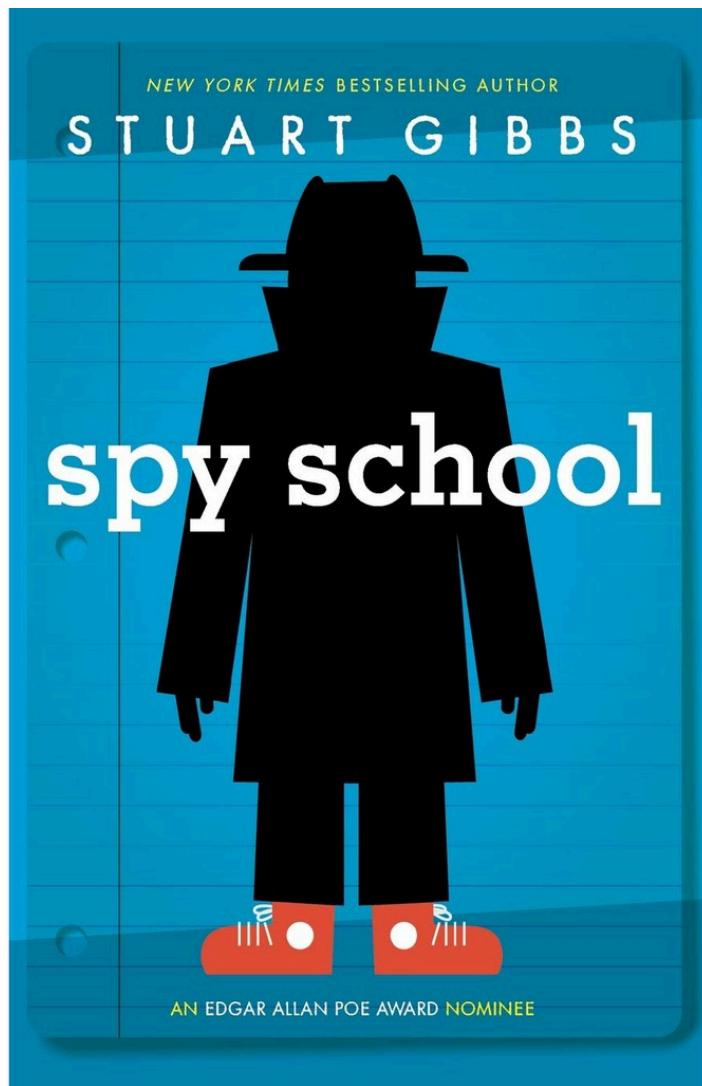


An in-depth analysis of Spy School by Stuart Gibbs



The following analysis is completely subjective and opinionated with a basis derived from the first book of the Spy School series. What I feel may not be the same as others; I am simply sharing my own experiences and view towards reading this piece of literature.

Part 1: The mind of Spy School's creator

The genre of spy in the entertainment industry has been redundant for several years. Whether it's the latest hit spy movies such as "James Bond: No Time to Die" or the giant that is "Mission: Impossible Fallout." There's simply no denying that these movies, while entertaining in some aspects, aren't fundamentally well written. They are instead heavily reliant on the mindless action that keeps the movie fun. Cliches, including preventing the bomb at the last second, have been way too predictable to a degree where a majority of the audience cannot feel the tension and excitement anymore.

So as a person who doesn't think too highly of spy genres and has a brief history of overly criticizing any piece of literature simply because my attention span cannot handle reading, when I first heard about "Spy School," , I wasn't very excited. Yet how wrong I was.

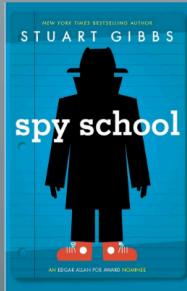
There's an extremely unique and fascinating approach to how the writer of Spy School, "Stuart Gibbs," deals with this genre. He had set up an extremely fast-paced humorous dialogue story that was fitting for any students looking for an entertaining piece of media. The combination of likable characters with distinct personalities, absurd world building that Spy School takes its place in, and plot twists that keep the reader guessing until the very end, have left me engaged in reading every single page of the book. And I think it all has to do with the brilliant mind of Stuart Gibbs.

