



Underhand

M.J. McIsaac

Reading level: 3.8

978-1-4598-0416-6 PB

Book Summary

Fifteen-year-old Nick Carver is tired of living in his older brother's shadow. Markus is the lacrosse team hero, love interest of Nick's longtime crush and now the recipient of a prestigious scholarship from the Philston Weiks Academy.

When a mistake at provincials results in Markus's goal being discounted, rumors start going around school that he cheated. Suddenly, Philston Weiks is "rethinking" Markus's scholarship offer. They've also invited other players, including Nick, to try out for Markus's spot. Nick is flattered but conflicted. He's pretty sure his brother didn't cheat. But can he prove it? And if he does, will he ruin his one chance to finally be in the spotlight?

Prereading Ideas

- How much would you sacrifice to make sure someone else is treated fairly?
- How do negative events sometimes deliver our greatest lessons?
- Is a person's bad behavior still bad if you can understand why they did it?

Connecting to the Text

Plot

- Invite students to write an epilogue for *Underhand*. Remind them to stay in character, asking themselves as they write: *What might Nick do next? What about Lindy? Markus?*
- Teach students about *plot elements*. These include exposition, rising action, conflicts, climax, falling action and resolution. Working in pairs, have students map out the plot using these elements to guide their writing. Have each pair create a poster showing the plot elements of *Underhand*. (Follow the web link in the Resources below to a Slideshare presentation on plot elements. As an added challenge, have students take notes as they go through the slide presentation.)

Character

- After Nick attacks Markus, his coach benches him for a number of games. At the start of chapter 9, Nick narrates his experience of sitting in the stands with his mother:

It's ten minutes until game time in the first of the provincials, and everyone around us is craning their necks to get a look at me—Markus Carver's deranged, rabid brother.

Lead students in a discussion about the effectiveness of this kind of characterization. How does Nick's description of himself help the reader to understand his personality on a deeper level? What does Nick's narration tell us about his beliefs and values?

- Conflict is what keeps a story moving along. It's what makes things interesting! Typically, story plot follows one of four basic patterns of conflict:
 1. *Person against nature*. Tension comes from the character's battle against strong forces of nature.
 2. *Person against person*. Tension comes through the conflict between the protagonist and the antagonist.
 3. *Person against society*. Tension comes from the main character's struggle against some societal factor that must be overcome.
 4. *Person against self*. Tension is created as the protagonist faces internal conflict; the hero has two or more courses of action and must decide which course to take.

Guide students in a discussion of the kind of conflict pattern in *Underhand*. Is there more than one?

- *Underhand* is told entirely from Nick's point of view. But what if we flipped a scene? How can telling part of a scene from another character's point of view show a different side of the story? Challenge students to rewrite part or all of chapter 21 from Kevin's point of view.

Theme

Like plot, setting and characters, theme is also 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 *Underhand*. Have them go through the book and flag at least three areas where the theme is apparent.

Literary Techniques

- A simile is a comparison using the words “like” or “as.” It’s a literary technique that gives the reader a compelling image to help broaden his or her understanding of the text. Here’s an example of a simile from when Nick’s mother learns about Markus’s pending scholarship with the Philston Weiks Hurricanes:

Mom lets out a shriek, and I wince. The sound is like a drill in my ears. (ch. 3)

As students read *Underhand*, have them look for other similes. Discuss: How do these comparisons help you get a better picture of what’s happening in the story? Have students find two places in the text where they could add a simile to enhance the descriptive quality of a passage.

- Showing a character’s emotion is more effective than simply telling the audience how he or she is feeling. A character’s actions and speech can create a clear picture of who they are and what matters to them. Have students read this selection from chapter 10:

From my perch in the stands, I can see Lindy Hilner’s lost about as much hope of winning as I have. She’s chewing on her nails, her other arm wrapped tightly around herself, and she’s shaking from the nervous jiggling of her leg. I’ve never noticed before how seriously she takes the game. I guess I’m usually too busy playing.

How does the author show Lindy Hilner’s anxiety? Have students find other examples of showing instead of telling in *Underhand*.

