

THE UNDERFOOT

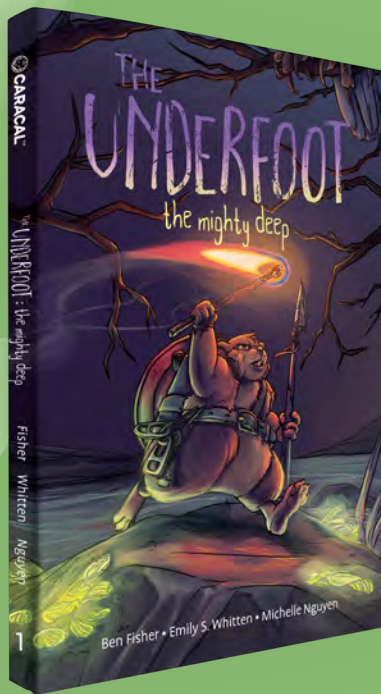
the mighty deep

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Discussion Guide

About the Book



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The *Underfoot* Volume One: *The Mighty Deep* chronicles the beginning of a science fiction/fantasy saga set untold years after the Giants-That-Were disappeared from the earth, leaving behind animal species forever changed by their scientific experiments. At the heart of the story is a colony of hamsters led by the Matriarch and protected by the Hamster Aquatic Mercenaries (H.A.M.). When the novel opens, hopeful young recruits are eager to prove that they are ready to join this elite force and embark on a mission to help their badger allies in return for a “favor to be named later.” As they venture outside of their burrow for the first time, the new recruits face unexpected dangers, put their battle skills to the test, learn the meaning of true friendship and loyalty, and uncover hidden secrets about their past. As this first book of the trilogy comes to a close, dark forces are poised to strike again. Will the hamsters and their allies survive or be destroyed?

Learning Standards

The *Underfoot Volume One: The Mighty Deep* can be used to address many of the Reading Literature Common Core standards for middle grades including:

RL.5.1, RL.5.2, RL.5.3, RL.5.4, RL.5.5, RL.5.7, RL.6.1, RL.6.2, RL.6.3, RL.6.4, RL.6.5, RL.7.1, RL.7.2, RL.7.3, RL.7.4, RL.7.5, RL.7.6, RL.8.1, RL.8.2, RL.8.3, RL.8.4, RL.8.6

The novel and activities in this teaching guide may also be used as a springboard for addressing numerous Common Core standards for Writing, Speaking, and additional related ELA-Literacy standards.

Introducing the Book

The *Underfoot Volume One: The Mighty Deep* fits well within the genre of science fiction/fantasy. The action takes place in a post-apocalyptic world with anthropomorphic life forms, and includes elements of advanced technologies, as well as social, political, and religious structures that allow for comparison with the world as we know it today.

Informative interviews with the creators of *The Underfoot Volume One: The Mighty Deep* can be found here: firstcomicsnews.com/nycc-the-underfoot-joins-the-lion-forge-caracal-imprint-in-spring-2019/

and here:

westfieldcomics.com/blog/interviews-and-columns/interview-ben-fisher-emily-s-whitten-michelle-nguyen-on-lion-forges-the-underfoot/

CHARACTERS AND RELATIONSHIPS Since this is the first book of a trilogy, quite a few characters are introduced. For that reason, some readers may also find it useful to keep a character list that includes important roles and relationships.

Potential entries in a character list for the novel include: Ani, Bastion, Beck, Basie, Brock, Buddy, Burl, Chrrk, Gunther, Hap, Ives, Luciana, Mac, Meekal and Pax, Mell, Mskki, Neil, Oates, Rem, Ruby, Tallis, Terry, Tori, Ursula, and Wynton.

Some of these characters are profiled on classified file pages inserted at some of the chapter breaks.

Roles to be defined include: Aegis, Commander, Demolitionist, Emeffcee Engineer, Gunner, The Matriarch, Overseer, Pilot, Sharpshooter, Shipmaster, Trainer, and Trapsmith.

PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS The differences between the different types of hamsters are described in the classified file page preceding chapter one and in the back of the book as part of a short interview with the creators. It may also be helpful for students to be familiar with badgers, cats, eagles, hermit crabs, fish, snakes, beavers, and lizards.

HAMSTER VOCABULARY The characters in the novel use terminology that is unique or used in ways specific to their culture. It is recommended that this vocabulary be explicitly taught and/or that students keep a vocabulary journal to boost comprehension. Possible terms include: baldie, sea-dees, emeffcee, feathers, fins, flat-tails, fur, Giants-That-Were, glowshroom, hardbacks, hoppers, licktrick, the Long Rain, nine-lifer, pleebo, scales, wheelies.

SCIENTIFIC VOCABULARY The classified files that precede each chapter include many high-register scientific vocabulary words that may be challenging for some readers. It is recommended that this vocabulary be explicitly taught and/or that students keep a vocabulary journal to boost comprehension. Possible terms include: adaptation, anode, anthropogenic, biocatalytic, bioluminescence, bioremediation, cathode, crepuscular, detoxify, electromagnetic, hyperactive, induced, microbial, nocturnal, pronuclear, remission, transgenic.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

CHAPTER ONE

1. According to the classified file preceding chapter one, what was the purpose of the H.A.M.S.T.E.R. project? **What else is revealed in the provided file?**
2. The first few pages of the novel feature wordless panels. **What information does the artwork convey about the characters and the setting?**
3. Page 14 contains a single illustration. In comics and graphic novels, this is called a "splash page." They can be used to introduce or focus special attention on particular places, characters, or events. Why is a splash page used here? **What can the reader assume is happening?** After reading further, is that assumption correct?
4. What questions do you have about the novel after reading pages 15-17?*
5. In your own words, describe the purpose and activities of pup school.
6. Carefully examine the first panel on page 20. **What sort of test will the pup trainees face?** Have you ever faced a similar test?
7. The events on page 25 show the hamsters in real danger for the first time. **What can be learned from this encounter?**
8. On page 31, Wynton mentions something called the "Long Rain." **Speculate about what that might be.**
9. The artist uses another splash page on page 43. Why? **What is the effect?**

*Teachers, this would be a good place to introduce a graphic organizer, such as a KWL chart. Fill in the K column with what is known, the W column with what students want to know, and fill in the L column periodically as those questions are potentially answered upon further reading. See KWL template in resources listed at the end of the guide.

CHAPTER TWO

1. The classified file preceding chapter two talks about producing electricity using biofuel cells made from fungus. How is electricity generally produced now? **Why is it important to find renewable sources of energy?** Why do you think this information was included in the book? **What is its relevance to the fate of the Giants-That-Were?** To the hamsters?
2. At the beginning of chapter two, Basie reports a problem with the "Emeffcee." **What is it, and where did the name come from?** (Hint: Microbial Fuel Cell)
3. What is happening in the heart of the hamster burrow? **What are the parallels to the Giants-That-Were?**
4. In your own words, describe what is happening in the wordless panels on pages 53-55.
5. The third scene shift of chapter two occurs on page 56. **What do we learn in subsequent pages about the origins of intelligent animals in the relationship between hamsters and cats?**
6. What other animals have also benefited from the "gifts" of the Giants-That-Were?

Questions for Discussion and Reflection Cont'd

CHAPTER THREE

1. Speculate about the significance of the classified file preceding chapter three.
2. Where does the action pick up at the beginning of chapter three? **Who and what is Gunther?**
3. What important characteristic about Ani and Tori is revealed on pages 87 and 88?
4. Explain the use of foreshadowing in the last panel on page 90. Gunther is storing objects for the return of the Giants-That-Were, but he tells Beck that the "scales" want some of them now. **Who are the scales, and what do you think they want with the objects?**
5. Describe the artist's use of a splash page on page 105.

