

By the author of *The Troubled Girls of Dragomir Academy*

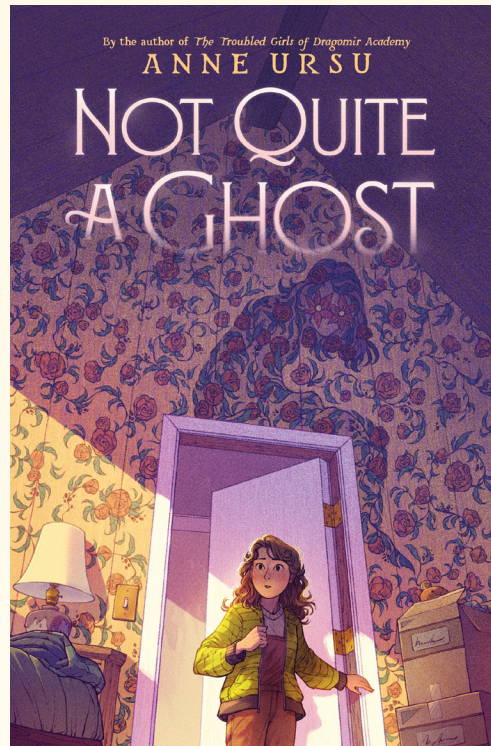
ANNE URSU

NOT QUITE A GHOST

EDUCATOR'S GUIDE

Includes Pre-Reading Activities, Discussion Questions, Enrichment and Extension Activities, an Exclusive Author Letter, and Background Material





The house seemed to sit apart from the others on Katydid Street, silent and alone, like it didn't fit among them. For Violet Hart — whose family is about to move into the house on Katydid Street — very little felt like it fit anymore. Like their old home, suddenly too small since her mother remarried and the new baby arrived. Or Violet's group of friends, which, since they started middle school, isn't enough for Violet's best friend, Paige. Everything seemed to be changing at once. But sometimes, Violet tells herself, change is okay.

That is, until Violet sees her new room. The attic bedroom in their new house is shadowy, creaky, and wrapped in old yellow wallpaper covered with a faded tangle of twisting vines and sickly flowers. And then, after moving in, Violet falls ill — and does not get better. As days turn into weeks without any improvement, her family growing more confused and her friends wondering if she's really sick at all, she finds herself spending more time alone in the room with the yellow wallpaper, the shadows moving in the corners, wrapping themselves around her at night.

And soon, Violet starts to suspect that she might not be alone in the room at all.



A LETTER FROM ANNE URSU

I started working on this book at a time when many of us became all too familiar with the walls of our homes. There's something about illness that lends itself to a haunted house story: you are suddenly beset by something outside your control, something inherently isolating, and something that, in the case of the disease experienced by Violet, the character at the heart of *Not Quite a Ghost*, is often met with disbelief and even disdain.

I know the feeling well; I came down with what would eventually be diagnosed as chronic fatigue syndrome in high school, and I've been trying to figure out how to write about it for years. But with the emergence of Long COVID, which presents very similarly to CFS, it felt important to find a way in — especially given how severe Long COVID can be in kids. Staring at the walls long enough brought me back to Charlotte Perkins Gillman's deeply creepy 1892 novella "The Yellow Wallpaper," which has its own things to say about illness, isolation, and the consequences of medical indifference, and finally I knew how to tell this story.

Like Long COVID, CFS is known as an invisible illness, a category that encompasses conditions like autoimmune disorders, heart disease, psychiatric illness, diabetes, and asthma — but also can refer specifically to conditions that seem invisible to the medical profession — so patients quickly go from searching for a doctor who can diagnose and treat them to searching for one who will even believe that they're ill at all.

Not Quite a Ghost is a story about the consequences of being invisible to the people who are supposed to help you, how isolating it can be, and how that isolation leaves room for something sinister to sneak through. It's also about middle school, seismic shifts in friendship, the way families can be unmade and remade, and the benefits of having a good cat at your side. And I hope that it's absorbing and fun and scary in all the right ways, and that maybe it will have readers looking twice at any wallpaper they happen to encounter.