- As a follow-up to the activity above, have students choose a passage from the book and enhance the story through adding some elements of “showing.”
- Good dialogue is anchored by beats—small bits of internal monologue or action that help to place the characters in the scene and develop their personalities. Consider this example from chapter 19:

“Markus,” I say. “I talked to Lindy. She told me she didn’t cheat. But someone told Coach Trent that you did. And I know who.”

He’s on his feet now, phone clutched in his fist, looking at me like I’m crazy. “Nick, what are you talking about?”

“It was Kev, okay? Kevin told Coach Trent that you cheated so that he could get on the Hurricanes.”

“How do you know all this?”

“Because he told me!” I shout. “I was with him, at Philston Weiks! They

invited us to one of their practices.”

His brow creases now. “You actually went?”

“Yes, but only to find out what happened. Markus, Kevin is going to get to play for the Hurricanes. He’s going to take your scholarship!”

Have students underline or highlight the beats—the areas of narrative that show the characters’ emotions or movements. (Note: an attribution like “I say” doesn’t count as a beat.)

Discuss: How do beats help to pace the dialogue? How do they develop characters and add to the scene? Challenge students to find other places in *Underhand* where the beats and dialogue combine to create strong, forward-moving scenes.

Vocabulary

Following is a list of vocabulary words from *Underhand*.

acknowledge	humiliated	smirk
baffled	intercept	swivel
commiserate	pang	threshold
confront	pristine	torso
frenzy	protocol	

- In small groups, in pairs or independently, have students create definitions for some of these words. You may choose to have them use a print-based dictionary, an online dictionary or some combination of both.
- Have students choose an unfamiliar word from *Underhand*. (It doesn’t have to be on the vocabulary list.) Ask them to provide a definition for that word based on its context, then explain how the context was helpful in creating that definition.
- Divide students into small groups and have them create a glossary of lacrosse terms from *Underhand*. Note: glossaries should include lacrosse-related *terms* as well as *words*.
- What do students know about the word *underhanded*? Introduce students to the term “a play on words.” Comment on the suitability of this word for the book’s title.

Connecting to the Curriculum

English

- In chapter 1, Nick explains how he feels when he puts on his lacrosse gear, comparing his feeling to a tiger that’s ready to break out and *take no prisoners*. But lacrosse isn’t about taking prisoners is it? This is what’s known as a *figure of speech*. It’s like saying *it’s raining cats and dogs* or *I’m so hungry I could eat a horse*. Team students up and have them look for other figures of speech in the book. Then ask them to brainstorm a list of figures of speech they have come across, either in life or in the books they’ve read. Share these—and their meanings—with the class.
- Read with students the section from chapter 4 where Nick hijacks his brother’s

computer and chats with Lindy Hilner as though he were Markus himself. Discuss the ways online communication is different from face-to-face communication. What is sometimes missed in text-based conversations? What are the risks of communicating solely via text/chat/instant messaging? What do you do to adapt a conversation to the medium in which you are communicating?

- As a follow-up to the previous activity, have students rewrite the conversation as an actual scene between Nick and Lindy, using dialogue and narrative to show the characters' emotions and motivations. (You may expand this activity with a mini-lesson on writing dialogue, plus dedicated time for drafting and revising. Students' published work can then be included in their writing portfolio.)
- Have students make a text-to-text connection about a movie or book where one character is (painfully) left out of the developing love relationship between two other characters. Connections should summarize the other work and draw a comparison between it and the Nick/Markus/Lindy triangle presented in *Underhand*.
- In chapter 7, Nick reflects how Markus's success is due in large part to his own willingness to share the ball and set his brother up to take the shots that win games. Have students think of other literary characters that are known for their willingness to sacrifice their own dreams and goals in support of someone else's.

Physical Education

- Have students pair up and research the rules of lacrosse. If you have lacrosse players in the class, pair them with students who have no prior experience of the game. Students will work with their partner to devise a way of teaching the rules of the game in a fun and engaging way to a grade three class. Have pairs share their teaching approaches.
- Lacrosse, like hockey, soccer and water polo, is a team sport. Divide students into small groups and have each group create a table or chart to organize sports into the following types: individual, pairs, team or other. Challenge students to record as many different sports as they can.

