

A Curriculum Guide to

A Spy School Novel: *Spy Ski School*

By Stuart Gibbs

About the Book

Ben Ripley enrolls in ski school, where the slopes, and the stakes, get really steep in this next installment in the Spy School series.

Twelve-year-old Ben Ripley is not exactly the best student spy school has ever seen—he keeps flunking Advanced Self Preservation. But outside of class, Ben is pretty great at staying alive. His enemies have kidnapped him, shot at him, locked him in a room with a ticking time bomb, and even tried to blow him up with *missiles*. And he’s survived every time.

After all that unexpected success, the CIA has decided to activate Ben for real.

The Mission: Become friends with Jessica Shang, the daughter of a suspected Chinese crime boss, and find out all of her father’s secrets. Jessica wants to go to ski school in the Rocky Mountains, so a select few spy school students are going skiing too—undercover, of course.

Ben might not be able to handle a weapon (or a pair of skis), but he can make friends easily. That is, until his best friend from home drops in on the trip and jeopardizes the entire mission. . .

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS: READING, WRITING, AND RESEARCHING

Prereading Activity

The following questions contained in this section particularly address the Common Core State Standards: (RL.4.2) (RL.6.2) (SL.4–6.1, 2, 3)

As a prereading activity, have students complete an anticipation guide structured in the following manner:

<i>Before Reading</i>	<i>After Reading</i>	<i>Statements</i>
		Completing a project is essential, no matter what the cost.
		Adults always know better ways to approach problems than kids.
		When in danger, it is best to play it safe rather than take a risk.

Instruct students to complete the guide by placing a “+” sign in the box next to the statements for which they agree, and a “0” next to those for which they disagree. They must commit to

agreement or disagreement—there are no conditional responses. Students should be assured that there are no correct or incorrect positions.

Spy Ski School through Writing and Research

The following questions may be utilized throughout the study of *Spy Ski School* as reflective writing prompts or alternatively, they can be used as targeted questions for class discussion and reflection. The questions contained in this section particularly address the Common Core State Standards: (RL.4.1, 2, 3, 7, 9) (RL.5.1, 2, 3, 4, 7, 9) (RL.6.1, 2, 3) (SL.6.1, 2, 3) (W.4–6.4)

- 1.) In *Spy Ski School*, the novel opens with a brief to Ben outlining his next mission. From this first document, what can you predict about the adventure Ben will embark upon?
- 2.) Ben tells readers, “Over the past eleven months, my enemies had kidnapped me, shot at me, locked me in a room with a ticking bomb, and even tried to blow me up with missiles—and yet I’d survived each time. However, my instructors at the CIA’s Academy of Espionage never seemed very impressed by the fact that I was still alive. They just kept giving me bad grades.” In your opinion, why is that the case? In what ways do his teachers not value Ben’s survival skills? Do you think there’s a bigger lesson they are trying to share with him? If so, what might it be?
- 3.) Describe Ben. What makes him a dynamic character? Is he the type of person you would want to befriend? Why or why not?
- 4.) Due to working for the CIA, Ben gets to live at a spy training school. Imagine what it would be like living there. What would be the greatest benefits to such an experience? What would be the biggest challenges? Do you feel that Ben takes advantage of this unusual situation? Why or why not?
- 5.) Ben describes the principal as “very likely the least intelligent person in the entire intelligence community.” Why might the CIA put someone like him into a position of this capacity? Can you see any real benefit to doing so? What are the drawbacks?
- 6.) How does Ben feel when he learns that Erica will also be assigned to the Leo Shang mission? How has their relationship developed over their time together in school and in the field?
- 7.) Cyrus states, “The United States has lots of enemies.” How do groups like SPYDER and other criminal organizations keep the CIA so busy? In what ways is it essential that those entities be watched constantly?
- 8.) Mike tells Ben, “Middle school sucks.” What is it about Ben’s life that makes Mike so envious? For what reason is it essential that Ben not share the true nature of his school? Why is that so difficult for him?
- 9.) What makes the setting for the mission challenging for the team? In what ways is being on a ski mission in Vail helpful as a means to get close to the target?

10.) Describe your earliest impressions of Jessica Shang and her family. How does Jessica seem eager to fit in?

