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A Curriculum Guide to
Spy School at Sea
By Stuart Gibbs

About the Book

In the ninth addition to the *New York Times* bestselling Spy School series, Ben Ripley faces his nemesis, Murray Hill, on the high seas. Thanks to the evidence Ben uncovered in his investigation of the Croatoan, the CIA has tracked Murray Hill to Central America, where they believe he is boarding the world's biggest cruise ship, *The Emperor of the Seas*, on its maiden voyage around the world. His mission: pose as part of a family—with Alexander and Catherine Hale as his parents, Erica as his sister, and his best friend, Mike, as his brother—to find out what Murray is plotting. At first, having a mission on the most glamorous ocean liner on earth sounds exciting; however, as usual, nothing goes according to plan. There is action, danger, and plenty of surprises as Ben and his team quickly find themselves in hot water.

Discussion Questions

The following questions may be utilized throughout the study of *Spy School at Sea* as reflective writing prompts, or they can be used as targeted questions for class discussion and reflection. The discussion questions and activities particularly address the following English Language Arts Common Core State Standards: (R.L. 4.1-3, 7, 9) (R.L. 5.1, 2, 3, 4, 7, 9) (S.L. 6.1-3) (W.4-6.4)

1. Though the Croatoan was defeated, the latest classified document reveals that Murray Hill is once again up to his nefarious ways. Despite his blunders, what makes Murray someone to be taken very seriously?
2. In *Spy School at Sea*, Ben and his team are assigned to Operation Deadly Manatee aboard the *Emperor of the Seas* cruise ship. Are there ways in which this mission is more challenging than their earlier assignments? If so, what might those be?
3. The CIA Deputy Director of Operations tells Ben's principal that the "Director has been very impressed with the performance of these agents-in-training." Though he is seemingly pleased, can you think of reasons why the principal may not be particularly excited by this praise? Why has the principal's relationship with Ben and his peers been such a tumultuous one?
4. CIA Deputy Director Indira Kapoor offers, "You have all handled yourselves capably and acted with ingenuity and skill, which is obviously a testament to the education you have received at this institution." Why does seeing her principal take credit for the successes of their team upset Erica so?
5. After learning that their mission will be carried out on *The Emperor of the Seas*, Mike exclaims, "Awesome! It's supposed to be the most amazing ship ever built! There's a bunch of swimming pools and miniature golf and a ropes course and a rock wall and a water park!" Why does Deputy Kapoor seem irritated by Mike's enthusiasm for this mission? Is Mike's approach to remind Deputy Kapoor that they should look like "normal tourists" a wise one? Explain your answer.
6. Catherine addresses Ben, Mike, and Erica, saying, "I know that you children have served your country well and faced considerable danger on several other missions. But you're still . . . well, children." What do you think of Catherine's argument? Do you think the CIA is taking advantage of these young agents? If so, in what ways?
7. Deputy Kapoor tells Ben, "Agent Ripley, you probably understand Murray Hill better than anyone else at this agency." Do you think his previous experiences facing Murray Hill give Ben an advantage? Explain your answer.
8. Zoe tells the group, "This stinks. Why aren't they sending me on this mission, too? I've been a student here way longer than Mike has. And I contributed just as much to our missions as Mike did in Mexico and London." In what ways is Zoe's work as a junior agent at DADD keeping her from being assigned to assist?
9. Though Ben would typically be delighted to get to spend a great deal of time with Erica on a mission, he is fearful that this one will be a disaster because of what was revealed to her sister, Trixie. Is his reaction and fear warranted? How do you predict Erica will react when she learns the truth?
10. Readers discover that Erica is "extremely protective of Trixie," so much so that she doesn't reveal to Ben that she has a sister. Why would the Hale family go to such great lengths to keep this secret from one of their own? Do you agree or disagree with their choice?
11. Ben tells Mike, "Erica is like a human lie detector. She always finds out the truth." Consider what you've discovered about Erica from *Spy School at Sea* as well as from earlier missions. Do you believe this to be an accurate description of her?

12. Ben points out all the ways this assignment could end poorly, reminding Mike of how close they'd come to dying on their last mission to the tropics. Mike replies, "But we didn't. Not only did we stay alive, but we also saved the day and thwarted the bad guys. Face it, Ben, we're pretty good at this spy thing." Compare Ben's and Mike's attitudes toward this new mission. Which of them do you believe has the more appropriate approach and why?

13. Ben had been excited to see Nicaragua, the starting point of the journey; however, he's disappointed by the lack of opportunity due to the cruise ship experience. The passengers are immediately put on tour buses and shuttled to the cruise ship terminal to wait in long lines and are treated like kindergarteners. Have you ever had a similar experience where a trip hasn't gone the way you expected? If so, where was it and what happened?

