

NEWBERY MEDAL-WINNING AUTHOR

REBECCA STEAD

LIAR & SPY

EDUCATOR GUIDE

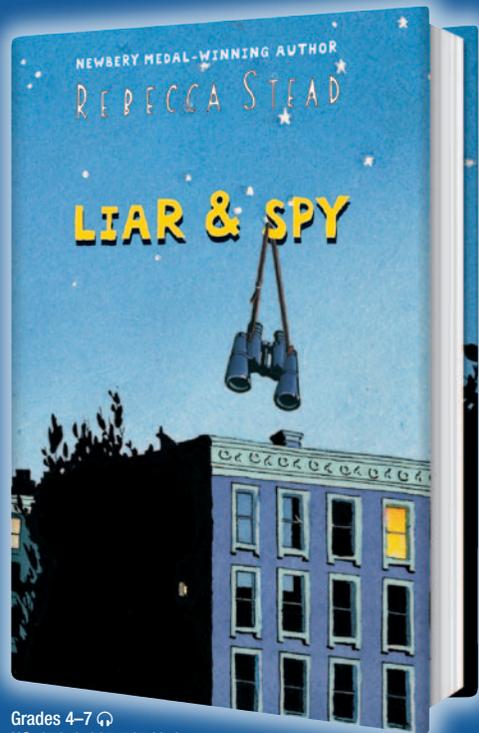


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ABOUT THE BOOK

Twelve-year-old Georges is intrigued with a boy in his apartment building who claims to be a spy, but Georges makes a startling discovery when the two launch a spy mission against a seemingly mysterious Mr. X.

Georges, named for the 19th-century French painter Georges Seurat, is in the seventh grade when his father loses his job. His mother works double shifts as a nurse, but the family has to give up their house in Brooklyn and move to an apartment. To make matters worse, Georges loses his best friend to the “cool crowd,” and his classmates constantly tease him about his name. Things are looking dim for Georges until he meets 12-year-old Safer, a boy in his apartment building who claims to be an expert spy. Safer convinces Georges that Mr. X, a neighbor who wears all black and carries a suitcase, is up to something evil. When the boys embark on a spy mission, Georges uncovers a mystery, but it has nothing to do with Mr. X. It’s what his mother calls “seeing the big picture.”



Grades 4–7
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PRE-READING ACTIVITY

Ask students to discuss the phrase, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” Engage them in conver-

sation about name calling, and words that do hurt. Then ask them to write a two-page essay called “Words that Hurt.”

THEMATIC CONNECTIONS

FAMILY—Describe Georges’ family. Georges’ mom calls Safer’s family “bohemian,” but his dad calls them “progressive.” Ask students to discuss the difference. Why is Georges intrigued with Safer’s family? Georges’ mom is a nurse, and he refers to her working double shifts. What is the first clue that she is an actual patient in the hospital? Explain why Georges’ dad needs him. Why is Georges uncomfortable with their conversations?

FRIENDSHIP—How might Georges define friendship? Explain what happened to the friendship between Georges and Jason. Georges feels like a loser when Jason betrays him for the “cool” kids. How is Georges really the winner? Debate whether Safer understands the meaning of friendship. Describe the relationship between Georges and Bob English Who Draws. Discuss whether Georges’ idea of friendship changes by the end of the novel.

THEMATIC CONNECTIONS (continued)

BELONGING—Georges certainly doesn't belong to the “cool” group at school. Then his dad loses his job and the family has to move from their house to an apartment. What does Georges miss about his old neighborhood? Contrast Georges and Safer's need to belong. How does Safer need Georges more than Georges needs Safer? Discuss why Mr. Landau asks Georges if he's doing okay.

BULLYING—Ask students to define *bullying*. Debate the difference between teasing and bullying. How does teasing lead to bullying? Dallas Llewellyn is the leader of the bullies that torment Georges. Discuss how Georges solves his problem with Dallas and his gang.