I very much hope you enjoy it.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Anne Ursu is the author of acclaimed novels *The Troubled Girls of Dragomir Academy*, *The Lost Girl*, *Breadcrumbs*, and *The Real Boy*, among others. Her work has been selected as a National Book Award nominee, a Kirkus Prize finalist, and as a best book of the year by *Parents Magazine*, *Publishers Weekly*, *Amazon.com*, and *School Library Journal*. She lives in Minneapolis with her family and an unruly herd of cats. Find Anne online at anneursu.com.



PRE-READING ACTIVITIES

What are your feelings about change? Do you perceive change to be a positive thing with lots of possibilities? Do you dread change and the challenges that change can bring? Are you somewhere in between? Violet is experiencing lots of change as she starts middle school AND moves to a new house with her blended family. In what ways might these changes be an adventure for Violet? In what ways might these changes be a challenge?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

CHAPTER 1

- ✿ How does the author bring the house at 1664 Katydid Street to life? What character traits or human qualities does she give it?
- ✿ Why is the Hart-Eddington family moving? How does the family feel about this?
- ✿ “Most of the house lied, but one room told the truth.” [Page 10] Which room is telling the truth, and what truth do you think the room tells?



CHAPTER 2

- ✿ What kind of relationship does Violet have with her sister?
- ✿ Who are the “three peas” referred to in the chapter title, and why does the imagery of a peapod comfort Violet?
- ✿ Why does Violet want to have one “last hurrah” sleepover with her friends?

CHAPTER 3

- ✿ Why does Violet try to avoid germs?
- ✿ Do you think Paige’s behavior at the sleepover contradicts what Violet has come to expect from her? Why or why not?
- ✿ What does Violet have in common with the other girls? What sets her apart or makes her different?

CHAPTER 4

- ✿ Looking back, how does Violet feel about the Truth or Dare game?
- ✿ What details do we learn about Violet’s dad?

CHAPTER 5

- ✿ Describe the new house.
- ✿ Where does Trixie come from? What role might she play in the story?
- ✿ How do you interpret Violet’s nightmare about the vines on her wallpaper? What does it make you think about?
- ✿ What is mono? Why is Violet’s stomach churning over the possibility of going to the doctor’s office?



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS — continued

CHAPTER 6

- ✿ How does Violet feel about seeing the doctor? What tells you this?
- ✿ Why does Violet want Eliot to believe she is ok? Do you believe her? Why or why not?
- ✿ What does it mean to quarantine with Covid?
- ✿ Do you agree with Violet that there's something eerie about her room? If you think it's eerie, what makes it that way?



CHAPTER 7

- ✿ What stresses Violet out about gym class?
- ✿ What does Violet feel is going well in her world right now? What does she wish would change?

CHAPTER 8

- ✿ What kind of friend is Paige?
- ✿ In your opinion, is it a problem that Violet doesn't have a phone? How might having a phone make things better for Violet? How might having a phone make things harder or more challenging?
- ✿ Does Dr. Reynolds share Violet's mom's concerns about her health? Why or why not?
- ✿ Who is the boy in the library? Would you be his friend?
- ✿ Why do you think Violet tells Will she understands being lonely?

CHAPTER 9

- ✿ How does Quinn relate to Violet's other friends? Give evidence to support your thinking.
- ✿ What is Violet worried about? What is Violet's mom worried about?
- ✿ What is Trixie watching?

CHAPTER 10

- ✿ Reread pages 119-120. How are things changing for the house?
- ✿ Why doesn't Will go to lunch in the cafeteria?
- ✿ Why do you think Paige is so insistent about keeping the sleepover secrets?
- ✿ Why is Paige suspicious of Will?

CHAPTER 11

- ✿ Why does Violet think it would help if she could talk to Mia?
- ✿ Violet dreams she is watching herself sleep while the wallpaper seems to come to life and a shadow skulks behind the vines. Is it a dream? Could it possibly *not* be a dream?
- ✿ Do Will and Violet feel the same way or differently about their friendship? How can you tell?
- ✿ The chapter ends with Violet's thought: maybe she could "have a squad and a tree house, too." [Page 144] Why do you think she thinks this?



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS — continued

CHAPTER 12

- ✿ If Violet has been feeling better, why does she have a sudden fainting spell at the Fall Festival?
- ✿ What surprises Violet about Paige's behavior at the Fall Festival, and why?

CHAPTER 13

- ✿ Why does Paige interrupt Kennedy to say Eliot isn't Violet's dad? What is her motivation and/or what does she think would happen?
- ✿ Why does Violet push herself to go to gym class?
- ✿ What is an invalid, and why does Mr. Bell refer to Violet that way?

