

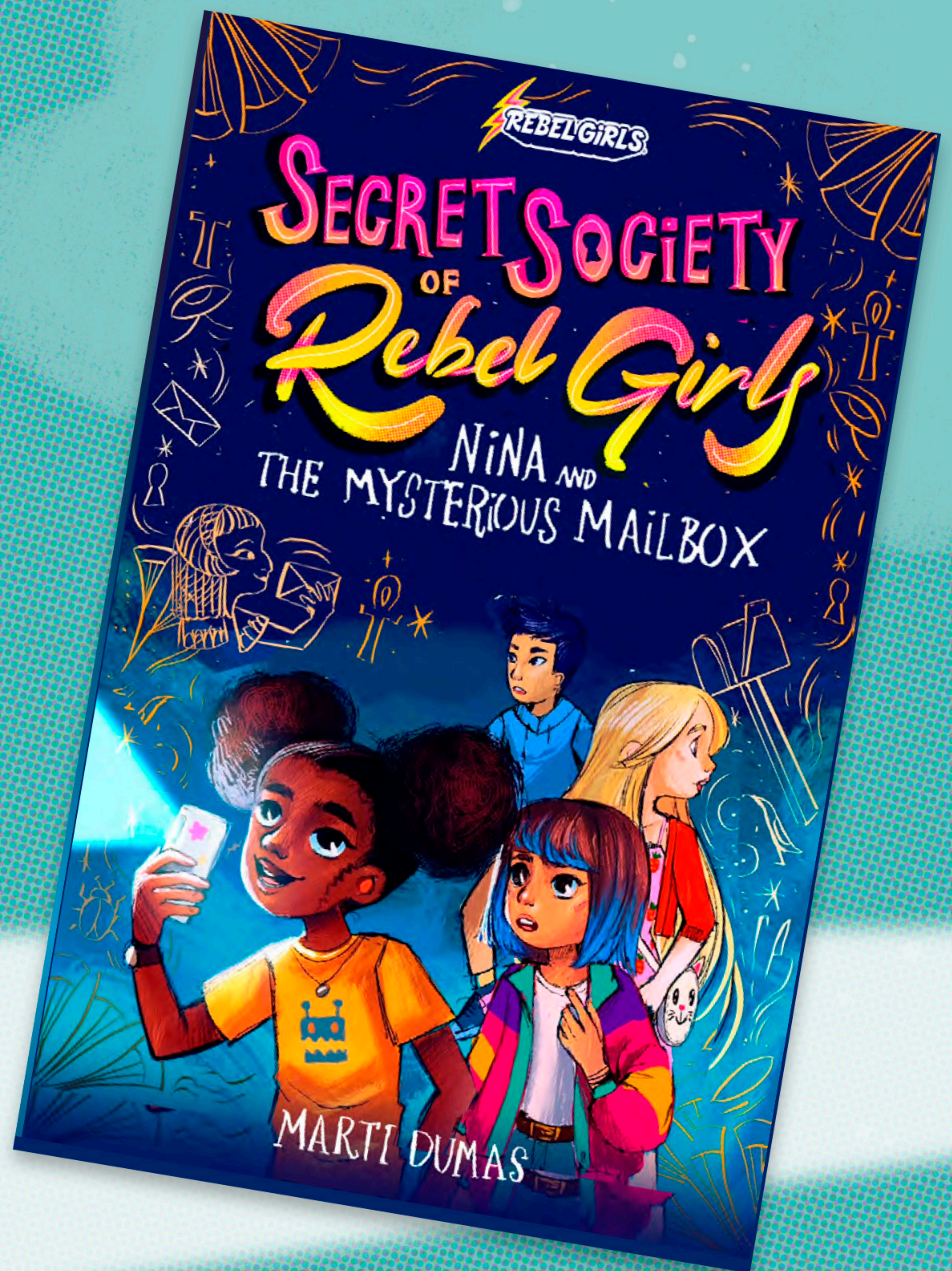
# SECRETS SOCIETY OF *Rebel Girls* NiNA AND THE MYSTERIOUS MAILBOX



**Discussion Guide and Activity Pack**

**Nina** is determined to help her best friend, Maya, win the race for sixth-grade representative. But when she uses her robotics skills to spy on Maya's opponent, the girls wind up in detention. There, they are asked to write a letter to a woman from history. Nina pours her heart out to Cleopatra, and instead of throwing the letter away so her moms don't find it, she slips it into a battered old mailbox she and Maya find in the woods. It is all just a game . . . until a giant scroll arrives at Nina's house, signed by Cleopatra herself!

