

## A Curriculum Guide to

### ***Spy School***

By Stuart Gibbs

#### **About the Book**

Ben Ripley, an average all-American twelve-year-old boy, has an uninteresting life that changes quickly when the great agent Alexander Hale slips into his house and coerces him to join the CIA. In a single day, he goes from being a middle school minion enrolled in boring math classes to a struggling secret agent taking courses on self-preservation at *Spy School*. Ben will try to save the day, get the girl, and become the spy he is meant to be while embarking on a mission of self-discovery and true identity.

#### **Prereading Activities**

The following activities contained in this section particularly address the following Common Core State Standards: (RL.7.7, 8).

1. Observe old James Bond movies or video clips to incorporate background knowledge of espionage and intelligence agencies. Have students create a list of characteristics that would define the “perfect” spy. Pay attention to the wardrobe, mannerisms, and personality traits of James Bond that make him the quintessential spy. After creating a list, each student can create a picture, either drawing it by hand or using a computer, to show his or her own idea of how the “perfect” spy should look.
2. Brainstorm about spy movies, novels, and graphic novels to remind students of the various stories and plotlines. Guide the class in a discussion about some of the themes in the novels or movies. How are the themes similar or different? What are the similarities in the protagonists? What are the characteristics of the antagonists?

#### **Discussion Questions**

The following discussion questions contained in this section particularly address the following Common Core State Standards: (RL.7.1, 2, 3,4, 5, 6).

1. How does the author organize the novel? Why does the author structure it this way and what effect does it have on the overall novel? Use examples from the story to support your analysis.
2. Who is Ben Ripley? What makes Ben an unlikely candidate for the CIA? Why is Ben chosen to join the CIA?
3. What is a Fleming? Explain the allusion the author uses with the phrase, “Don’t tell me you are a Fleming?”

4. The author uses the word *espionage* throughout the novel. For example, Ben is recruited to the Academy of Espionage. What is espionage? What words or phrases help the reader to understand the definition?
5. How does the action in Chapters 2 and 3 set the tone for the rest of the story? What effect does the tone have on the overall novel?
6. The author uses descriptive language throughout the novel as, “Chip turned crimson in anger. Veins the size of night crawlers bulged in his neck.” Analyze the impact of the author’s specific word choices on the novel. How does the word choice contribute to the tone?
7. Summarize Chapter 6 briefly and objectively. What happens to Ben that advances the plot? How does the incident propel the action forward?
8. Who is Joshua Hallal? What is his relationship with Erica Hale? How do you know?
9. What does Murray Hill think about Spy School? What is Erica’s point of view of Spy School? How are their points of view different?
10. Who is Alexander Hale? Who is Erica Hale? How do they interact with each other? How do their interactions with Ben increase the drama in the story?
11. Compare and contrast Ben’s reputation at home and at Spy School. How is it different? How is it the same? How does Mike Brezinski’s character help to point out the similarities and differences?
12. Chapter 14 is titled “Provocation.” What does provocation mean? Why do Ben and Erica provoke the principal? What effect does the principal’s character have on the story?
13. The author uses figurative language throughout the novel. For example, Erica asks Ben if anyone’s name “rings a bell”? What literary device is the author using in this example? Identify three other literary devices the author uses and determine their meaning.
14. What is Operation Pinwheel? What is Operation Jackhammer? How do you know?
15. Describe how the plot unfolds in a series of episodes from the beginning of the novel. Create a time line in chronological order to help the reader keep the plotline straight. Use details from the story including the setting (time and place) to structure the time line.
16. In Chapter 19, “Abduction,” Erica and Ben have a private moment at the Washington monument. How does this incident reveal Erica’s conflicting emotions? How does it show she is a complex character?
17. How does the development of Professor Crandall’s character help to shape the theme of the novel? What is the theme of the novel?

18. What is Ben's revelation in Chapter 23? How does Murray Hill's character manipulate the reader? How does Murray's character add to the irony?

19. What is SPYDER? What does SPYDER stand for? Why is SPYDER one step ahead of Ben and Erica? How does the SPYDER organization contribute to the drama of the story?

20. The author leaves a letter at the end of the story with certain particulars blacked out. What effect does this have on the reader? Why would the author do this? Why does the author include the letter at the end of the story? Give specific examples from the novel to support your conclusion.

### **Postreading Activities**

The following activities contained in this section particularly address the following Common Core State Standards: (RL.7.3, 7).

1. Have students work in pairs to understand and identify the elements of plot: exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution. Have student partners create a plot pyramid diagramming example incidents from the novel for each of the elements to show their understanding of the elements of plot. For example, Ben Ripley's first experience at the Academy of Espionage is part of the exposition.

2. Create groups of 3 – 4 students and have each group act out a scene from the novel. First, have students construct a storyboard to aide the process that includes parts and dialogue for each character, limited props and resources, and changes they may need to make to the script in order to perform it realistically in class. How does watching the staged scene affect the drama versus reading the written scene in a book? Analyze how the students perform, character's dialogue and dialect, alternating the diction for each character. How do the students know to emphasize certain words or change their tone of voice? Guide the class in a constructive discussion to help students understand the changes that it may be necessary to make to the novel to translate it into another medium.

*This guide was written in 2013 by Michelle Carson, Reading Teacher, Reading Endorsed, Palm Beach Central High School, FL.*

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