SELF-DISCOVERY—Georges makes an important journey in the novel. What does he

learn about himself? How does learning the truth about Safer's fears help him mastermind a plot to improve his image at school? Georges and Safer deal with identity issues because of their names. How is “Safer” both a label and a name? When does Georges begin to see “the big picture”? How does this change his view of himself?

VALUES IN CONFLICT—Georges isn't normally a liar. Ask the class to discuss why he allows Safer to talk him into lying about the Spy Club meeting. In what other ways does Georges violate the moral values that his parents taught him? Georges feels somewhat betrayed when he finds out that Safer has been dishonest about Mr. X. Debate whether Safer is a liar or someone who doesn't tell the whole story.

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

LANGUAGE ARTS—Mr. Landau is teaching the class about taste. He asks, “What is the taste of the human experience?” He then asks them to write an essay using a metaphor of taste. Georges and Bob English Who Draws are assigned *bittersweet*, the sixth taste. Have students write an essay that Georges may write at the end of the novel that expresses his understanding of *bittersweet*.

Bob English Who Draws develops an elaborate system of spelling reform. Ask students to use his system and write a two-sentence note that Georges may send to Safer at the end of the novel. Have students switch notes and crack the code.

SOCIAL STUDIES—Safer tells Georges that one must learn to be observant to be a good spy. Instruct students to become spies for a week and write down their observations in the school lunchroom. Is there a “cool” table? What do students eat? How

do they interact in the lunch line? Do the teachers intervene? Then have them write a brief essay called “The Social Life of My Classmates.”

SCIENCE/HEALTH—Ask students to read about phobias on the following website: kidshealth.org/kid/feeling/emotion/phobias.html#. What are the clues that Safer suffers from some type of phobia? Have them use materials in the library or sites on the Internet to define *anthropophobia* and *angorophobia*. Then have them write a brief case study that points to the fact that Safer may have one of these social phobias.

ART—Pointillism is an art style made famous in the late 19th century by the French painter Georges Seurat. Have students view images of this art style at the following website: www.childs.mccsc.edu/art99/art2p6.htm. Then ask them to use this art style and make a welcome home card that Georges gives his mother.

VOCABULARY/ USE OF LANGUAGE

The vocabulary in the novel isn't difficult, but students should be encouraged to jot down unfamiliar words and try to define them using clues from the context. Such words may include: *premonition* (p. 5), *cumulative* (p. 7), *catastrophic* (p. 37), *morality* (p. 39), *furtive* (p. 46), *savory* (p. 51), *modicum* (p. 72), and *stamina* (p. 78).



Photo Credit: © Jeanne Dugan

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

REBECCA STEAD grew up in New York City in the very neighborhood where *When You Reach Me*, winner of the 2010 Newbery Medal, is set. Stead began writing in elementary school, where she was free to climb under a table, or sit in a windowsill and allow her imagination to take her to other places and times. She graduated from Vassar College, and later, law school. She is married and has two sons. She made her literary debut with *First Light*. *Liar & Spy* is her third novel.

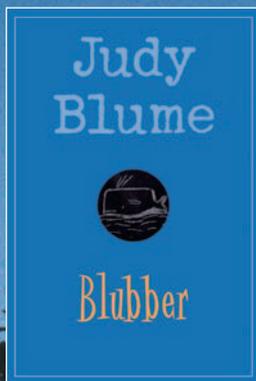
INTERNET RESOURCES

Neuroscience for Kids: Taste
faculty.washington.edu/chudler/tasty.html

Seurat and the Making of LA GRANDE JATTE
www.artic.edu/aic/exhibitions/seurat/seurat_themes.html

KidsHealth: Dealing with Bullies
kidshealth.org/kid/grow/school_stuff/bullies.html

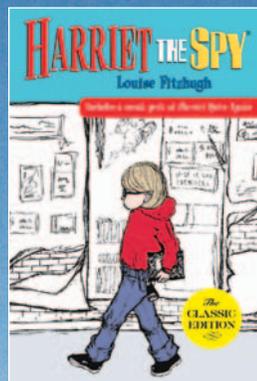
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