



City Spies by James Ponti

Look inside for

Discussion Questions

Author Interview/Biography

Reviews

Discussion Questions

1. In book one, before she's renamed "Brooklyn," Sara explains that it would be challenging to trust someone whose name you don't really know. Gerald Anderson responds by saying, "It all depends on the situation ... but my friends and colleagues, and I do hope that's a group you'll soon consider yourself to be a part of, they all call me Mother." Are you surprised to find out that this is his nickname? Why might Mother be inclined to have his friends and colleagues call him this? What are some of the traits often associated with mothers that Mother consistently demonstrates?
2. Consider how each City Spies member contributes to MI6. Why do you think they're so eager to work there? What about their past experiences make them well suited for the job? Would you want to be a City Spies member? If so, what would your job be?
3. Though a part of her will always be Sara, how does transitioning to her new identity as "Brooklyn" allow Sara to reinvent herself? What would your code name be?
4. Consider the individual City Spies: Which character did you like the most or the least? Whom did you feel was most similar to you?
5. Think about the "Motherisms," little sayings that Mother invents to help his team remember key spycraft principles that are scattered across the books. Can you think of any other useful tips that might assist the City Spies and create your own Motherisms?
6. Being a City Spy is special, but it can be hard to see a new member do so well after first arriving. How do you think that might make the other spies feel? How would you feel in Brooklyn's shoes? Or in the shoes of a veteran City Spy?
7. How do Mother's interventions profoundly impact and change the lives of each of his charges? Do you think being part of a team influences their behavior? What makes someone a good teammate?
8. At its heart, City Spies is a story about family. How does this found family remind you of your own? What are some ways in which they are unique or complicated?

Author Interview

Q: The City Spies series takes place all around the world. What kind of research do you do for each book? Have you been to any of the cities before?

A: Research is a big part of these books. From a geography standpoint, I try to find out as much as I can about a destination, including the off the wall elements. When possible, I travel to them and explore. If I know that I'm going to include a specific building or landmark, I try to arrange a special tour. For example, the New York Public Library is a setting for City Spies 5 and I was able to get a behind the scenes tour to look around the stacks and see things like the automated system that moves books around.

I also do tons of distance research. I interview people who've lived in the cities so I get a local perspective. I read books, scour YouTube, find websites. Anything and everything. I couldn't go to Egypt because of Covid, so I interviewed an Egyptologist, watched a slideshow of a family's trip to Cairo, and practically lived on a website that maps out of the tombs at the Valley of the Kings.

Q: Each kid brings a unique skillset to the team. What role would you play (or wish you could do) if you were a part of the team?

A: I would be a terrible spy. I get scared easily. I don't like secrets. And I'm pretty clumsy. The spies in my books have all the skills I wish I had. The character who I most identify with is Mother, (who is actually the father for those who haven't read the books). If I could be any of the kids for one of the adventures, I would probably pick Paris. He's all brains and courage and steadfastness. It would be neat to feel that way for a little while.

Q: What other books would you recommend for young readers who are fans of the City Spies?

A: My buddy Stu Gibbs writes two great spy series: *Spy School* and *Charlie Thorne*. I highly recommend both of those. Some other great spy books I'd recommend are *Concealed* by Christina Diaz Gonzalez, *Mrs. Smith's Spy School for Girls* by Beth McMullen and a great new non-fiction book by Rebecca Barone called *Unbreakable: The Spies Who Cracked the Nazi's Secret Code*.

Author Biography

My name is... James Ponti. Always James, never Jim or Jimmy. My mother insisted on this when I was little and it stuck, although there have actually been three exceptions. One was Father Heslin, the priest I was named after. One was Abraham Polonsky, a blacklisted film director who taught at my college. I was his teaching assistant and he called me Jimmy and I was cool with that. And there's David Feherty, the golf commentator and television personality. I produce his tv show and he calls me Jimmy. I think it's an Irish thing like it was for the priest. I was born in Italy and the thinking was to have one English and one Italian name. They went with James Marco instead of Giacomo Marcus (which would have been the reverse.) I don't know if I could've pulled it off as a kid, but Giacomo works now. So you can call me that if you're daring.

I am... an upbeat and optimistic person. I think this has been essential throughout my life. There have been a lot of setbacks and some real heartbreak, but I've always felt really fortunate to have the life that I do. I've been surrounded by amazing loving people who believe in me and no matter what's going on. I always feel like there are great things on the horizon.

As a kid, I was... a terrible reader. I really struggled with it. In my first grade classroom we had poster with all of our names on it and every time you finished reading something you got a star to put by your name. I only got one star all year and I was so embarrassed. I almost never read for pleasure and now try to write books that I think would've engaged me when I was younger.

Writing is... so much fun. I've always loved it. I decided to become a writer when I was in Mr. Prothro's fifth grade English class and I have literally never wanted to be anything else. It's been great and introduced me to amazing people. It's taken me all over the US and to nearly a dozen countries. What I love about it most is that it's universal. Everyone has a story to tell and everyone's story is unique to them. It doesn't take money or special equipment. Just your imagination and some paper. (Oh, and something to write with. But that's all.)

Reading is... something I've grown to love. Although, it's a bit of a luxury. I have so many deadlines and while I love reading, it's still not a very fast process for me. I've always joked that I could write a book faster than I can read one. My favorite books are mysteries as well as books by friends like JARRETT LERNER!!!!

Books are... passports. They take you everywhere real and imagined. But most of all, they connect us. I love the fact that I can write a book all alone in my office in Florida and some kid in Minnesota who I'll never meet can pick it up and read it and connect with me. It's a two way street for writer and reader. And when you read a book you complete that connection. And when you recognize yourself in the manuscript both you and the writer are elevated.

Did you know... I worked for a long time writing scripts for shows on Nickelodeon, Disney Channel, and PBS. I actually wrote on the Mickey Mouse Club when the mouseketeers included Ryan Gosling, Justin Timberlake, Britney Spears, and Christina Aguilera. They were just kids I saw and talked to every day and it's crazy to see them as superstars. One of the shows I wrote for PBS was Clifford's Puppy Days and that was a lot of fun too.

You can find me... hanging out with my family, going to the movies, traveling to some interesting location or at my desk writing. As for my books, you can find them almost everywhere books are shelved. I have a trick to find them quickly when I enter a bookstore by looking for the huge James Patterson and JK Rowling sections. I'm alphabetized right between them!