CHAPTER 14

- ✿ Why does Violet think she doesn't need to be in the emergency room?
- ✿ Why is Dr. Carlson suspicious about Violet's visit?
- ✿ How would you describe Violet's mom's feelings about the emergency room visit? Why do you think she feels this way?
- ✿ What are some of the questions you imagine Violet might have?

CHAPTER 15

- ✿ What is Violet's reaction to her mother's new plan?
- ✿ Explain the movement Violet "sees" behind the pattern in the wallpaper. Who or what is it, and why is it there?
- ✿ What does Ally share? How does she justify Paige's behavior?

- ✿ What has changed for Mia?
- ✿ Violet describes "empty spaces" she can feel within herself. What does she believe left those spaces? What does she do, or what could she do, to heal the hurt feelings that give rise to those empty spaces?
- ✿ What do you notice about what Violet is thinking or feeling when the corpse girl shows up in the story?

CHAPTER 16

- ✿ Does visiting Dr. Reynolds help Violet? Why or why not?
- ✿ How does Violet feel after the third appointment?

CHAPTER 17

- ✿ What would her family think if Violet told them someone or something is in the wallpaper?
- ✿ Why does the word "help" appear in the mirror?
- ✿ What keeps Violet from shouting about the shadow?
- ✿ What is happening to Violet?

CHAPTER 18

- ✿ What does the girl in the wallpaper want?
- ✿ How does Violet know she is in a different space than her room?
- ✿ What keeps Violet from being absorbed by the wall?
- ✿ What does Violet feel that her mom can't understand?
- ✿ What thought does Violet have that makes her realize what heartbreak might feel like?



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS — continued

CHAPTER 19

- ✿ How and/or when did the girl in the wallpaper get trapped?
- ✿ How does Violet hope Owen's painting will help?
- ✿ Describe the voice of the girl in the wall.
- ✿ What evidence is there that Violet believes what the girl in the wall is saying? What evidence is there that she doesn't?

CHAPTER 20

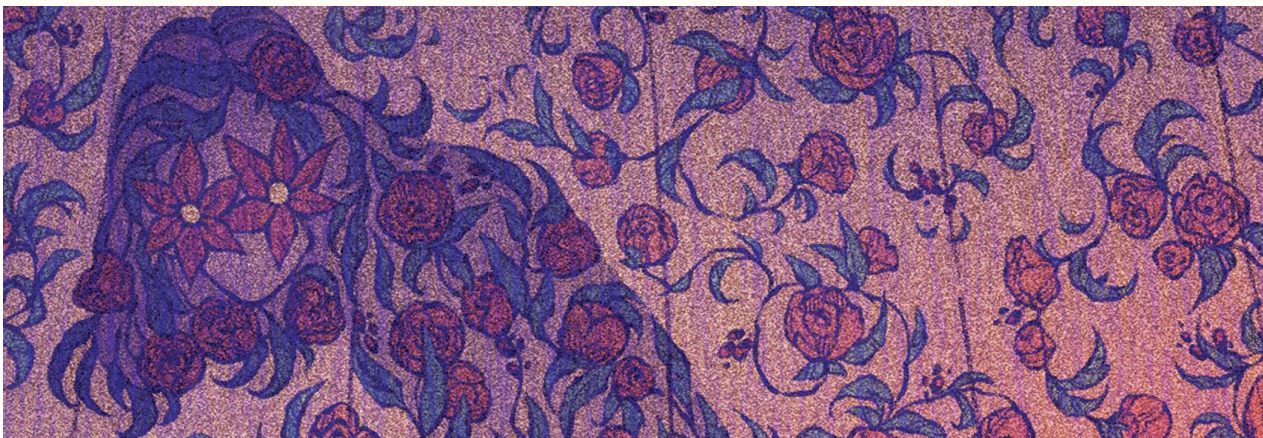
- ✿ What is the significance of the photo book Mia brings to Violet?
- ✿ Why does Violet tell Will about the mysterious thing haunting her room?
- ✿ Why do Violet and Will type to each other, even though they are together?
- ✿ What might Violet's plan be?

CHAPTER 21

- ✿ Explain how Violet — despite being sick and weak — fights off the girl in the wallpaper.
- ✿ How does Violet rid the house of the girl?