Do the girls really have a pen pal from 2,000 years ago? Will their friend Zoe ever speak to them again? Why is the science teacher acting so oddly? And what on earth is a time taco?



**Marti Dumas** is a mom, teacher, writer, and creative entrepreneur. She is passionate about promoting childhood literacy, and for more than 20 years she's worked with children and teachers across the country to encourage an early love of reading both in and out of the classroom. Her stories combine science, humor, family, and magic while adding much-needed diversity to the children's book landscape. She lives in New Orleans with her family.



# Discussion Questions

**1** How would you describe each of the main characters: Nina, Maya, Kai, Zoe, and Ms. Juniper? Choose three adjectives for each character. Who do you identify with the most? Why?

**2** As the book begins, Nina is excited about how middle school is a fresh start. But then she says, *“Middle school isn’t fresh!! Mixed in with the new people in the new halls and new classrooms is almost every single kid from your old school. Kids who know you. Kids who remember. How could you be a brand-new you with the Pajama Day Debacle hanging over your head? (page 6)”* Do you agree with Nina? How is middle school different from elementary school? Is it possible to reinvent yourself when you start middle school?

**3** How does the author describe Ada Lovelace Middle School? How is it similar to and different from your school?

**4** Kai copied off of Nina in the third grade, and Nina refers to him as “Cheater Kai” (page 9). Does it make sense for her to hold that against him? Do people change a lot between third grade and sixth grade?

**5** At school dropoff, Nina sees Zoe. She says, *“I tried to say hi, even though I could feel my turtle shell closing up around me” (page 11)*. Later, after Nina and Maya are caught using the school intercom without permission, Nina thinks, *“For probably the millionth time in my life, I wished I had a turtle shell I could crawl into” (page 45)*. What does she mean when she talks about her “turtle shell”? Have you ever wished you had a turtle shell to crawl into?

**6** Maya chooses Nina as her campaign manager. What is the role of a campaign manager in a school election? How do you think the role is different when a campaign manager works for a candidate running for Congress or to be a governor or the president? Does Nina do a good job? If you were a campaign manager, what advice would you give your candidate?

**7** When Nina finds out Kai is running against Maya, she worries that the election is turning into a popularity contest. Are her fears justified? Is that something that happens during elections?

**8** Maya talks about her grandmother tying herself to the Trouble Tree to keep it from being cut down. She believes it is worth getting into trouble to stand up for causes you believe in. Do you agree? What causes do you think it is worth getting in trouble for?

# Discussion Questions

**9** When Nina and Maya end up in detention, Ms. Juniper asks them *“to write a letter to a woman from the past”* (page 54). Is this an appropriate punishment? What might the students learn from the exercise? How does writing a letter differ from sending a text or an email?

**10** Instead of writing a letter, Maya made some drawings. She said, *“In a way, all art is a letter to Frida Kahlo”* (page 65). Do you agree? Did she complete the assignment?

**11** How do Nina’s moms show her they care? How do the members of Maya’s family express their love for Maya?

**12** To learn about what was important to their classmates, Nina and Maya made telephone calls and met with groups of students. If you wanted to learn about your classmates’ concerns, how would you go about it? What groups of students would you meet with? What questions would you ask them?

**13** If Maya approached you, what concerns would you raise about your school? What would you like to improve about your school? If you created a straw poll for your school, what questions would you put on it?

**14** When Nina creates the online straw poll for the students, she leaves a space for kids to write jokes. What joke would you tell?

**15** After Kai throws the donut dance party, Maya considers dropping out of the race. If you were in her place, what would you do? How would you decide whether to stay in the race? If you were Nina, what would you say to Maya in this moment?

**16** What misunderstanding leads to the friendship troubles between Nina, Maya, and Zoe? How can they move on? How do the friendships change throughout the story?





# Reflection Questions

**1** At home, Nina has lots of labeled drawers with her LEGO bricks in them. Maya has her “little medium corner” with an electric candle and her tarot decks. What is an area of your home that tells something about your interests or your personality?

**2** Zoe has her lucky cat purse, and Nina has her beloved cargo pants. Do you have a favorite piece of clothing or a cherished accessory? What is it? Why do you like it so much?

