

A Curriculum Guide for

Under Their Skin

By Margaret Peterson Haddix

About the Book

Twelve-year-old Eryn knew the minute she woke up that something unusual was happening. It wasn't Christmas, but Eryn could smell her mom's special holiday breakfast, turkey-sausage-and-egg-substitute casserole. So Eryn was more prepared than her outraged twin brother Nick when Mom announced that she was getting remarried and they were all moving to a new house. But both kids were shocked when their mother disclosed they'd also have two new stepsiblings. And yet Mom told them not to worry. They wouldn't ever have to meet their stepsiblings . . .

Under Their Skin is a brand-new thrilling series from *New York Times* bestselling author Margaret Peterson Haddix about twins on a quest to discover the secrets being kept by their new family—and their entire society.

Discussion Questions

The discussion questions below align with the following Common Core State Standards: (RL.5.1, 2, 3, 4, 4a, 6, 10)

1. What seems unusual about Eryn and Nick's mom in the opening chapters?
2. How does the author create mystery? What unusual situations occur that make you feel that you, like Eryn and Nick, are not being told the whole truth?
3. Even though the book is written in the third person, each alternating chapter is told from the point of view of Eryn and then Nick. What is different about the "voice" in Eryn's chapters as opposed to Nick's chapters? Which voice do you like better?
4. How do Eryn and Nick find out about Ava and Jackson prior to meeting them? What do they learn about their stepsiblings?
5. Is there an antagonist or villain in this novel? Explain.
6. Why do you think Eryn and Nick's parents kept their real selves secret? Would Eryn and Nick be better off if they had known the truth from the time they were born? Would you want to know if you were Eryn or Nick?
7. Make a list of details from the book about Maywood. Using these details, describe Maywood. How is it similar to the town where you live? How is it different?

8. What does Eryn do when she discovers her mom's true identity? Why does she react this way? How have you reacted to startling news?
9. "How could any human being not ask questions at a time like this?" thinks Nick. How else are the robots different from humans in the novel? What are some of the questions the robots ask the humans, and how would you answer these questions? Be prepared to back up your responses with passages from the book.
10. What does it mean for robots to be programmed? How about for humans to be programmed? Find passages from the book that are examples of programming.
11. Explain how Nick, Eryn, and their parents are bringing humans back from extinction. Explain Project Return of the Snowflakes.
12. Do you think robots are people? Or are they just pretending to be people? What are the similarities and differences between robots and humans?
13. Explain why Ava and Jackson must be kept a secret. What has happened and what is happening to the other robot children?
14. Is lying or not telling the truth only a human trait? Can machines lie? Use examples from the book to support your answer.
15. Why is it so important that Eryn and Nick discover what caused the extinction?
16. Under the current government in *Under Their Skin*, all public officials must allow access to all their thoughts and memories. What are the benefits of this rule in the robot society? What could be the downside? If it were possible, should this be a law in today's society? Why or why not? Should politicians be allowed to have a private life while they are in office?
17. Who are better parents: the robot parents in the book or human parents in our world? Defend your opinion with examples from the book and from real life.
18. Is the world in *Under Their Skin* a utopia or dystopia? Explain your answer.
19. What do the papers in the cave under the glass say? What should Eryn and Nick do?
20. Explain this quote: " . . . clear that robots will always evolve, just like living things . . . it's inevitable that humans lose control of what their creations become . . . "
21. How does the prologue make you feel? Predict what is going to happen.

Activities

The activities below align with the following Common Core State Standards: (SL.5.1, 2, 5) (RF.5.3, 4) (W.5.3b, 5)

1. Robots have been a subject of fascination for decades. Research one of the following topics, and write a brief summary of your findings.

a) What are the origins of robots?

b) How close are we to having robots in human form that can perform like humans?

c) What is “AI”? What is the difference between the terms “robot” and “AI”?

d) What do most robots look like currently? What tasks do they perform? Make a photo display.

e) What do you think would happen if humans create AI that’s smarter than us? What if we create AI that can evolve on its own?

2. Look up the word *sentient*. How would you determine if a robot is sentient? If a robot is deemed sentient, what rights should it have? After each member from the group has shared his or her opinion, create a Bill of Rights for robots and AI beings.

3. Many books, TV shows, and movies include robots (*Star Wars*; *I, Robot*; *Terminator*; *2001: a Space Odyssey*; *Star Trek: the Next Generation*; etc.) Watch a fictional show or read a fictional book that contains robots or AI beings and discuss how the robots are portrayed. Then, for further discussion, select snippets from several different movies, TV shows, or books, and create a poster board depicting the portrayals of robots. Use photos, drawing, and passages to depict your findings. Do you notice any patterns or similarities throughout the media?

4. Write an essay on whether the Mom and Dad characters in *Under Their Skin* are good/benevolent or evil. Do the same with Jackson and Ava.

5. Because Mom is a middle-school psychologist, she uses many psychological terms, such as preteen, adolescence, predisposed, self-obsessed. Find ten more psychological terms in the novel. Find out what they mean. Using the words, write and perform a skit in which a middle-school counselor is talking to preteens about their problems.

6. Make copies of pages 93 through 113. Highlight all of the dialogue, including the twins’ inner thoughts. Carefully choose a few sentences of the narration that is needed to further the action. Have different students read Nick, Eryn, Jackson, Ava, Brenda, and a narrator. Read through several times so that the actors read with the right pronunciation and expression. Perform for others.

7. Write a dialogue between Eryn and Ava in which they discuss the differences between being a robot and being human. Have them ask and answer questions, as well as try to explain to each other their differences. Perhaps develop a conflict or argument, and through the dialogue, show how they express or lack emotions.

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