



The Undergardeners

Desmond Anthony Ellis

Interest level: ages 8–11

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AR Quiz # 107118

Consider the following question as you read *The Undergardeners*:

When can small feel tall after all?

Story

Mouse is small for his age and tired of being teased about it. One night he discovers, much to his surprise and delight, that he fits perfectly (well, almost perfectly) into an incredible world underneath his backyard, where he finds new friends, adventure and courage.

Author

Desmond Anthony Ellis lives in a house in Toronto that backs onto a park full of animals. There's a river and a railway bridge nearby and lots of hiding places among trees and bushes—the perfect place for a boy to grow up. A place very like where Mouse lives, in fact.

Connecting to the Curriculum

Language Arts

- In *The Undergardeners* we find ourselves reading about strangely named, yet lovable characters. Have students create an album or poster of some of these characters, including pictures, character names, creature types and a short bio for each one.
- Challenge students to explore the life of one of these characters by writing a journal as that character. They can be Mouse, Podge, Chuck or Digger, for example. Have students write five entries that shed light on the lifestyle and adventures of the characters they choose.
- Qwolsh explains to Mouse that showing each other the soles of your feet is a form of greeting called sole-ing. Greetings around the world are just as interesting. Find out some interesting greeting gestures and learn them as a class. Don't forget sign language! Make up your own signs for hello, goodbye or other short greetings.
- The Ancient Rhymer creates rhyming poems. One of his lines, "From the wise man's house came the billowing smoke," can be used as the beginning or end of a short rhyming poem students create.
- In their reading response journals, have students write a quote that interests them from each chapter. Below each quote, students should explain what they found interesting about that quote. Have them provide reasons for their answers.
- In chapter 1, the fireflies put on a light show of sorts with lanterns. Have students interpret this by creating a picture using black paper and yellow paint or pastel. Using their picture, write a cinquain poem describing what is taking place. A cinquain pattern is:

Line 1: title

Line 2: two words describing the title

Line 3: three action words relating to the title

Line 4: four feelings words relating to the title

Line 5: a synonym for the title.

Social Studies

- Trains are a common method of travel, as well as a means to transport goods across continents. Often trains must go through tunnels or across bridges to get to their destination. Have students research such structures in your area, including when and how they were constructed.

Science

- There are many animals and insects in *The Undergardeners*. For example: moles, groundhogs, deer mice, shrews and fireflies, to name a few. Using books or other print resources, have students locate information about these creatures and how they live.
- Animals that spend most of their time underground have certain adaptations that help them live in the dark. Research animals that live underground and list their special features. Encourage students to find out about subterranean animals that are indigenous to your area.
- There are also many creatures that live their whole lives under the ocean floor. Have students learn about these creatures and compare this information with what they have discovered about creatures who live underground. What things are the same and what are different?
- The Earth is made up of the inner and outer cores, the mantle and the crust. Each section has distinctive characteristics. Find out more about each part and why it is important. Extension: have students create a 3-D model of the Earth's layers.
- Inventors connected in some way to trains include: George Westinghouse, Richard Trevithick, James Watt, Thomas Savery, Thomas Newcomen, Rudolph Diesel, Granville T. Woods, Elijah McCoy and Palle Jensen. Assign each student an inventor. Have them find out about that individual's contribution to the development of trains, and make an informational poster to share with the class.

Health

- Mouse is always being picked on because of his size. Have a discussion about how people perceive the physical characteristics of others. Create posters or signs that put a positive spin on such things as being small or wearing glasses.
- Mouse is small for his age and because of this is picked on. Have students create short skits that address this issue. One person in the group plays a character like Mouse and the rest of the group creates a positive and a negative skit.

Art

- In *The Undergardeners* we meet such characters as Alkus, Qwolsh, Soric, Sprint, Snick and Snock. List all these characters and have students draw portraits for each one.
- In chapter 2, Mouse refers to “monochromatic moonlight” when he is looking at his blood. Pablo Picasso's blue and rose periods are examples of the monochromatic—one color—style. Monochromatic paintings use many shades of just one color. Have students choose one color to create a picture in this style.

- Looking at objects from another perspective gives you the opportunity to see things in a new way. Have students draw a garden scene as they would see it. Then have them draw the same scene or a portion of it from the perspective of an ant. You may wish to do the reverse with another scene, starting with the ant's perspective, then drawing the same scene from the student's perspective. Display these pictures side by side.
- The underground is a maze of tunnels through which animals and insects make their way. Create a maze either by hand or on the computer and have other students try and solve it.
- The Creepscreech is described at the beginning of chapter 8 after Digger falls into its lair. No one really knows what it looks like. Using the vague descriptions given, have students draw a portrait of what they think the Creepscreech looks like.