11.) In what ways does Mike's arrival in Vail change things for Ben? In your opinion, does he have the potential to derail Ben's mission? Why or why not? In what ways has their relationship changed? What makes this so challenging for Ben? Are there any ways Mike's presence is helpful?

12.) How does Erica's inability to be a natural skier affect her? Can you think of ways this reality provides a positive experience for her? How can she also grow as a person? Why do her classmates take such great joy in her failure to be a natural skier?

13.) What are the most impressive obstacles Ben overcomes in *Spy Ski School*? Which of these hurdles did you find the most remarkable?

14.) Jessica Shang tells the ski school group that "Sasha is a case of baskets." And later, she describes her father as "quiet as a louse." What do these mistakes indicate about her?

15.) Though Ben sometimes is criticized by his classmates, and personally lacks confidence in his spying ability, he is also the person who often helps complete the CIA's mission. What can you infer about Ben from this?

16.) Consider the unusual cast of secondary characters: Who did you like the most? The least? For what reason? Of all of the characters, whom was most similar to you due to his/her personality or experiences?

17.) *Spy Ski School* is told in first person: How would the story be different if another character (besides Ben) were telling it?

18.) When Ben realizes that Erica likes him, how does that affect him? Do you think this will bring about any changes in their relationship? If so, how?

19.) *Spy Ski School* opens and closes with CIA briefs that have been "censored." What did you think of the reports? Did you find the information in the reports to be particularly useful to the kids on the mission?

20.) Using the phrase, "These stories are about...", supply five words to describe *Spy Ski School*.

21.) As *Spy Ski School* closes, Ben has solved and completed an important mission for the CIA. Predict what adventures await him in the next installment/adventure of the Spy School series.

Extension Activities

The following activities contained in this section particularly address the Common Core State Standards: (RL.4.1, 2, 3) (RL.5.1, 2, 4) (RL.6.1, 2) (W.4–6.4)

1.) Throughout the *Spy School* series, readers learn about the CIA and its work in investigating crime syndicates here in the United States and throughout the world. Using the following link, have students research the role of the CIA in investigating crime:

<https://www.cia.gov/index.html>. Then have them create a digital report about their findings.

Consider the following questions:

- What is the primary function of the CIA in the United States?
- What types of investigative campaigns does this organization undertake?
- Using the CIA resources available online, what are some of the specific divisions of the organization?
- What are the criteria for working as a CIA agent?

2.) Throughout *Spy Ski School*, the challenge of being a kid who is also a CIA agent is highlighted. Using the novel as inspiration, use textual descriptions of this experience for these characters. Place students in pairs and have them role-play as news reporters interviewing one of the other operatives. To enrich the activity, record the report and allow students to use props and costumes for their news report.

3.) Assume the role of one of the secondary characters in *Spy Ski School* and draft a diary entry detailing what you experienced and witnessed. To prepare, create an outline using the five Ws (who, what, when, where, and why). Remember to write in first person and give special attention to sensory imagery (what you saw, smelled, heard, etc.)

4.) A number of the characters in *Spy Ski School* are not as they appear. Consider the importance of appearances and the need for disguising one's self: What might be a rationale to do so? What are the ramifications and consequences of such a choice? Select one character from the novel and write a short analysis of his/her choice to use a disguise.

5.) In small groups, have students select a favorite scene from *Spy Ski School* and create either a digitally or manually illustrated graphic novel for that scene. Using a digital comic strip creator (<http://www.makebeliefscomix.com/Comix/> or <http://infinitecomic.com/> for example), have students begin by using the strips to create storyboards for their scene. Have students select original art, images, and graphics. Alternatively, students could assume the roles of two of the characters with each one's personality and voice and have them interact with one another by creating an extension of a scene from one of the novels. As part of the evaluation component, consider panel size and number of panels, transitions and layouts, artwork, writing, and lettering.

6.) Ask students to describe one of the problems faced by a character in *Spy Ski School* and write advice to him/her. Students may choose to be serious or humorous. Use the letter format common to newspaper advice columns, where the person with the problem writes for advice and the advisor writes back. Often the person seeking advice disguises his or her name with a descriptive name associated with the problem.

This guide was created by Dr. Rose Brock, an assistant professor at Sam Houston State University. Dr. Brock holds a Ph.D. in Library Science, specializing in children's and young adult literature.

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