CHAPTER 22

- ✿ What is the importance of the Cinematic Universe movie from Mia? Why does Violet cry?
- ✿ Why does Violet want to protect her mom from being sad? What is her mother's perspective about this?
- ✿ Why do you think Violet is hesitant about talking to Will's dad?
- ✿ How does Dr. Sommers-Medina explain what happened at Violet's other appointments?
- ✿ Why does Violet feel less alone in the attic at the end of the book?
- ✿ How or why might the house on Katydid Street have been waiting for Violet?





FOR MORE DISCUSSION

Anne Ursu is very careful in her choice of language. For example, consider the book's title: *Not Quite a Ghost*. What do the words "not quite" mean? Who or what is referred to as being "Not Quite a Ghost"? Is there more than one possible answer? Explain your thinking with examples from the text.

Evidence of Anne Ursu's carefully chosen language and allusions to ghosts compliment the juxtaposition of what is seen and unseen throughout the book. As you read, notice places where the author has selected precise words and phrases to support that overarching idea.

Here are some to get you started:

- ✦ "...tiredness clung to her like a needy ghost..." [Page 93]
- ✦ "Mia was like an extra in a movie now, or a ghost who occasionally haunted corners of her world." [Page 134]
- ✦ "'The best ghost hunters are skeptics,' [Will] said. 'You have to look at everything like it can be explained by natural phenomena or trickery—and then the ones you can't explain, that's what you take seriously.'" [Page 141]
- ✦ Revisit Chapter 11, in which Will and Violet are watching a video of a ghost hunter as they do research in the library. What does a ghost hunter do? In what ways are the work of a ghost hunter and a doctor similar and different? How are ghosts and illnesses alike?

- ✦ Reread pages 227-228. What is the "infection" the house at 1664 Katydid Street did not want to be lost to? What parallels can be drawn between the intruder and an invisible illness?
- ✦ Recall Violet's visits with her doctors. What are her memories with Dr. Reynolds from when she was younger? What does she remember from recent visits? What was her experience with the emergency room doctor?
- ✦ "Some people are the kinds that leave. We just need to find the kind of people that stay." [Page 269] Discuss this quote from the last chapter of the book. Who says it, and what do they mean? How might this quote have a bigger meaning beyond the context of this chapter?
- ✦ True or false: The house at 1664 Katydid Street is a character in the book. Discuss this statement. Provide evidence to support your argument. What role does the house play in the story, if any?

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ENRICHMENT AND EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

VIRUSES & ILLNESS

Brainstorm various illnesses you've experienced over time.

- ✦ What are some of the characteristics of “being sick” that you remember or recognize?
- ✦ When you look at your list, notice which of the characteristics you mentioned are visible (observable or seen by others) and which are invisible (not observable or seen by others).
- ✦ How might it be frustrating to be sick with “invisible” symptoms? What challenges might you face?
- ✦ Explore what makes something a *virus*. How do we get viruses? How do we typically get rid of or fight off viruses?
- ✦ What is an *autoimmune disease*? Why is this dangerous or concerning? What are some examples of autoimmune diseases?
- ✦ Construct a model for other students that helps explain how a virus might cause one's immune system to begin to fight against the healthy body/cells.

Resource: [Boston Children's Hospital](#)

GHOSTS & SPIRITS

Research ghost hunters (if you dare!).

- ✦ Why do people hunt ghosts?
- ✦ What methods do ghost hunters use to detect spirits?
- ✦ What do they consider to be evidence of ghost-like phenomena?

Will convinced his social studies teacher, Ms. Entrada, to support his project about local hauntings of Minnesota.

- ✦ Do some research about the area where you live.
- ✦ What ghost stories or lore can you uncover that are local to you?

What is a Ouija Board?

- ✦ How and why did it originate?
- ✦ How does it “work”?

THE POWER OF SUGGESTION

What is the power of suggestion? Consider how it might work.

- ✦ Think of a time when you were convinced of something because of someone else's strong suggestion.
- ✦ Was it someone you know? A stranger? A person your same age or someone older than you? The media or an advertisement?
- ✦ How could the power of suggestion be used in a positive way?
- ✦ How could it be used in a negative way?

HEALTHY FRIENDSHIPS

Violet's middle school experience is challenging enough with the mysteries around her health. Like many preteens, she also must navigate tricky social situations.