Health/Personal Planning

- In chapter 4, Nick's mother is thrilled about Markus's pending scholarship with Philston Weiks—and this upsets Nick enough that he doesn't want to join the rest of the family for supper. Suppertime (preparing the meal; setting the table; clearing; cleaning up) is often a time of ritual and connection for families—but there are other ways families can share rituals too. Talk about the importance of ritual with your students. What are some of the rituals they share with their loved ones?
- As an extension to the activity above, have students write a step-by-step procedure that outlines one of their family's rituals. It might be having supper, going grocery shopping, games night or even something like driving together. Have students finish with a reflection of why this particular activity is a ritual for their family.

- At night, Nick's room is lit by the light from Markus's computer screen as well as the streetlights outside. Is Nick experiencing ideal sleeping conditions? Talk with students about proper sleep hygiene. Include information about adolescent sleep needs; light levels; using one's bed only for sleep, etc. (See the Resources section below for a link to the National Sleep Foundation's tips for good sleep hygiene.)
- Have students think about characters they've met who are gossipy. Discuss the rewards and pitfalls of gossip. Where does gossip fit within the framework of building strong and trusting relationships with friends and schoolmates?
- In chapter 15, Nick worries about taking Lindy Hilner out for ice cream. "Is she going to expect me to buy hers?" he wonders. "I'm the guy." Lead students in a discussion about modern expectations for dating—or even just hanging out. Should the guy always pay for the girl? How do things change if we're talking about same-sex couples? Discuss how societal shifts have led to changes in our expectations of social interactions. How do students navigate these tricky questions in their own lives?
- Damien Sadowski jokes to Nick that his sister and brother will likely make more money than he will during his lifetime: one of them is going to be an engineer; the other, an architect. "They got the brains, I guess," says Sadowski. "They'll be millionaires and I'll probably be sharpening skates at the Oak Ridge Pro Shop the rest of my life" (ch. 16).

There is a lot of messaging in Sadowski's words. Talk about this with students. What is the difference between making a living and making a killing? Do we always need to aspire to the latter? What's wrong with Sadowski working in the pro shop forever if it's something he enjoys? Why does our society place such high value on making tons of cash? What other things are equally, if not more important? You may choose to have students do some writing around this subject.

- As a follow-up to the previous activity, have students list five or six possible career paths they are considering. Discuss: Do you feel pressured by family members to choose a certain type of career? Why? Do you approach your career goals with your strengths and interests in mind, or with your potential earnings in mind? Or both? Ask students to research the average salaries for their chosen careers using three different websites (this helps to ensure greater accuracy).

Connecting to the Students—Discussion Questions

1. As the book opens, the provincial lacrosse championships are approaching, and the Vikings are expected to win. What sports championships do you enjoy watching or participating in? Why?
2. Throughout *Underhand*, Nick feels resentful of Markus because his older brother is held up as a lacrosse superstar. He also feels like his coach's expectations are too high as a result of being Markus's younger brother. Do you sometimes feel like other people's expectations are too much to deal with? In what part of your life do you feel this (e.g. sports, academics, social or family expectations)?

