

A Curriculum Guide to

Spy School Goes South

By Stuart Gibbs

About the Book

In this latest addition to the *New York Times* bestselling *Spy School* series, CIA agent-in-training Ben Ripley is taken to Mexico by his nemesis in the hopes that he will finally be able to take down SPYDER. Ben has been caught in the snares of SPYDER more than once, and knows well enough to be suspicious of anything that seems too good to be true. So when Murray Hill finally breaks his silence with an offer to hand over the SPYDER elite, Ben knows something sinister must be going on.

Discussion Questions

The discussion questions below particularly address the following English Language Arts Common Core State Standards: **(R.L. 4.1-3, 4.7, 4.9) (R.L. 5.1-4, 5.7, 5.9) (R.L. 6.1-3) (W.4-6.4)**

The following questions may be utilized throughout the study of *Spy School Goes South* as reflective writing prompts, or alternatively, they can be used as targeted questions for class discussion and reflection.

1. In the coded letter introducing this book, readers learn that the suspect being held and questioned about SPYDER is only willing to talk to Ben Ripley. Predict this person's identity. What do you think makes him or her only interested in connecting with Ben?
2. After Ben cleverly stops a theft in progress, Erica tells him, "There are always going to be other things going on, Ben, but you need to be on alert at all times." Why does Erica seem so displeased with Ben's heroic deed? Do you think she's right to react in this manner?
3. How does Ben react to the knowledge that Erica worries about his safety? How does knowing that she cares affect him?
4. Erica admonishes Ben, stating, "You already have enough problems with SPYDER being after you. If you pull another stunt like that and get outed as a spy, the CIA will cut you loose, and then no one will be able to protect you anymore." Do you agree with her assessment of this possibly dangerous situation? Why do you think Ben continues to risk his position?
5. While sharing frustrations about Murray Hill, Cyrus states, "The little dirtbag hasn't said one useful thing the whole time he's been here. No matter what we've tried." Describe Murray Hill. Do you find him to be an interesting character? If so, in what ways? What are some of the specific qualities that make him such an excellent adversary to Ben?

6. The schoolwork for prisoners at the Spy Academy includes courses such as “Why You Should Defect from SPYDER,” “Help Us Defeat Them,” and “Informing on the Enemy 101.” Why do you think Ashley Sparks and Nefarious Jones haven’t been receptive to this training? Why do you think SPYDER attracts young people?

7. Ben describes Murray as he remembers him, stating, “He had a potbelly, a permanent slouch, and the stamina of a koala bear; his hair was oily, his skin was greasy, and his clothes were usually so covered with food stains that they looked like Jackson Pollock paintings.” Why is Ben shocked by the Murray he discovers in a cell? What does this say about Murray?

8. Murray tells Cyrus, “I’ve taken up yoga, mindfulness, and tantric meditation. It’s amazing. I feel like I’ve really gotten in touch with the real me.” Consider these changes in Murray’s appearance and mental state. What are possible motivations for these physical “improvements”? Do you think this is a big accomplishment for Murray?

9. Why does Erica question Murray’s sincerity about being a changed man? Do you think she’s being too tough on him? Explain your reasoning. Do you think Cyrus and Ben are wise to trust Murray? Do they have any other options?

10. After Murray offers to reveal SPYDER’s headquarters, he tells Cyrus, “Them. And only them. No one else from CIA comes along. That’s the deal. Take it or leave it.” Do you think the possibility of gaining crucial information outweighs the risks? What are possible outcomes for this plan?

11. When describing Ben and Erica’s partnership, Murray states, “You’re a team. A good one. Possibly the best at the CIA—even if the CIA won’t admit it.” Do you agree with Murray? Considering what you know about their past experiences, in what ways are Ben and Erica a dynamic duo?

12. Cyrus tells Ben and Erica, “It won’t be that simple. Things never are with SPYDER.” Considering early experiences with this evil organization, name ways in which SPYDER has gotten the better of Ben and the CIA. What do you think will be different about this particular mission?

13. When Ben shares his hesitation about the mission, Cyrus tells him, “This is the Academy of Espionage. If you didn’t want danger, you should have enrolled in the Academy of Scrapbooking.” Do you think Cyrus is being too hard on Ben? In your opinion, does Ben have a right to be concerned about his own well-being? Does he have the right to refuse missions?

14. Why are Cyrus and Erica initially at odds over the plan to allow Murray to take her and Ben to SPYDER’s headquarters? Who do you support in this argument: Cyrus or Erica? Explain your reasoning. How does Erica convince Cyrus to allow this mission to move forward?

15. What makes Operation Tiger Shark feel like a necessary improvement in terms of mission names? Think about previous missions; are there any names you particularly liked or disliked? Why do you think it's important to name a mission? What kind of emotions might it evoke?

16. Erica says, “Ben, I know we’ve ended up in danger every time we’ve gone up against SPYDER, but this mission is different. It’s easy. We’re only keeping an eye on SPYDER, not confronting them. They won’t even know we’re there.” Why do you think Erica works so hard to try to “sweet-talk” Ben into performing this mission? What does she have to gain by moving forward? She argues that it “might even be fun.” What does Ben hope to possibly gain from this time away with her?