Born on June 11, 1989, in America, Stuart Gibbs was an exceptionally talented author, going as far as to create five best-selling middle grade series. This includes names that you're most likely familiar with: Fun Jungle, Charlie Thorne Moonbase Alpha, The Last Musketeer and most importantly, the ongoing Spy School series, which currently consists of 10 separate books. In the first few pages of Spy School Part 1, it was written that Stuart had originally thought up the idea of this series on the playground in his



elementary school. And it certainly shows, as the series contains a lighthearted childish tone, while maintaining a coherent story of a thrilling adventure.

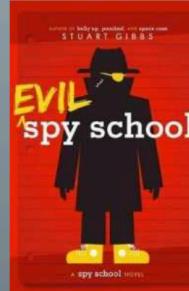
Timeline of Spy School series by Party



Spy School (2012)



Spy Camp (2013)



Evil Spy School
(2015)

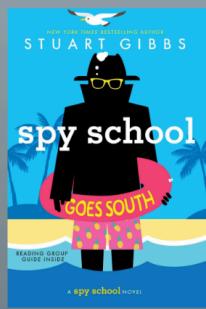


Spy Ski School
(2016)



Spy School Secret
Service (2017)

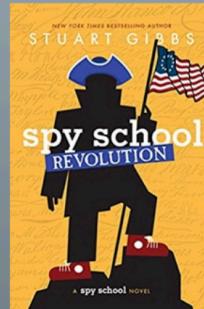
Timeline of Spy School series by Party



Spy School Goes
South (2018)



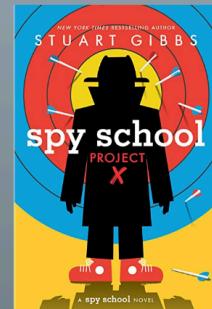
Spy School
British Invasion
(2019)



Spy School
Revolution
(2020)



Spy School at
Sea (2021)



Spy School Project
X (2022)

What makes a childish spy story so popular and profitable to the point of currently having 10 different books made? Without further ado, let's analyze the first edition of the Spy School series.

Part 2: An unseen prodigy



Taking place in Washington, D.C. of America, during a winter snowfall in the 21st century, the story is told in the perspective of an awkward, shy 12-year-old boy, “Ben RIPLEY” whom we immediately knew wasn’t normal. As in the very first paragraph, we grasped the understanding that Ben was able to accurately count how many seconds he had been alive during his life span. As

such, it was reasonable that after Ben had romanticized his crush and escaped from his bullies to his apartment. He would soon be recruited by CIA agent “Alexander Hale,” to admit himself to a government’s established Spy School disguised as a normal standard science school.

Right off the bat, in just the very first chapter, the story does an extraordinary job in establishing the character’s motivations and personality through humorous dialogue.

On page 3 of Chapter 1:

I found myself desperately wanting to impress him. “My folks have all kinds of stuff. What would you like? A martini?”

Alexander laughed again. “This isn’t the movies, kid. I’m on the clock.”

I blushed, feeling foolish. “Oh. Right. Water?”

In comedy, there’s a general consensus that the joke in question shouldn’t disrupt the story itself but rather flow along. Otherwise, the audience would be left annoyed, questioning why the story isn’t progressing. This and the many other dialogues I will be using in this analysis are a prime example of how to do comedy. Not only is this a funny joke, which sets the tone that this isn’t your average cliche spy, but it also establishes the character’s personality, in which Ben is a shy boy desperately wanting validation from others. Whereas Alexander is an extremely kind-hearted agent who can socialize well and isn’t serious at all.