14. When Ben shares his suspicions that Murray's taken the "cushy route" by staying in expensive accommodations aboard the cruise ship, Catherine tells the group they can't stay in first class because "espionage may be extremely important, but most operations still have shoestring budgets." Do you find this news surprising? Think of all that's involved in a CIA operation like this. What kinds of things need to be paid for?

15. Though Koolnezz, the teen club on board the ship, offers dance parties, arcade games, Ping-Pong, karaoke, and trivia, Ben and his friends have to feign interest in visiting and participating. Why aren't they more excited? Would you enjoy spending time in a place like that?

16. After accidentally trespassing on a well-known drug trafficker's private property, Ben and Mike discover that El Diablo is a complicated, complex individual. What do you learn while reading about El Diablo that supports that statement?

17. Consider Ben's reaction to discovering that Jessica Shang and her mother are owners of *The Emperor of the Seas*. How does Shayla Shang's behavior complicate matters for his relationship with Jessica?

18. After being captured by Murray and Dane, Ben attempts to learn about the evil plans that are underway. Murray, unwilling to share, tells Ben, "You're the one being devious here, Ben. Very cunning of you. With your mind and my schemes, we would have made a great team." What do you think of Murray's statement? Do you believe his assessment of Ben is correct? If so, in what ways?

19. How does almost drowning in the ocean and being saved by Mike help Ben better appreciate his friend? What are some of the specific ways Mike shows his fortitude?

20. What are your earliest impressions of Bjorn Turok? Given what is learned about him throughout the course of the novel, do you believe him to be truly different from his cousin, Dane Brammage? Explain your answers.

21. After discovering that the ship contains stolen national treasures from China, the team realizes that *The Emperor of the Seas* is being used for a number of criminal endeavors. In what ways does learning this complicate their mission?

22. Thinking about the events of *Spy School at Sea* and the *Spy School* series in general, what's been your favorite mission that Ben and his team have undertaken so far? Explain your answer using examples from the books.

23. After Ben manipulates Murray into believing Zoe reciprocates his feelings to get him to assist them in defusing a bomb he'd set, Murray tells Ben, "You've made it personal. So now, in return for all the trouble you've caused me, I'm going to destroy you, Ben Ripley." Do you think Ben has anything to worry about? What do you predict will happen when the two next face off?

Extension Activities

1. In *Spy School at Sea*, readers learn that *The Emperor of the Seas* is run on nuclear power. Working with a partner, learn more about how nuclear power is harnessed and used to run ships and a variety of other things by researching the following:

- What is nuclear power?
- How is it created and used?
- In what ways is it useful as a source of energy?
- What makes it dangerous?
- Besides ships, what else uses nuclear power and energy?
- What are other interesting facts you've uncovered?

After completing your investigation, share your discoveries with others.

2. In *Spy School at Sea*, the grand scale of the fictional *Emperor of the Seas* is considered at length, but what goes into designing and building a real cruise ship? Discover more by first watching "Sail Away! New Technology in Cruise Ship Design" here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=drA7Dc-osCo>. After viewing, participate in a group discussion about the ways author Stuart Gibbs's ship is similar to or different from what you learned. Then create a wish list of what you'd want included if you were part of a ship design team.

3. In *Spy School at Sea*, the team discovers that their cruise ship is being used to transport priceless, stolen clay Chinese soldiers from the Terra Cotta Army. Using this article, "Terra Cotta Soldiers on the March" from *Smithsonian Magazine* (<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/terra-cotta-soldiers-on-the-march-30942673/>), learn more about these antiquities. Be sure to discover:

- Where were these warriors originally found, and by whom?
- What made this archeological find so important?
- How many clay statues were uncovered?
- What do these pits of soldiers help us understand about the leader who commissioned their creations?
- Why are pieces like this so valuable and vulnerable?

After reading, join a small group for a focused discussion about the article and how it relates to what you learned while reading *Spy School at Sea*.

4. In *Spy School at Sea*, readers learn that the children's education continues onboard *The Emperor of the Seas*. Using library and internet resources, research more about schools on cruise ships, being sure to discover the following:

- What types of schools at sea exist?
- What are the age ranges of most students?
- What are reasons young people go to school on boats or cruise ships?
- Are there any specific benefits for a young person in doing so?

After completing your research, share the three most interesting things you learned with your peers.

5. After Mike rescues Ben from the ocean, their perilous journey ends in northern Costa Rica where they marvel over witnessing sea turtles coming ashore to lay their eggs. Begin your focused learning by visiting the National Ocean Service's site here: <https://oceanservice.noaa.gov/facts/turtle-hatch.html>. After building a basic understanding of how sea turtles hatch, use other resources to learn more about sea turtles and their conservation, focusing on the following:

- Besides the National Ocean Service, which is run by the U.S. Department of Commerce, what other conservation groups focus on sea turtles?
- Beyond predators, what are the greatest dangers to sea turtles and their eggs/hatchlings?
- What are some specific things that young people can do to help?

After completing your research, share your new knowledge with others.

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