Drama

- The Undergardeners believe the Creepscreech to be their enemy, though they have never really seen it. Mouse says, "How do you know it's an enemy? Perhaps it's friendly if you give it a chance." Divide the class into groups and have one person in each group play the Creepscreech as either a good or evil character.
- The names of some characters in *The Undergardeners* reflect their behavior in some way. For example: Digger is a mole, Sprint is the tortoise (!) and Chuck is a groundhog. Have students make up nicknames for animals or insects, then use them in short skits they create. Others will guess who the animal is by their nickname.

Connecting to the Text

- Have students conduct literary interviews where one student pretends to be a character in *The Undergardeners* and the other plays the role of a TV or newspaper interviewer. To prepare for the interview, the first student must create a full character web to help him or her get into character; the second student must compile a list of questions that are based on events in the book or personality traits of the character s/he is interviewing. Record the interviews for posting on your school's website.
- In small groups, have students create a timeline of the novel in the form of a board game. Encourage students to use the vocabulary, information and characters from *The Undergardeners*. Board games must be complete with clear instructions, game pieces and playing cards.

- Often in fiction, the story requires that readers *suspend disbelief* of events and occurrences that couldn't happen in the real world. Discuss this concept with students, and have them brainstorm other kinds of stories they've read (and watched) where suspension of disbelief is a key component of enjoying the story. Then have students think about stories that *could* occur in the real world. Assign students to write a paragraph explaining which kind of stories they prefer to read and/or watch—and why.
- In *The Undergardeners*, Ellis uses descriptive language to paint pictures of the events in the story. For example, read through the passage that introduces readers to the Ancient Rhymer's quarters, in chapter 6. Discuss with students how the author's choice of words helps the reader to use different senses to “see” the scene. Have students find other descriptive passages in the book. For each one, discuss (or write about) the words that help to create images in the reader's mind.
- Like plot, setting and characters, *theme* is an important literary element in any novel. Theme is an idea or message about life revealed in a work of literature. It's not really a moral, but it's kind of a guiding message all the same. Break your class into small groups and have them discuss what they understand to be the theme of *The Undergardeners*.

Connecting to the Students—Discussion Questions

1. Mouse has learned a good technique for keeping his cool: he doesn't show that it upsets him when others tease him about his size. Have you used this little trick to make your own life easier? Explain. How could you try this next time you feel uneasy about the way you're being treated?
2. As Mouse descends into the Undergardeners' secret world, he feels a mixture of dread and anticipation. Have you ever felt similarly, where you can't wait to do something...but yet you're kind of scared about it?
3. When Mouse disobeys Alkus and hums in the underground world, he creates all kinds of ripple effects that he doesn't immediately see. As you see it, why is it important to abide by other people's rules when you're in unfamiliar territory?
4. When Mouse goes into the Undergarden, he suddenly is the biggest creature. What does Mouse learn from this sudden shift in the way he is perceived? What does he learn when he realizes they look at him as a leader?
5. As the Undergardeners struggle to help Digger back from the Creepscreech's lair, they work together as a team. Write about a time when teamwork helped you accomplish your goals.
6. When Mouse explains that the Creepscreech is really just a train, Digger says that fear has a very big shadow—even if the fear isn't very big. What does he mean? When in your life have you realized you were afraid of something you didn't need to be?

Author's Note

Dear Reader,

One day while walking along the banks of the Humber River, which runs through the valley where I live, I looked over a railing and saw the opening to a large storm drain. The drain was big enough to accommodate a small boy. If that small boy were to explore it, who knows what he might find, I thought. Perhaps a whole new world? An underground world that only the right small boy under the right circumstances would be able to find. I came back from that walk with Mouse in mind.

Now, I had long been fascinated with the ease with which the animals in the valley accepted us humans. The chickadees would—and the blue jays almost would—eat from your hand. The raccoons who lived in the hollow willow at the end of the garden were very brazen. Unbeknownst to me, one came into the kitchen once and made off with a loaf of bread. I only realized this later in the day when the loaf dropped from the willow branches overhead into the middle of the garden. Whoops! The squirrels and the skunks who lived under the shed seemed to be on first-name terms with my cats and were not a bit put out by having me and my wife around. A pair of mallards visited the back garden every summer for thirteen years just to sit on the grass and watch us. They didn't fly in, they sauntered up from the river, waddled under the fence and plonked themselves down and watched. Were they anthropologists?