What I love about this book so much has to be the early chapters. As it strikes plot twist after plot twist against you to a degree where the reader is unsure of the story's direction. Since everything is possible. This is evident from three events, which I will carefully explain.

Ben's first day at Spy School

Beginning a story is tougher than a lot of people would think. Ideally, a good beginning should establish the character's motivation, settings, and the main plot. However, the difficulty lies in balancing these elements, as spoiling the entire premise can leave the readers not interested in continuing the story. On the other hand, hiding too much information is also a red flag since the readers will be bored and underwhelmed.

Spy School manages to find the perfect spot for beginning a story. In which it explores the core elements discussed prior through an obscure creative method. Essentially, once Ben and Alexander had arrived at Spy School, they were immediately faced with the realization that the school had been infiltrated. Scared, Ben was guided by Alexander's daughter, "Erica Hale," in an attempt to save the school. However, little did he know that this was all planned by the school in advance to see Ben's performance. And he had failed the test. Shocked, Ben attempted to argue that no one could even pass the obscure test in the first place, only to find out that Erica had previously gotten 100% on it.



In my opinion, this is a well-thought-out beginning to this series, as it establishes four things all at once.

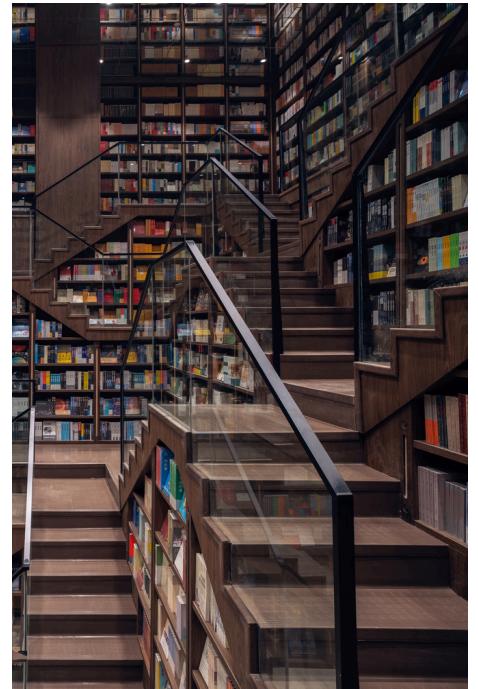
Reason 1

The reader managed to understand the fundamental structure of Spy School's building in an original way. Had Staarts gone with a more basic approach, with Alexander explaining to Ben where everything is. It would've been a lot more boring.

Instead, we were thrilled and concerned about the safety of Ben's life, while unconsciously absorbing the buildings of Spy School.

On page 24 of Chapter 3:

The library was cavernous, four floors of wide balconies ringing a central open space. On the main floor was a maze of shelves. Normally, I would have been thrilled by the sheer acres of books, but at the time the library only looked like a gigantic bobby trap to me.



Reason 2

It establishes the difficulty of Spy School and a theme of uncertainty. A majority of readers, including me, were tricked into believing that it had actually been a school infiltration. It causes a lot of concern and doubt in our minds once we realize that this was actually planned in advance. Since we can't even predict the beginning of a story, anything is possible in Spy School. Thus, we are more engaged in the direction in which the story is going.

Reason 3

We managed to grasp a further understanding of Ben's character and personality. The fact that he had failed the very first test upon his arrival while others had passed, proves his incompetence as a spy. Which gives us doubt on why he would even be recruited in the first place. Additionally, the use of Erica as a guide for Ben establishes a developing dynamic of awkward romance between them. A shy young boy is desperately chasing love from an Ice Queen who doesn't even acknowledge his existence.

On page 17 of Chapter 2:

The girl sitting on my chest appeared to be a few years older than me, maybe fourteen or fifteen, with thick dark hair and incredibly blue eyes. Her skin was flawless, her cheekbones were sculpted, and her lips were full....