3. In chapter 2, Nick lies to Lindy, saying Markus doesn't need a ride home. This way, he gets Lindy all to himself. Markus arrives home and catches Nick while Lindy is still there; he asks why Nick took off and left him after practice. Nick is embarrassed as his lie is exposed. Why do we lie? Are there occasions when you are tempted to lie? How does lying help you? How has it gotten you into trouble?
4. Marcus and Nick share a room—and sometimes Nick doesn't feel he has much privacy at all. Compare this to the sense of privacy you feel in your home. What do you wish was different?
5. In chapter 6, the Vikings play the Timber Wolves. Even though Nick is preoccupied with Markus's scholarship, he is able to shut out all extraneous thoughts and just focus on the game, starting with the blast of the ref's whistle in the face-off circle. When do you get "in the zone" like this? What helps you focus?
6. In chapter 10, Lindy Hilner is anxious as she watches Markus during the championship game. She chews her nails and jiggles her leg as she tries to manage her feelings. As you see it, is Lindy displaying compassion? Empathy? Or sympathy? Or is she displaying something else entirely? What are the differences between compassion, empathy and sympathy?
7. Chapter 10 ends with Lindy Hilner slinking "back into her seat, her face red from anger or embarrassment." She has been found at fault for not properly setting the clock when the final goal was scored...so the Vikings have lost their tie-breaker point. Write about a time when you felt you let other people down. What happened? Did this event shape or change your personality in any way?
8. Lindy and Markus's relationship, as well as Markus's scholarship, is at the centre of the vicious rumors swirling over how Lindy "purposely" cheated to help Markus. Think about rumors: their causes, the people who circulate them, their purpose, and their effects. What is it that makes rumors so powerful? How is it that they're so difficult to resist?
9. In *Underhand*, Nick is forced again and again to make decisions about whether he is going to support his brother or use events as an opportunity for self-advancement. And every time he comes up against the issue, he chooses to be loyal to Markus, despite how much it hurts him. Talk about loyalty. What does it mean? Where have you given it to someone else? Where have you had it given to you? How does loyalty act as the glue that strengthens relationships?
10. When Nick discovers Kevin's treachery, he regrets ever having confided in his friend about his irritation with Markus. *I hate that I did that*, Nick reflects. *I hate that Kev knows this about me* (ch. 21). Talk about the saying "Knowledge is power." What does it mean? How does it apply in this instance? How does it apply in the wider world?
11. When Nick takes Damien's phone to Eric for fixing, he learns that Eric likes to mess around with phones, taking them apart and putting them back together (ch. 23). What about you? What sorts of things do you enjoy getting your hands into? Sewing? Woodworking? Cooking? Playing guitar?

Author's Note

Dear Reader.

I've never been good at sports. Ever. I played them, to the best of my ability—soccer, basketball, swimming—but at the end of the day, the truth cannot be escaped. I sucked.

My brothers, on the other hand, were very good—still are, in fact. All three of them. And two of them played a lot of lacrosse. They inspired *Underhand*. And I always secretly wished I could be as gifted at sports as they were.

In *Underhand*, Nick has the same feelings—wishing he were as talented as his big brother. Nick is a good athlete, but because Markus is older, he gets all the glory first. What happens when admiration for someone snowballs into envy? I didn't have to be a good athlete to have experienced those feelings. Who hasn't wished they were as great a player as so and so? As lovely a singer as this and that? As amazing an artist as whosit and whatsit? I wanted to explore that and see how it could be overcome. Sure, Nick is jealous of Markus. But for better or worse, they're brothers. And for Nick, rising above his own insecurities is, I think, its own kind of win.

M.J. McIsaac

Resources***Plot Elements***

www.slideshare.net/guest6bbfe8d/elements-of-plot

Lacrosse

National Lacrosse League

www.nll.com

Canadian Lacrosse League

www.lacrosse.ca

The Canadian Encyclopedia: Lacrosse

www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com/en/article/lacrosse

The Origin of Lacrosse

<https://filacrosse.com/origin>

Sleep Hygiene

<http://sleepfoundation.org/ask-the-expert/sleep-hygiene>

Salary Scale for Various Careers

www.careeroverview.com/salary-benefits.html

Books***Fiction***

Bruchac, Joseph. *Children of the Longhouse*

Butler, Lisa. *Jake Fennings: Lacrosse Goalie*

Christopher, Matt. *Lacrosse Firestorm* (Matt Christopher Sports Fiction)

Maddox, Jake. *Lacrosse Attack* (Jake Maddox Sports Series)

Nonfiction

Fisher, Donald M. *Lacrosse: A History of the Game*

Hinkson, James and Joe Lombardi. *Lacrosse for Dummies*

Pietramala, David G. and Neil A. Grauer. *Lacrosse: Technique and Tradition*

Vennum, Thomas. *American Indian Lacrosse: Little Brother of War*

Author Biography

M.J. McIsaac was born in Oakville, Ontario, and completed a master's degree in writing for children at the University of Winchester. She has three little brothers, all of whom play lacrosse. They inspired her to write this book. M.J. currently lives in Toronto, Ontario, where you can find her writing and taking care of one noisy beagle and a very hungry Lab.