CHAPTER FOUR

1. Explain the significance of the events mentioned in the classified file preceding chapter four.
2. What questions from chapter three are clarified on pages 113-114?
3. What potentially important clue is revealed in the top right panel and the lower left panel of page 115?
4. Explain the use of the largest splash page in the novel on pages 118-119.
5. When the Hamster Aquatic Mercenaries meet the Hamster Airborne Mercenaries, they have some problems with communication. **Have you ever met someone from a different school, town, state, country, or culture?** What were your experiences? What similarities and differences did you discover? **What similarities and differences exist between the Hamster Aquatic Mercenaries and the Hamster Airborne Mercenaries?**
6. On page 125 we learn a bit more about what the hamsters believe regarding the Giants-That-Were. What does the "return policy" sign indicate about the importance of context?

Can you think of other examples of things that might be misinterpreted without proper context?

7. What potentially important clue is revealed on page 128 and the top left panel?
8. Both colonies of hamsters view the Giants-That-Were as benevolent and generous, having given them the gifts of intelligence and other skills. However, from the perspective of a human reader of the novel, animal experimentation may be viewed quite differently. **Discuss the ethical issues surrounding the use of animals in scientific research.**
9. Describe the cooperation between the Hamster Aquatic Mercenaries and the Hamster Airborne Mercenaries. **What strengths does each group possess?**
10. Discuss the themes of loyalty and sacrifice as illustrated on pages 143-144.
11. What special skills has Ruby demonstrated throughout the novel? **What have been the short-term effects of her efforts?** The long-term effects?
12. **Who are the animals conversing with on page 150?** Describe the use of foreshadowing on that page.
13. What happens on page 153? **What is pictured in the last panel?** How do you know?
14. What new group is introduced on page 154? **What questions do you have about what will happen in the second book in the series?**



EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

TEXT RE-PRESENTATION When the Hamster Aquatic Mercenaries meet the Hamster Airborne Mercenaries, they discover that their colonies have somewhat different stories about their origins. Origin stories play an important part in every culture and offer great opportunities to reflect on one's values and beliefs. Likewise, it is an excellent opportunity to promote and practice respect for other cultures and belief systems. Appropriate classroom discussions may be conducted after the following activities:

For Readers Below Grade Level:

In pairs or small groups, students create a Venn Diagram comparing the similarities and differences between the origin stories and characteristics of the Hamster Aquatic Mercenaries and the Hamster Airborne Mercenaries. See resources below for a link to Venn Diagram templates. (**W.5.9, W.6-8.9**)

For Readers at Grade Level:

In addition to the Venn Diagram activity, assign individuals, pairs, or small groups of students to read one of several teacher selected origin/creation stories (e.g. Native American, Judeo-Christian, Ancient Greek, etc.) and retell them in their own words with accompanying illustrations. (**W.5.7, W.5.9, W.6-8.7, W.6-8.9**)

For Readers Above Grade Level:

In addition to the Venn Diagram activity, assign individuals, pairs, or small groups of students to research origin/creation stories from at least three different traditions or cultures. Students then discuss the stories and complete a comparative chart. See resources below for a template. Using the completed chart, students write and illustrate a comparative essay. (**W.5.7, W.5.9, W.6-8.7, W.6-8.9**)

MUSICAL CONNECTION The hamsters use “sea-dees” in their naming process. From the illustration on page 123, we know that the names come from music CDs, such as Fleetwood Mac’s *Rumors* and R.E.M.’s *Out of Time*. No doubt, these were the sources of the names **Mac** and **Rem**. Other possible musical inspirations for hamster names include: **Burl Ives**, Hall & **Oates**, **Wynton** Marsalis, **Tori** Amos, **Ani** DiFranco, **Buddy** Holly or Buddy Rich, **Beck**, Count **Basie**, and Thomas **Tallis**. It may be necessary to explain CD technology to younger readers. Encourage students to ask an older adult in their lives if they are familiar with any of the artists or albums alluded to in the novel and to listen to some of those musical selections on YouTube or other online sources. What did they find out? Did they like any of the music? Why or why not?