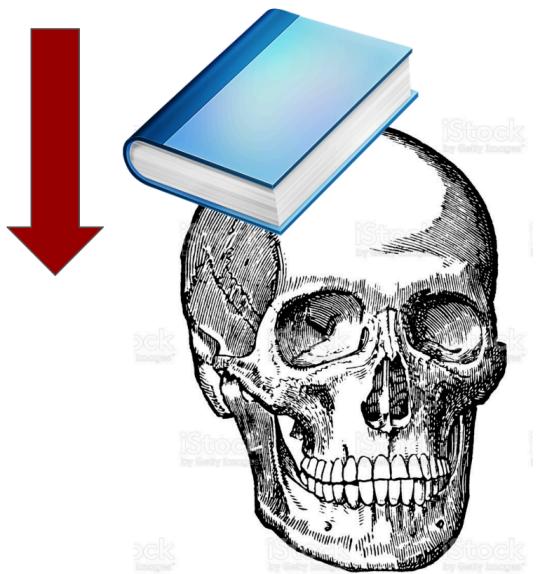
But perhaps the most attractive thing about her was how calm and confident she was in the midst of life or death situations.

Reason 4

While Ben is a complete amateur at being a spy, there is a very elaborate action scene that shows Ben using math skills to save himself out of the chaotic situation. This is not only creative and unique in the sense that the protagonist is using his brain to solve a particular situation. But the execution was also done exceptionally well, with Staarts being descriptive enough so that we can perfectly envision what is happening.

On page 25 of Chapter 3:

I snatched the heaviest I could find—Cooper's Pictorial Guide to Soviet Era Weaponry—quickly estimated the speed of my attacker in relation to the force of gravity, and determined the exact right moment to drop the book over the railing. From below came the distinct thud of the book colliding with the skull.



The facility of Spy School

Contrary to the entire belief of spy as a genre, the book does a complete 180 in an extremely absurd fashion. In which the Spy School was a complete dump with at best no better than a standard Afghanistan school. The Spy School settings of poison-level food, incompetent teachers, terrifying bullies, and a horrendous dorm are all present. And is commonly and humorously discussed throughout this entire book. For references, I will only be analyzing two dialogues. But bear in mind that the setting is described way much more than the amount I am using.

Scene 1

On page 33 of Chapter 3:

The furniture was army surplus, circa World War II: a spindly cot with a rock-hard mattress, a squat wooden nightstand, an iron desk with corners sharp enough to put out an eye, a foot locker, and a folding chair.



While there isn't anything absurdly funny about this scene. What the reader does experience is the setting of Ben's dorm in an entertaining way. In literature, the advice given is to always be creative and never use the same adjective over and over again. The repetition that results from the over-usage can heavily lose the punch it originally had.

This is where the scene shines as the description of the furniture being World War 2 can effectively paint the reader's mind a thousand words of how outdated and ancient the dorm is. Had Staarts used a more common term such as "old." Neither would that have been creative nor interesting to read as we've seen that word used more than enough. Furthermore, Staruts effectively uses imagery and paints the reader's mind of how sharp the desk is by using a sense of fear. With the eye being one of the most sensitive parts,

stating that the iron desk is sharp enough to put out an eye could send chills all over our body. Comparatively, if the statement had claimed that the iron desk is sharp enough to injure an arm. That wouldn't have had as strong an effect since an arm is much less vulnerable than an eye.

Scene 2

On page 89 of Chapter 10:

Professor Crandall had shuffled in shortly afterward, looking startled to find an entire lecture hall staring at him.....

He spent the next three minutes searching his pockets for his notes and the two minutes after that searching for his reading glasses.....

Crandall had quickly become sidetracked, relating a rambling tale from his Cold War days.



When it comes to humor, the substance of relatability is extremely desirable and valuable. If an audience can grasp, or even better relate to a certain joke. Then they're more likely going to link those jokes with past experiences that they've had. And this can result in the audience finding the joke funnier.