**3** Nina loves robotics and has her heart set on going to MIT. Social justice causes energize Maya. Kai is all about tennis, and Zoe loves fashion. What ignites your imagination and makes you most excited? What do you want to learn more about? How do your interests affect your dreams for your future?

**4** When they are on their “listening tour,” Nina and Maya lean in to their strengths: Maya speaks with the students, and Nina builds an app to organize the information. What are your strengths? What role would you play in a political campaign?

**5** After missing robotics club for detention, Maya was nervous and embarrassed to return to the club. Would you have felt the same way? How would you have handled it?

**6** Nina is her family’s official cheese grater, and her family loves to make Ziplock ice cream together. What are some of your family traditions? How do they make you feel?

**7** When Nina’s moms start arguing, she pretends to feel sick and goes to her room. How do you handle it when things are stressful at home?

**8** Kai goes along with the donut dance party because his parents want him to. Have you ever felt like you’ve gone along with something for the sake of someone else—your parents, teachers, or friends? How did you feel about it? If you could go back in time, would you do it again? How might you be able to change the situation?

**9** Zoe isn’t speaking to Nina and Maya for much of the book. Have you ever had a misunderstanding with a friend? How did you handle it? Is there something you wish you had said or done differently?

**10** As a young person, Ms. Juniper received a letter from Katherine Johnson. She said, “*The letter I got from her changed my life. Just the fact that she would respond. It gave me the boost I needed to pursue a career in math and science*” (page 223). Have you ever received a letter that changed your life or meant a lot to you? Who was it from? Why is it so special to you?

# Writing Activities and Creative Expression

**1** During his campaign, Kai gave out T-shirts, baseball caps, and water bottles. “The logo had a shiny gold crown on top, and underneath it was the absolute worst phrase possible: *Kai’s Your Guy . . . for 6th Grade Rep*” (page 23). What images would you use in your campaign logo? Come up with a logo and a campaign slogan, and design your own campaign merch.

**2** At her first meeting with the robotics club, Nina starts to build a hover car. Later, she works with her team to create a robot that can move throughout the school. What kind of robot would you like to design? Sketch it and label the parts to explain what your robot can do. Maya suggested the Fortuna as the name for Nina’s robot. Don’t forget to name your robot creation.

**3** The members of the robotics team talk about Dr. Hansen’s legendary obstacle courses (pages 35–37), complete with blind spots. Imagine you are in charge of creating a “diabolical” obstacle course for a middle school robotics competition and map it out.

**4** Write a letter to a woman from the past. Let her know why you chose her.

**5** Read the scene where Nina and Maya hide in the fabric bin to sneak into the auditorium so they can speak with Carly (pages 93–96), then draw a comic panel of the scene.

**6** When Nina is sad, her Mum comes up and braids her hair. Sometimes, Nina and her moms curl up together on the hideaway bed. Maya’s abuela makes the girls a special breakfast with her famous sweet-and-spicy hot chocolate. How do you bond with your family? Write about something you do together or draw it.

**7** When Maya delivers her speech on election day (pages 171–175), she mentions things that could be done to improve the school. Write your own campaign speech to deliver to your classmates. Make sure to state the problems you would like to address and to explain how you would try to fix them.

**8** Zoe designs her own clothes. Grab some paper and design your own outfit.

# Research Projects

**1** Nina describes the “Surprising Scientist” display in Ms. Juniper’s class. “*Did you know Cleopatra was an alchemist?*” the board said” (page 21). What is alchemy? What did alchemists in history do? Can you think of some modern-day equivalents of alchemy?

**2** Do some research to choose three other scientists who would be compelling subjects for Ms. Juniper’s “Surprising Scientist” display. What did they do? What makes them so fascinating?

**3** After Nina receives the scroll from Cleopatra, Maya does some research to check the facts in the scroll. Do your own research into Cleopatra’s life. What do you find most fascinating about her?

**4** Choose another historical figure to research. Before you begin your research, write down what you think you know about her. Then do some research online or in the library. What do you find out? Were your initial notes correct? What was the most interesting or surprising thing you learned?

**5** When the kids brainstorm who they would like to write to next, Kai suggests Althea Gibson and other tennis players. Think of a sport you play or a hobby you enjoy. Do some research to find out the names of some of the most important or influential people in the history of that sport or field. Which one would you most like to correspond with? Why?

