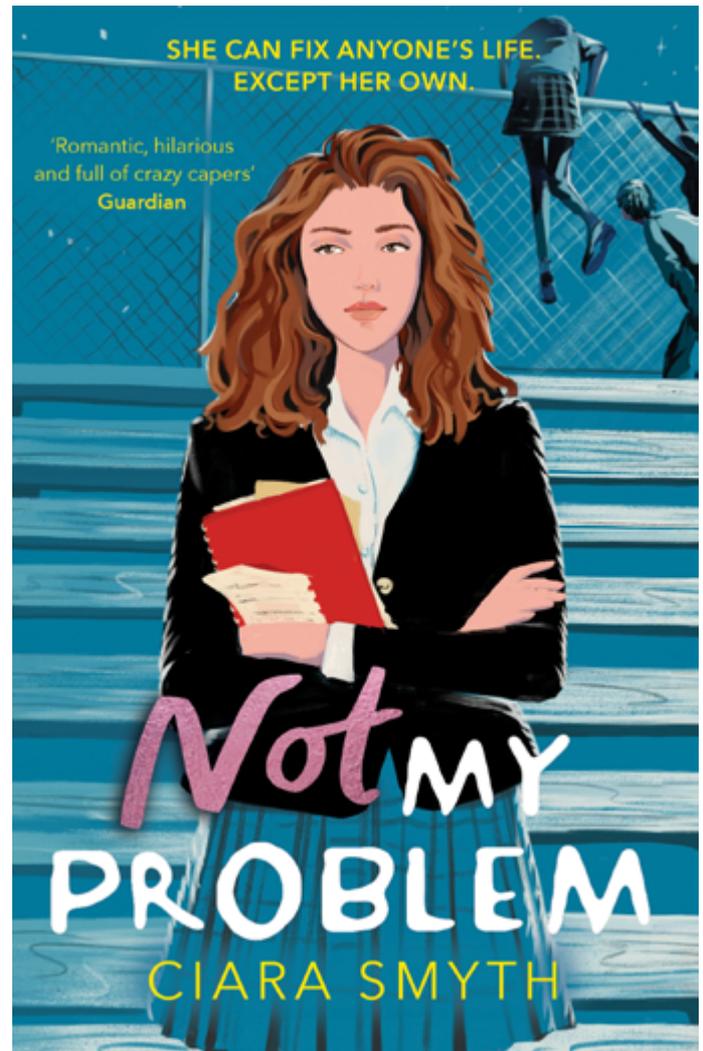
Themes

- Friendship
- Family relationships
- LGBTQ+
- Anxiety
- Alcoholism
- School

Summary When rulebreaker Aideen reluctantly agrees to help class-swot Meabh cope with her crazy workload, she doesn't expect to wind up *pushing her down the stairs*. However, this wild solution leads Aideen to discover she has a real talent for solving other people's problems. A series of ill-advised but well-intentioned hijinks ensues, with the assistance of her lovable sidekick Kavi and the annoying (but distractingly cute) Meabh. However, her own life is a mess – her mam is drinking again, her best friend is avoiding her and she is flunking out of school. As she grows closer to her new friends, she wonders can every problem really be solved?

Judges' Comments Teenager Aideen seems quite capable of solving other people's problems but struggles with her own life: her mother's alcoholism, issues with her best friend and falling grades. With humorous and witty dialogue, as well as complex portrayals that masterfully avoid cliché, this young adult novel weaves diversity seamlessly into its narrative. Smyth's excellent writing and characterisation ensure that the reader is drawn directly into an emotional and realistic tale of contemporary teen experience. This novel is hard-hitting at times while also brimming with empathy and sensitivity.

About the Author Ciara Smyth studied drama, teaching and then social work at university. She thought she didn't know what she wanted to be when she grew up. She became a writer so she wouldn't have to grow up. She enjoys jiggling (verb: to complete a jigsaw puzzle), playing the violin badly and having serious conversations with her pets. Ciara has lived in Belfast for over ten years and still doesn't really know her way around.



QUESTIONS

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

1. What impression does the front cover give you of Aideen's character?
2. Do you like the title *Not My Problem*? Does it make you want to read the book?
3. Look at the background of the cover illustration (by Spiros Halaris) – what is happening? What idea does this give you of the plot?

AS YOU READ

Chapter 1

1. What is your first impression of the following characters – Aideen, Meabh and Ms Devlin?
2. Discuss Meabh's ideas for improving the school. Do you think they are strong ideas? Would you vote for her to become student council president?
3. Why do you think Aideen is worried about her mum?

Chapters 2–6

1. What does the scene where Aideen remembers her project work with Meabh tell us about both girls? How do you think they both felt?
2. Meabh is a perfectionist and is very stressed about her grades, extracurriculars and her future. What would you suggest to help her with her anxiety?
3. What do you think of Mr Kowalski's reaction to his daughter's injury?
4. What details does the author give about Aideen's home? What impression does this give of her home life?
5. Do you like the use of text messages in the book? What are the differences between Aideen's and Meabh's styles of texting/expressing themselves?
6. How does Aideen feel about her dad being back? How does the author show us these feelings?

Chapters 7–11

1. What do you learn about Aideen's home life in chapter 7? How do you think she feels about her responsibilities?
2. How does the author create tension and drama when the characters break into the school?
3. Orla reveals to Aideen that she was cyberbullied. How would you deal with this? What do you think of how her dads reacted?

4. Why do you think Aideen reacts the way she does to Holly being annoyed? Do you think this is a healthy friendship?
5. Aideen and her mother remember the trip to Galway differently. What does this tell us about both of their characters?