Looking at this scene, the relatability of Professor Crandall arriving late, clumsily looking for his stuff, and rambling about his past are funny experiences a lot of students can relate to. Thus, not only does this scene shows the incompetency of teachers in Spy School. But it is also extremely humorous and enjoyable to read as well.

Ben's realization of the truth

After having his entire energy drained out from the test, Ben attempted to take a nap. Yet it wasn't so easy, something felt a little bit off. And the instant he had opened his eyes. He had noticed an assassin attempting to extract information about a certain gadget called "Pinwheel." Confused, Ben attempted to play it cool only to break it at the last second and fight for his life. Through miracles, he was able to survive and was saved by "Tina Cuello," a student next to his room. But the assassin was long gone when he checked, with no footage of him caught on the camera.

On page 55 of Chapter 5:

I grasped the handle, sat up to face the assassin, and tried to stall for time. "Who told you I knew about Pinwheel?"

"What do you think? It's in your file."

That didn't help at all. I didn't have the slightest idea what to say, seeing as there were several million wrong answers that would get me killed.



Throughout this event, it made the audience wonder about several questions. Was this another test set up by Spy School? Who is the assassin and how come he is not caught on camera? What is Pinwheel? Yet, it would only take a few hours when Erica would tell Ben the harsh truth of what was going on.

Ben had believed that he was admitted to Spy School due to his prodigious level 16 math skills, specifically his unbelievable speed at complex calculations. This couldn't be further from the truth. In reality, the government has noticed that there's a mole who has infiltrated the school. This poses a massive threat since he would have a database of future spies. As such, Ben's profile was set to be the inventor of a revolutionary crypto

gadget “Pinwheel,” to lure the mole out of the shadows. Given this, Ben was not only determined to find the devious double agent who had infiltrated this school but also to accomplish his dreams of being a spy.

On page 76 of Chapter 8

“Am I even qualified to be a spy?”

“Not really,” Erica said. “I think they picked you because you have strong math skills- so on paper, you look like you could be a crypto genius. And because you live close by.”

Once again, this book has completely subverted our expectations, yet it all makes sense if we think about it. And if not before, then now is the time that the reader has realized that they’re in for something special.

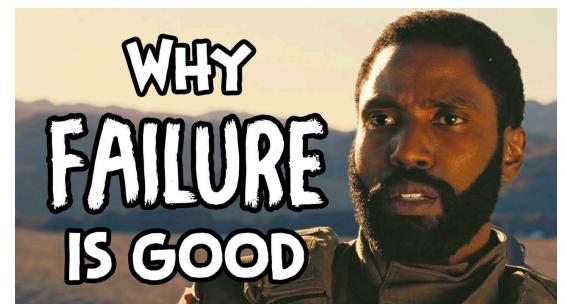
Part 3: The Soul of Spy School

What makes a story entertaining? While some would argue that a great story requires a perfect balance of the 5 basic elements (settings, character, plots, conflict, resolution.) I wholeheartedly disagree. In my opinion, the best approach is a simple story with complex characters. In this detour, I would like to give two pieces of evidence to support my claim. To apply that knowledge to why Spy School is so enjoyable.

Case Study 1: Tenet

Take a look at the movie “TENET,” by Christopher Nolan as an example. The movie is an exceptionally well-crafted substance full of convoluted time travel concepts. Yet, despite all of that, it was heavily criticized for its dull and lifeless characters. As a matter of fact, the character is so irrelevant to the point where the protagonist of the story itself is named “protagonist.”

This is a case of a complex story with simple characters. And it had failed miserably.



Case Study 2: Nichijou

Nichijou has no story. Since the anime was released in 2011, multiple anime critics have deemed it as the funniest anime ever. The primary reason for this has to be the wonderful cast of distinct personalities and their dynamic with each other. As such, Nichijou's approach to simple stories with complex characters has led them to earn the title of one of the most entertaining anime ever.