TOPICS IN SCIENCE The classified files included before each chapter contain a great deal of information about the Giants-That-Were and what they were facing and studying. It may be necessary for students to do some research to better understand the topics and events mentioned. Possible areas of exploration include:

Anthropogenic Climate Change

K-T Asteroid Impact

Yellowstone Supervolcano

Virology/Pandemics

Genetic Engineering

Electricity from Fossil Fuels

Biofuels and Renewable Energy Sources

Whitaker Wright and the Underwater Ballroom

These topics may be assigned to individuals, partners, or small groups and shared later with the entire class via written reports, oral or multimedia presentations, posters, infographics, or other formats. The relevance to events in the novel *The Underfoot Volume One: The Mighty Deep* can then be discussed in greater detail. See resources below for places to start.



Ben Fisher

is a best-selling comic book author. His works include *Smuggling Spirits*, *The Misadventures of Grumpy Cat and Pokey*, the critically acclaimed series *The Great Divide*, and the online web comic *Ladybird*. He currently resides in Portland, Oregon with his cat and vast collection of board games.

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Emily S. Whitten

enjoys examining humanity through the lens of science fiction and fantasy via her online columns, web comics, conventions, radio and TV shows, podcasts, and other media outlets. She resides in the greater D.C. area where she also holds down a 9-to-5 job and, in her free time, enjoys crafting, reading, and looking after her tiny hamster.

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Michelle Nguyen

is a Vietnamese-American illustrator and comic artist whose previous works are included in *The Misadventures of Grumpy Cat and Pokey* and the Ignatz & Eisner award-winning anthology *Elements: Fire*. She enjoys life in the Pacific Northwest with her equally artistic spouse and their gaggle of pets.

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ADDITIONAL REFERENCE MATERIAL AND RESOURCES

COMICS AND GRAPHIC NOVELS

Eisner, W. (1985). *Comics & Sequential Art*. Tamarac, FL: Poorhouse Press.

Eisner, W. (2008). *Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton.

McCloud, S. (1994). *Understanding Comics*. New York, NY: HarperPerennial.

McCloud, S. (2000). *Reinventing Comics*. New York, NY: Paradox Press.

GRAPHIC ORGANIZERS

KWL Chart: eduplace.com/graphicorganizer/pdf/kwl.pdf

Venn Diagram: eduplace.com/graphicorganizer/pdf/venn.pdf

Origin Stories Comparison Chart: cdn.kastatic.org/KA-share/BigHistory/KU1.2.2-Origin_Stories_Intro_Comparison_Chart-2.pdf

TOPICS IN SCIENCE

Causes and Effects of Climate Change: youtube.com/watch?v=G4H1N_yXBIA

Energy 101: Electricity Generation: youtube.com/watch?v=20Vb6hLLQsg

Biofuels 101: youtube.com/watch?v=ZGmwtDffc74

Renewable Energy 101: youtube.com/watch?v=1kUE0BZtTRc

K-T Meteor Impact Site: youtube.com/watch?v=dNRTtLLuNM8

Yellowstone Supervolcano: youtube.com/watch?v=HFEQ9r9xtTg

How Pandemics Spread: youtube.com/watch?v=UG8YbNbdaco

What is a Virus?: youtube.com/watch?v=7KXHwhTghWI

What is Genetic Engineering?: youtube.com/watch?v=3IsQ92KiBwM

Underwater Ballroom: youtube.com/watch?v=IEQlg-MF394

DISCUSSION GUIDE AUTHOR: A former K-12 instructor, **Dr. Robyn A. Hill** is a teacher, educator, reading advocate, and lifelong comics fan.



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