

Reading Group Guide for  
**Forbidden City**  
By James Ponti

**About the Book**

After taking down a mole within their organization, the City Spies are ready for their next mission—once again using their unique skills and abilities to infiltrate places adults can't. The sinister Umbra has their sights set on recruiting a North Korean nuclear physicist by any means necessary, and the City Spies plan to keep an eye on his son by sending Paris to the chess prodigy's tournaments in Moscow and Beijing. Meanwhile, Sydney's embedded as a junior reporter for a teen lifestyle site as she follows the daughter of a British billionaire on tour with the biggest act on her father's music label to uncover what links both the band and the billionaire have to a recent threat from an old Soviet missile base.

From a daring break-in at one of London's most exclusive homes to a dangerous undercover mission to a desperate search and rescue operation on the streets of Beijing, the City Spies have their work cut out for them on their most daring mission yet.

**Discussion Questions**

1. As *Forbidden City* opens, readers learn that while Paris was born in Rwanda, grew up in Paris, and now lives in the UK, he has learned to "blend in and disappear." Why is this skill such an essential one for someone like him?
2. Kat reminds readers that while spies in movies may have extravagant getaway vehicles, she and Paris are utilizing a bright red double-decker bus to escape from their job. Do you find this unusual? What can be learned about the reality of their work from this conversation? In what ways does riding on a classic London bus connect with the larger lore of espionage?
3. While discussing the fictional British boy band KB5, Paris tells Brooklyn that "calling what they do music is an offense to everyone from Beethoven to the Beatles." Do you feel his assessment is appropriate? Why or why not? From your reading, what did you discover about the group? Do you believe teen stars are judged too harshly?
4. Consider the mission to return the Fabergé egg to Sir Reginald Banks's home. In what ways is this assignment particularly unique?
5. In *Forbidden City*, Brooklyn isn't actively included in most of the mission, due to her academic struggles and her need to attend a summer program to catch up. Why does this decision make her doubt her place on the team and in their family?
6. In *Forbidden City*, Umbra, a global crime syndicate, is once again engaged in terroristic activities and is working with billionaire Sir Reg. What continues to make Umbra and their associates so dangerous to the City Spies and to the world at large? Why do you think individuals like Sir Reg are willing to work with organizations like this one?
7. For this mission, Paris serves as the alpha, or leader, at the beginning and remains an essential operative throughout. What skills or strengths does he bring to the operation? Based on textual examples, are there any specific ways he proves he was the right choice?

8. This installment of the City Spies series focuses on self-identity or how these young people view themselves individually and their roles in the larger group. What examples from Forbidden City can you find that supports this statement? What are some specific ways in which the members of the City Spies have a greater self-awareness of who they are?
9. Consider Sydney's assignment to serve as a reporter for All Roads Lead to Audrey as a means of staying close and monitoring the activities of Sir Reg by shadowing his daughter Tabitha. Do you see Sydney as the best candidate for this part of the mission? What important skills does Sydney have to offer? What might be the biggest obstacles for such an assignment?
10. At school, Brooklyn befriends Charlotte, a classmate that once lived at FARM and was a member of the City Spies before she was removed. What makes this new friendship so complicated?
11. Given what you know about this mission and the City Spies in general, why is it so vital for the young spies to maintain their secrecy?
12. In your opinion, what makes the Sorokin family such dangerous individuals? Offer specific examples from the novel to support your position.
13. Based on what you learn through reading Forbidden City and your impressions from other books in the series, who is your favorite spy on the team or the character you identify with most? What is it about this specific character that makes you admire them?
14. While discussing her former life at FARM and the espionage and missions in which she played a part, Charlotte tells Brooklyn, "Sometimes I miss the excitement . . . it was fun being in on a secret. I miss being friends with everyone. I miss that terribly." What can be inferred by Charlotte's confession? Why does learning that Mother has adopted the City Spies wound her?
15. In Forbidden City, part of their mission requires a visit to China, where Mother and Paris visit both the Great Wall and Bird's Nest Stadium (officially known as Beijing National Stadium). Compare and contrast these two architectural structures. What do you believe these two treasures of China symbolize?
16. In the novel, readers discover that Jin-sun, a prominent North Korean nuclear physicist, wants to defect from his country with his son, Dae-jung. Considering the danger and consequences of such an action, why would an individual risk doing so? What does Jin-sun hope to gain for himself and his child?
17. Considering the conclusion of Forbidden City, what do you predict will happen in the next installment of City Spies?

### **Extension Activities**

**RUSSIA**—A part of the mission the City Spies undertake in Forbidden City lands some of the team in Russia, a country filled with renowned cities, buildings, and locales. Using library and internet resources, have students learn more about landmarks in Russia, specifically selecting an architectural work (examples include but aren't limited to St. Basil's Cathedral, Gorky Park, Red Square, and the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg), researching it, and sharing with the group their favorite findings.

**CARTOGRAPHY**—In *Forbidden City*, one of the important plot points is the purposeful use of maps created by the USSR during the Cold War to expedite the nefarious endeavors by Umbra and their allies. Use the following article by National Geographic to learn more about how these maps were created and used by the military and their spy network: <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/article/maps-soviet-union-ussr-military-secret-mapping-spies>. After reading, lead a discussion on what was learned and how these maps play a role in the novel, being sure to discuss why maps and mapmaking are still important.

**ROBERT BURNS**—At the beginning of the novel, Brooklyn shares her frustrations with having to master understanding the poetry of Robert Burns. Ask students to learn more about poet Robert Burns and what role he played as a writer and in Scottish history. Share examples of Burns’s work and let students find passages they find interesting, confusing, or inspiring.

**FABERGÉ EGGS**—Paris is tasked with breaking into a home to swap a counterfeit Fabergé egg being used for surveillance by MI6 with the real one, before the treasure is loaned out to a museum in Moscow. Using library and internet resources, have students research to learn more about the history of Fabergé eggs, being sure to discover the following: What is their connection to Russian history? What makes them rare and priceless? What makes these jeweled eggs so mysterious and legendary? Why would a reproduction used for surveillance likely be discovered?

**KENSINGTON PALACE GARDENS**—The first mission for the *City Spies* brings them to the home of Sir Reg, nestled in Kensington Palace Gardens, one of the most exclusive and expensive neighborhoods and streets in the world. Have your students investigate to learn more about what makes this street so unique. After their research, ask them to create a pro/con list of residing in such a place.

**MATRYOSHKA DOLLS**—These nesting dolls have a fascinating history. Using the library and internet resources, ask students to discover more about these dolls, being sure to learn more about their origin, design, history, cultural significance, and references in popular culture.

**CRYPTOGRAPHY**—Cryptography plays an essential role in the *City Spies* series and specifically the missions in *Forbidden City*. Have readers work with a partner to learn more about cryptography to discover what it is, who uses it, and how it’s used. After allowing for exploring and learning, have the pairs share what they discovered.

**CHESS**—Paris is vital to the mission in *Forbidden City*, due to his chess-playing skills that land him a spot at the Around the World international chess tournament featured in the novel. Ask students to research more about children and chess competitions, focusing on how players qualify, where tournaments are hosted for young people, and additional inquiries of their choice. Have them share their most interesting discoveries with the group.

*This guide was created by Dr. Rose Brock in collaboration with James Ponti. Rose is an associate professor in Library Science Department in the College of Education at Sam Houston State University and holds a Ph.D. in Library Science, specializing in children’s and young adult literature.*

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