In the following comedic scene, the very simple and standard plot of getting bitten by a dog is made entertaining by the over-exaggeration of the characters.

 [Nichijou 22 - Dogs](#)



Given all of this information, it should be obvious by now that the main entertainment that arises from Spy School is the humorous dynamic between the distinct characters. For this, I would like to analyze two of the best characters in this series excluding Ben.

Erica Hale

On page 216 of Chapter 19:

“How’d you find me?” I asked. “When the entire CIA couldn’t?”

“I’ve never lost you. I was monitoring everything that was happening. Once every agent on campus started moving in one direction, I decided to look the other way. Just in case it was a diversion. Sadly it turned out I was right.”

Being the daughter of the great spy “Alexander Hale,” Erica was deemed as the Ice Queen. Who had rarely talked nor socialized throughout her 3 years in Spy School? Yet never failed to impress the reader when it comes to any activities regarding spies.

Personally, the description of Erica's character couldn't have been said better than the following scene.

On pages 44-45 of Chapter 5

She was the only student sitting alone, although her exile appeared self-imposed. Every guy in the mess looked like he wanted to be chatting up Erica; every girl looked like she wished they were friends.....

"Her family's been spying for the United States since before there was a United States. If anyone's graduating into the elite forces, it's her."

One of the better ways to introduce how powerful a character truly is would be to have other characters talk highly of them. Had it just been Erica saying all of the stuff, then the readers might think the character is a bit egotistical and unlikable. This would ruin the image of her that the author was originally trying to preserve. From this scene, we gain a deeper understanding of what Erica is truly like. A talented, beautiful, cold, and calculated student. This is why the readers feel so accomplished when Erica starts to show more emotions towards Ben.

On page 75 of Chapter 8

"So.....there's a mole?" I asked.

"Wow, Erica said sarcastically. "Figured that out already did you?"

On page 222 of Chapter 19:

She startled for the stairs. But while she was trying to be her usual distant self, I'd noticed a hint of regret in her eyes. As though she'd wished she could have stayed up there, dishing dirt on her father and laughing for the rest of the night as well.

The developing relationship between Ben and Erica is what made the dialogue feel so unique and special. From Erica sarcastically mocking Ben for not even realizing the situation he was in, to being sad in losing the chance to talk and laugh with him. It clearly shows significant character development which rewards the reader. Had we begun with Erica already showing interest in Ben. Then the book would have become stale in the long term.

Murray

If Erica was the shining light of Spy School. Then Murray would be the forgotten Pluto floating around in exile, simply because that's what he wants. He is a smart worker, wanting to exploit the best out of any scenario. He doesn't want to be a field agent, he sees the risks of dying outweigh the rewards. Instead, he believes that the best outcome you could get from Spy School is to be an office worker, relaxing and earning a fair amount of wages. As such, he usually pretends to perform his best but ends up failing at something and earning the lowest grades out of his class.

Murray is a prime example of the many methods students are willing to take in Spy School. Not only is this a fantastic addition to Ben's collection of the few friends that he has. But it also adds to the experiences of the Spy School setting as well.

On page 90 of Chapter 10

"Don't you think you should try staying awake through it this time?"

"Sure, if I were going to be a field agent. But the best way to avoid that is to be a guy who can't even pass Self-Preservation 101. The Administration's going to be so worried about me that they'll assign me to the safest desk job in the Agency. Probably won't even let me use a stapler."

Part 4: Final thoughts

This is an imaginative ludicrous book written by a person who truly cares not only in regards to spy as a genre. But in the entire entertainment industry. The main target audience of this book is aimed at middle schoolers. I truly believe it is fitting for any person looking for a quick escape from reality. And I do mean every single word of what I said. I hope by creating this scuffed piece of analysis, I can hopefully at least add something positive to this wonderful piece of creation.