



TEACHING NOTES

# I AM THE SUBWAY

Author and illustrator Kim Hyo-eun

Translator Deborah Smith

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## PLOT

A cinematic journey through the Seoul subway that masterfully portrays the many unique lives we travel alongside whenever we take the train. A critically acclaimed translation of the bestselling Korean picture book.

Accompanied by the constant, rumbling ba-dum ba-dum of its passage through the city, the subway has stories to tell. Between sunrise and sunset, it welcomes and farewells people, and holds them — along with their joys, hopes, fears, and memories — in its embrace.

Originally published in Korean and brought to English-speaking audiences with the help of renowned translator Deborah Smith, *I Am the Subway* vividly reflects the shared humanity that can be found in crowded metropolitan cities.

## THEMES

Trains    city life  
commuting  
multiculturalism



books in translation  
Seoul  
Korea  
other people's lives



## DISCUSSION TOPICS

### Close reading of the cover

Look at the cover and describe what you see. Now read the title: *I Am the Subway*. What do you think this story will be about? Who do you think the narrator will be? Now take a closer look at all the people in the cover illustration. Who do you think these people might be? What are they doing? How might they be feeling? How do you know?

### Close reading of textual elements

**Title page:** Read and take a close look at the first few pages of the book, up until the title page ('*ba-dum, ba-dum* I AM THE SUBWAY'). Usually a title page is placed at the very beginning of a book. What effect does this later arrival of the title page create for you? How does it feel to read these first few pages and then arrive at this title page? The publisher made this choice in order to evoke the feeling of watching a movie, in which the title usually appears a little while after the movie as begun: we are given a short introduction to the story, and then the name of the story is revealed. Do you think the publisher's choice here is effective, or would you prefer the title page to appear at the beginning of the story? Why?



**Character study:** Choose a character from *I Am the Subway* who you would love to have a conversation with. Write down a list of everything that you know about them — the clothes they're wearing, and anything that they share about their lives. Then answer this question: what is it about this character that interests you? Perhaps you relate to them, share their interests, or they remind you of someone you know — or maybe something about their life seems unfamiliar to you. Write three questions that you would love to ask this character.

### The Haenyeo of South Korea

In *I Am the Subway*, we meet Granny, who dives for seafood to bring to her family in Seoul. Granny is participating in an ancient Korean tradition of female freediving. There is a long lineage of Korean female freedivers, called the Haenyeo, which can be translated to 'women of the sea'. Haenyeo women earn their living by diving for seafood such as seaweed, abalone, and octopus. The only diving gear that they use are a wetsuit, goggles, and a weight belt (which helps them sink down into the sea's depth more easily). These divers can hold their breath for up to three minutes underwater — long enough to dive down to twenty or even thirty metres, harvest some seafood, and then swim back up to the surface with their catch. The Haenyo freedivers begin learning their trade at around the age of fifteen and are called 'Young Haenyo'. The number of women taking up this tradition has decreased a great deal over the past few decades, and most Haenyo these days are women over the age of sixty — like Granny!





## ACTIVITIES

### Creative writing

Think about someone who might take a train, bus, or tram in your hometown. Maybe it's someone you've actually seen on public transport, maybe it's a made-up person, or it could even be a friend or family member. Now, write from the perspective of your mode of transport (e.g 'I am the Mernda Train' or 'I am the 56 Bus'), followed by a monologue from your passenger character, in the style of *I Am the Subway*. What sound does your mode of transport make? Is it *ba-dum ba-dum*, like the Seoul subway, or does it sound different? Perhaps it goes *Dedededede* or *Brrrrrrrrrrm*.



.....  
[transport sound]

This station/stop is

.....  
[name of station/stop].

My doors open — who is it now?

.....  
[Name of character]

arrives, .....

[comment on the style, energy, or action of their arrival].

[Write a monologue from the perspective of your character.]

[Now come back to being the mode of transport, commenting on the passenger's actions and mood onboard the bus/tram/train]

### Art

Draw a picture of your passenger character on the bus/tram/train to accompany your writing.



## BIOGRAPHIES

### Author and illustrator:

I am Kim Hyo-eun. Hyo as in dawn, eun as in divine grace. It is the name my father, at 32, gave to his second daughter. I was born, and three younger siblings followed after. In this way, I became daughter, younger sister, onni (older sister to a girl), and nuna (older sister to a boy).

The seven of us went many places in my father's old car. We saw pretty pebbles and small fish in valley streams so cold they made your teeth chatter. We lay in ugly tents on the beach and heard the sound of waves rolling in, overlapping. Dark nights when the grasshoppers cried, on roads without a single light, we encountered numberless stars, and the white moon shining on each other's faces. We grew up seeing the many things our father showed us.

At some point I became an adult, found the path I would walk, and went down it. I saw the things I wanted to see, passed by what was otherwise, pretending I couldn't see it, and walked on diligently. Then all of a sudden I saw the people on the path. I began to put wrinkled hands, different coloured faces, arms making various gestures, into pictures. As the pictures accumulated steadily, I too wanted to show them to someone, just as my father had showed us children when we were young. Things I had seen on the path, things that were near at hand but could not be seen, things not visible to the eye but still significant.

### Translator:

I am Deborah Smith. I grew up in a small South Yorkshire town without a bookshop or books at home, never travelling. I read translations, learned Korean, then began to translate and founded Tilted Axis Press (publishing translations of writing from across Asia), all to learn, share, and support a more nuanced and equitable awareness of our mutually entangled lives.

These days I translate little and slowly, mainly poetry. My other translation work involves mentoring, curating, and learning to live in India.