Chapters 12–16

1. Aideen is very understanding – how does the author show us this? Think about how Aideen reacted to Orla and Laura when they told her about their problems.
2. What do you think of Meabh's idea to make the school paper digital?
3. What do we learn about Aideen's dad in chapter 14?
4. What does Holly's response to Aideen's 'He's back' text tell us about their friendship?
5. Aideen is in a difficult position when Holly asks her to spy on Meabh. What do you think she should do?

Chapters 17–21

1. Aideen often fails to see her own talents and abilities. What strengths of hers have you noticed so far?
2. Do you think Ms Devlin is a good teacher? How does she try to support Aideen?
3. What do we learn about Aideen's childhood in this section of the book?
4. Aideen's opinion of Meabh changes – think about what she has learned through their friendship. What do you think of Meabh now compared to at the start of the book?
5. Meabh says that Aideen focuses on fixing other people's problems rather than dealing with her own. Do you think this is true? If so, why does she do this?
6. Aideen is hurt by her mam's apology – why do you think she accepts it and pretends to be happy? Compare this to the apology Aideen received from Holly in this section of the book.

Chapters 22–26

1. Were you surprised by what happened when Aideen and Angela went to break Daniel out of his home? What did you think of the rescue mission?
2. Compare the ways the different characters speak. How does Ciara Smyth make their voices distinctive?
3. Aideen and Meabh talk about stereotypical depictions of lesbians in media. Think of queer characters you know

from TV or movies. Do they fit these stereotypes? What identities do we not see represented?

4. Meabh, Aideen and Kavi have an emotional chat at the party. Aideen realises that, like her, they have often felt alone. Discuss the different ways these characters have struggled to fit in at school. What could be done to help them?
5. In this section of the book, Aideen almost kisses Meabh. What hints have we had that Aideen finds Meabh attractive?
6. Aideen confronts her mam in this section of the book and asks if she has been drinking. What do you think of how Aideen handles this conversation?

Chapters 27–31

1. Aideen helps Dylan create a viral video in which he attempts to break different Guinness World Records. Did you enjoy this scene? Which record do you think would be easiest to break?
2. Aideen speaks to Holly about their friendship and how Holly has been treating her. How has Aideen found the courage to have this conversation? What do you think are the traits of a healthy friendship?
3. At the end of the book, Aideen starts opening up to Meabh and Kavi about her struggles at school and her mam's drinking. What do you think of their reactions? How would you support a friend through a difficult time?
4. Compare Aideen and Meabh's realisations at the end of the book. How have they both grown during this novel, and what will they change in future?

AFTER YOU HAVE READ

1. The ending of this book is a new beginning for Aideen, as she opens up to her friends and her teacher about her struggles. What do you think will happen next?
2. Think about Aideen – how has she changed since you met her in chapter 1? What is your opinion of her now?
3. Discuss some of the relationships in the book. What do you think of Aideen and Meabh's relationship – do you like them as a couple? How is Kavi a supportive friend to Aideen?
4. Imagine what happens to the characters in this book in the future. What do you think will happen to Aideen, Meabh and Kavi when they leave school? How will Aideen's relationship with her mam change over time?

ACTIVITIES

- Meabh is passionate about sustainability and fighting climate change. Think of environmental campaigns you could arrange in your school or community. You could use ideas from the book or come up with your own.
- Aideen daydreams about creating a popular app, which she names Flubberygiblets. What do you think this app would do? Create your own app idea. Think about what it would do, who the audience would be, what you would name it and what the design would be.
- The teenagers in this book deal with a lot of anxiety and pressure. Aideen has a panic attack at one stage. Research ways of dealing with anxiety (such as breathing techniques, journaling or counselling) and how to handle panic attacks. Jigsaw.ie and SpunOut.ie are resources aimed at helping young people.
- Aideen has a lot of playlists, including 'Creepy Vibes and Spooky Beats' and 'Sad Ladies of the Nineties'. Which songs would you put on a 'Not My Problem' playlist to represent this book? Think about the mood of the book, the different characters (maybe even what music you think they would like) and the events of the story.
- Aideen goes to a food bank in chapter 18 for groceries when her mam has had a relapse. Food banks and other organisations that deal with food poverty saw a huge rise in demand for their services in 2020 with increased unemployment during the Covid-19 pandemic. Research food banks or charities that accept donations in your area. You could get in contact with your local service and arrange an event – perhaps a fundraiser or a collection of non-perishable food items or period products at your school.
- Research Guinness World Records. You could look at records set in Ireland (for example, the world's largest tea towel) or, like Aideen, you could look for records that might be easy to break!
- Meabh and Holly speak at the electoral debate when running for student council president. If you were a candidate for this election, what points would you have made in your speech?
- There are lesbian and bisexual characters in this book. Aideen says that when she was outed at school, she faced a lot of bullying and homophobia. What can schools or communities do to support LGBTQ+ young people? You could look into inviting a group like ShoutOut to your school or community group to raise awareness.

FURTHER RESOURCES

- To find more LGBTQ+ inclusive books, check out Children's Books Ireland's Rainbow Reads reading list: <https://childrensbooksireland.ie/our-recommendations/rainbow-reads>
- Explore the *Living with Pride* exhibition from the National Library of Ireland: <https://www.nli.ie/LivingWithPride/>
- Jigsaw.ie is the national centre for youth mental health: <https://jigsaw.ie/>
- SpunOut is Ireland's youth information website, providing easy access to relevant, reliable and non-judgemental information: <https://spunout.ie/>
- ShoutOut is a registered charity committed to improving life for LGBTQ+ people by sharing personal stories and educating school students, parents and guardians, teachers, youth workers and workplaces on LGBTQ+ issues: <https://spunout.ie/>