These animals were allowing us to share in the tiniest part of their lives, and I just knew that they would share a lot more with Mouse. So I introduced the animals to Mouse. *The Undergardeners* is the result. And the rest is mystery.

All the best,
Desmond Anthony Ellis

Resources**Books***Fiction*

- Andersen, Hans Christian. *Thumbelina*
- Arnold, Ted. *Hi! Fly Guy*
- attema, martha. *The Paper Wagon*
- Azarian, Mary. *The Gardener's Alphabet*
- Barwin, Gary. *The Racing Worm Brothers*
- Billingsley, Franny. *The Folk Keeper*
- Berton, Pierre. *The Secret World of Og*
- Cronin, Doreen. *Diary of a Worm*
- Fleischman, Paul. *Weslandia*
- Graves, Keith. *Pet Boy*
- Hayward, Linda. *The City Worm and the Country Worm*
- Hughes, Susan. *Earth to Audrey*
- Jacques, Brian. The Redwall series

Kazenbroot, Nelly. *Down the Chimney with Googol and Googolplex*
 Lee, Ingrid. *The True Story of George; George Most Wanted; George, the Best of All!*
 Levert, Mireille. *Lucy's Secret*
 Lewis, C.S. *The Chronicles of Narnia*
 Martin, Ann M. and Laura Godwin. *The Doll People*
 Nanji, Shenaaz G. *An Alien in my House*
 Newman, Patricia. *Jingle the Brass*
 Patou, Edith. *Mrs. Spitzer's Garden*
 Poole, Amy Lowry. *The Pea Blossom*
 Reid, Barbara. *The Subway Mouse*
 Seuss, Dr. *Because a Bug Went Kachoo*
 Stevens, Janet. *The Great Fuzz Frenzy*
 Wakeman, Daniel. *Ben's Big Dig*

Nonfiction

Bender, Lionel. *Creatures of the Deep* (577.7)
 Biello, David. *Bullet Trains Inside and Out* (385.2)
 Bull, Jane. *The Gardening Book* (635)
 Cefrey, Holly. *High Speed Trains* (385)
 Halfmann, Janet. *Life in a Garden* (591.75)
 Hoare, Stephen. *The World of Caves, Mines and Tunnels* (624.1)
 Hipp, Andrew. *The Life Cycle of an Earthworm* (592)
 Kent, Peter. *Hidden Under the Ground: The World Beneath Your Feet* (624.1)
 Lerner, Carol. *Butterflies in the Garden* (595.78)
 Llewellyn, Claire. *Caves* (551.4)
 Macauley, David. *Underground* (624.19)
 Miles, Victoria. *Wild Science* (591.68)
 Nadeau, Isaac. *Water Under Ground* (551.49)
 Otfinski, Steven. *World Book's Hedgehogs and Other Insectivores* (599.33)
 Pearson, Debra. *Hidden Worlds: Amazing Tunnel Stories* (624.1)
 Reid, Mary. *Homes in the Ground* (591.56)
 Richards, Julie. *Tunnels* (624.1)
 Richardson, Adele. *Soil* (631.4)
 Solway, Andrew. *What's Living in your Backyard?* (579)
 Stojic, Manya. *Hello World: Greetings in 42 Languages Around the Globe*
 Stuart, Gene S. *Towns Underground* (591.5)
 Thompson, Geoff. *Trains on the Rails* (385)
 Turnbull, Stephanie. *Trains* (385)

Online

Backyard Wildlife Habitat
www.backyardwildlifehabitat.info

Garden Creatures
www.dgsgardening.btinternet.co.uk/insects.htm

Hidden Life in a Garden
www.pbs.org/wnet/nature/secretgarden/hidden.html

Underground Adventure
www.fieldmuseum.org/undergroundadventure/teachers/soil_biodiversity.shtml

Animal Homes
www.42explore.com/animhom.htm

Structure of the Earth
<http://scign.jpl.nasa.gov/learn/plate1.htm>

The Dirt on Soil: What is Really Going on Underground?
<http://school.discovery.com/schooladventures/soil>

Composting with Red Wiggler Worms
www.cityfarmer.org/wormcomp61.html

Greetings Around the World
www.factmonster.com/ipka/A0769343.html

How Maglev Trains Work
<http://travel.howstuffworks.com/maglev-train.ht>

Perspectives Powers of 10
<http://micro.magnet.fsu.edu/optics/activities/teachers/perspectives.html>

Logic Mazes
www.logicmazes.com

Fascinating Facts About Trains
<http://mikes.railhistory.railfan.net/pindex.html>

Colorado Railroad Museum
www.crrm.org