- ✦ List each of Violet's friends from the book: Paige, Ally, Quinn, Kennedy, Will. How would you characterize the relationships she has with each person?
- ✦ Which of her relationships with friends are healthy for Violet? How so? Which are not, and why not?



ENRICHMENT AND EXTENSION ACTIVITIES — continued

- ✦ Have you had an experience, like Violet, when you and a friend grew apart? Or, have you had a time when a misunderstanding or worry got between you and a friend? How did you handle that obstacle? Would you handle it the same way now, or would you do something differently?

WALLPAPER & PRINTMAKING

The dull, yellow wallpaper with berries and flowers and vines serves to contain the girl in the wall in Violet's attic room, at one point even with the suggestion that the vines were like bars.

- ✦ If you were going to be trapped by wallpaper, what sort of pattern or design would it have? Would it be vines and flowers like the wallpaper in Violet's attic room, or would it be something else?
- ✦ Explore the art of printmaking using styrofoam or other stamping tools.
- ✦ Can you incorporate symbols in repeating designs?

Resources: [Styrofoam Painting with Kids](#); [Potato Printing](#); [Rubber Stamp Making](#)

CREATIVE WRITING

"Ghost stories were supposed to be about people. Who was the ghost? What did they want? Why were they haunting that specific place?" [Page 139] Write your own ghost story! Consider:

- ✦ Will your ghost be related to a specific place or object?
- ✦ What is their motive? What will happen as a result of their haunting?

Write a letter to one of Violet's doctors. You might write from Violet's perspective, her mom's perspective, or from your own perspective. Consider:

- ✦ What could you write to help the doctor better understand about a patient like Violet?
- ✦ What would you request the doctor do differently in the future?

PERSUASIVE WRITING

Write a public service announcement about invisible illnesses.

- ✦ What audience would you like to reach? Who do you think needs to hear a message about others' experiences with invisible illnesses?
- ✦ What is your purpose? What language do you want to use? What images? Sounds?
- ✦ Be sure to cite the sources that inform your work.

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NOT QUITE A GHOST BY ANNE URSU
WWW.WALDEN.COM/BOOKS
WWW.HARPERCOLLINS.COM
 ISBN: 9780062275158
 ON SALE: JANUARY 16, 2024



SEEING BEYOND INVISIBLE ILLNESS

By Dr. Traci Arway

Have you ever read a book and, when you needed to step away from it, wondered how the characters were doing? That is precisely how I felt when reading *Not Quite a Ghost* by Anne Ursu. I found my mind wandering to Violet, hoping she was doing well and wondering what was happening to her. Were the doctors right? Was she being attention-seeking or just “adjusting to middle school woes?” I wondered if her invisible or non-apparent illness would be appropriately identified, so she could start the road to treatment and living successfully with what was impacting her. Still, most importantly, I found my mind wondering what I would do if this were my student or, even more, my child.

My three children and I all have non-apparent or invisible disabilities. After I lost my husband to brain cancer, it became my job to advocate for us all. As an Intervention Specialist, I thought I was equipped to navigate the educational system; as the primary caregiver for my husband, I felt I was ready to navigate the medical hurdles. But even with all my experience, I encountered red-tape, resistance, and even hostility. Violet’s journey in *Not Quite a Ghost* shows what one child experienced when her voice was not heard.

As teachers, we can help support students and families even as they try to navigate the myriad hurdles in front of them. When we have students like Violet in our classroom, we can be the ones who believe what they say about the way they’re feeling. We can be the ones who truly listen to them and perhaps then they’ll feel more able to advocate for themselves. We can trust them when they tell us what they need and adjust our practices and expectations accordingly. We are not a one-size-fits-all profession, society, or world!

What can we do to make our learning spaces more accessible and inviting to all learners? Here are my suggestions:

1. Take time to get to know students and build relationships and connections with each one so they know you have created a safe space for them to learn and take risks.
2. Read and learn more about non-apparent disabilities and illnesses and fill your classroom library with books representing all students, including those with non-apparent illnesses.
3. Provide yourself some grace as you learn and grow to meet all students where they are.
4. Although Violet finally finds answers, not all students do. Advocate for them, support them, accommodate them, teach them.

Dr. Traci Arway is a 23-year veteran Intervention Specialist, now serving as a Special Education Coordinator in Columbus, OH. She is also a NEA IDEA Resource Cadre member, helping spread the word about non-apparent disabilities and ableism.