17. Describe Ben’s friendship with Zoe. What has made their relationship more challenging as time has gone on?

18. After finally visiting Erica in her private quarters, Ben thinks, “It looked completely normal. I had been expecting walls lined with weaponry. Or cold, bare walls that concealed secret rooms with walls lined with weaponry. I had not expected posters with kittens on them. Or a baby-blue comforter on the bed. Or a plethora of throw pillows.” How does finally seeing Erica’s room help Ben see her in a different light? Why is Erica’s final promise to kill him if he tells anyone about what he discovered significant? What does it tell you about their relationship?

19. After Zoe tells Murray that he shouldn’t be shocked that SPYDER tricked him, he cries, “But this time they promised they wouldn’t! I had them put it in my contract—and they welched on the deal, those jerks!” Do you think Murray has a right to be upset? Explain your reasoning. Why is it so hard to trust someone who has wronged you in the past?

20. After surviving their plane crash only to be stranded in the jungle, Erica states, “SPYDER thinks we’re dead, which gives us an advantage against them.” In what ways is she correct? What will be the biggest challenge for the team as they attempt to find the evil group?

21. When you use an ironic expression, you’re saying the opposite of what you really mean or the opposite of what’s expected. Ben tells Murray, “Really sucks to get betrayed by people you trusted, doesn’t it?” Why is Ben’s statement so ironic? Why is Murray left feeling so upset with this knowledge that SPYDER finds him expendable? Do you think he deserves to feel this way?

22. Ben criticizes Mike and Zoe for falling asleep while doing surveillance. Zoe responds by stating, “I guess we can’t all be amazing spies like you.” Do you believe Ben’s criticism is justified? Why might Ben be so unwilling to forgive a mistake? What does learning he feels badly about insulting them imply?

23. While making a case for her belief that Erica manipulates him, Zoe tells Ben, “She consistently puts you in danger to further her own agenda . . . Erica may be a great spy, but the mission is all she ever cares about.” Do you agree with Zoe? How does the realization that Zoe might be right make Ben feel? Do you think he’s foolish to still have feelings for Erica? Explain your reasoning.

24. After Ben rescues Paul Lee, Erica shouts, “What the heck were you thinking? This whole mission is toast!” How do Ben and Erica differ in their commitments to saving an evil person’s

life? Why do you think they feel so strongly about their philosophies? What can be inferred from these choices?

25. After revealing part of his nefarious plan, Joshua tells Ben, ““There’s where you come up short, Ben. You only see jungle, whereas I see opportunity.”” What are the ramifications of Joshua’s plan? Why is it so important that Ben and his team thwart it?

26. Murray tells Joshua, ““It’s a pity Ben works for the other side. As for me, I’m on your side, Joshua. And I have been all along.”” Given what you know about Murray, do you think there is any hope of him ever straightening out? Why do you think he keeps coming back to the dark side?

27. Considering the novel’s conclusion, make predictions for what will happen to Ben, Erica, and the other spy school students as they work to finally defeat SPYDER.

Extension Activities

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1. After crash-landing their plane in the jungle, Ben, Erica, Michael, and Zoe are forced to use their wits to survive in the wild. Using the resources found on <https://thesurvivalmom.com/wilderness-survival-skills-kids/> or <http://www.equipped.org/kidprimr.htm> or <https://www.reserveamerica.com/outdoors/wilderness-survival-for-kids.htm>, review the survival information and create a survival guide of your own that can be shared with the Spy School team.

2. SPYDER’s nefarious plan includes detonating devices to blow up and melt the ice caps in Antarctica, which will lead to a worldwide increase in sea levels, flooding, and loss of land and life. Even without the evil organization’s plans, human behavior is already greatly impacting Earth’s temperatures and sea levels. Using the *National Geographic* article titled “The Big Thaw,” <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/global-warming/big-thaw/>, research mankind’s effect on the environment, specifically to the ice caps. Discover the following information:

- What is global climate change, and how does it directly effect the ice caps?
- What impact do scientists believe humans have on global warming?
- What are some of the ramifications of these changes?
- What can be done to combat this?

After reading, break into small groups for a focused discussion. Work together to create an action plan highlighting 2–3 things young people can do to help.

3. Thanks to the Farkle family reunion taking place at the resort, the spy school team is able to disguise themselves and hide in plain sight while trying to figure out what to do next to defeat

SPYDER. Consider the importance of appearances and the need for disguising one's self. What rationale might you use to justify this need? What are the ramifications and consequences of such a choice? Are there certain situations where a disguise makes sense and others where it doesn't? Select one character from the novel and write a short analysis of his or her choice to use a disguise.

4. Think about the challenges of being a kid while also being a CIA agent. Using the novel as inspiration, use textual descriptions of these characters' experiences to back up your ideas. Find a partner for a role-playing exercise; one will be a news reporter interviewing the other, who will answer as one of the CIA operatives. Record your dialogue, and use props or costumes if available to get into the act.

5. Choose three characters from *Spy School Goes South* and imagine what they'll be like in high school. Create a yearbook with pages featuring each student and their accomplishments. First, cut out pictures of people from magazines to represent each character. Next, mount one picture per page. Underneath the images, invent the following information for each character: nickname; participating activities, clubs, and sports; recipient of mock awards such as "class clown"; quotations revealing insight about what's most important; favorites such as colors and foods; impactful books; votes for "most-likely-to" or their plans after high school.

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