

# READING GROUP GUIDE

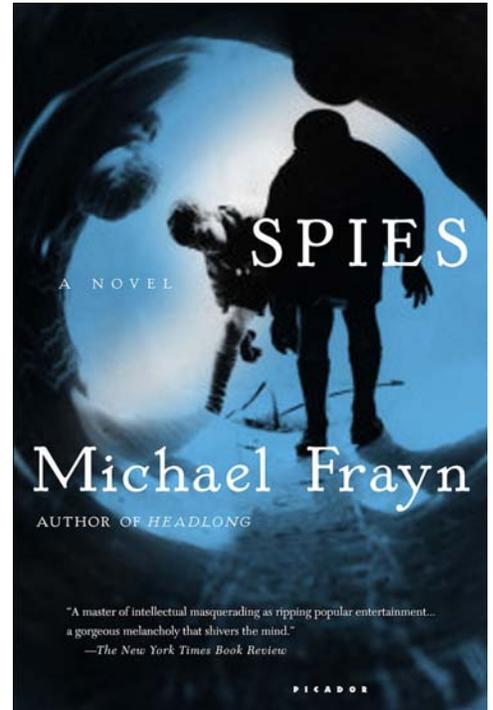
## *Spies*

*A Novel*

*by Michael Frayn*

ISBN-10: 0-312-42117-6

ISBN-13: 978-0-312-42117-5



### About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *Spies* are intended as resources to aid individual readers and book groups who would like to learn more about the author and this book. We hope that this guide will provide you a starting place for discussion, and suggest a variety of perspectives from which you might approach *Spies*.

### About the Book

From the celebrated British novelist and playwright Michael Frayn comes this rich tale novel of childhood, deceit, desire, guilt, innocence, the past, and other such universal mysteries. In *Spies*, one Stephen Wheatley revisits the sidewalks, shops, houses, and fragrant shrubs and flowers of his childhood neighborhood, and in doing so return to vivid memories and life-changing secrets of growing up in wartime London. As Stephen pieces together his scattered recollections, we are brought back to a quiet, suburban street where two boys—Keith and his sidekick, Stephen—are engaged in their own version of the war effort: spying on their neighbors, recording their movements, and ferreting out their secrets. But when Keith reveals a shocking facet of his home life, the boys' game of espionage takes a sinister and unexpected turn, transforming a wife and

mother's simple errands into the elements of adult deception, irreversible catastrophe, and domestic violence.

In his sharp yet tender depiction of the boundless imagination and incessant game-playing of childhood, Frayn offers us an exciting world of suspense and intrigue—but it is also a world that is human, familiar, ordinary, and real. Lyrically written and sensitively imagined, *Spies* powerfully demonstrates that what appears to be happening in front of our very eyes often turns out to be something we cannot see at all.

## Praise

“[An] intellectual mystery masquerading as rippling popular entertainment...[*Spies* exhibits] a gorgeous melancholy that shivers the mind.”

—*The New York Times*

“Marvelously effective... A novel of extraordinary power and wisdom, a tour de force of human insight.”

—*The Baltimore Sun*

“Bernard Shaw couldn't do it, Henry James couldn't do it, but the ingenious English author Michael Frayn does do it: write novels and plays with equal success. [He] has extended his reach and seriousness while keeping a sprightly intellectuality.”

—**John Updike**, *The New Yorker*

“In *Spies*, recollections of actual things—the ‘disconcerting perfume’ of privet hedges in bloom and the flavor of lemon barley water—makes Frayn's story so real you can taste it.”

—*Boston Herald*

“In this very English novel, secrets assume an unexpected power and excitement as Frayn reveals that a little of the fascist is buried in every clever child, and that spying can be a soul-destroying game.”

—*Chicago Sun Times*

“[*Spies*] convinces American readers that Frayn, author of some thirteen novels and sixteen plays, is a literary double threat.”

—*The Boston Globe*

“[A] dark, nostalgic, and bittersweet parable... As it plays out to a surprising denouement, this enigmatic melodrama will keep readers' attention firmly in hand.”

—*Publisher's Weekly*

“A compelling story about secrecy and betrayal... Frayn builds quite a bit of suspense... What is truly remarkable about this novel, though, is the way Frayn perfectly captures the dynamics of childhood friendships.”

—*Booklist*

## About the Author

**Michael Frayn** is the author of several novels, including the widely acclaimed and bestselling *Headlong*. He has also written over a dozen plays, among them *Noises Off* and *Copenhagen*, which won three Tony Awards in 1999. He lives in London.

## Discussion Questions

1. Throughout *Spies*, Stephen looks back on his friendship with Keith, a friendship that is, like the novel itself, in both the present and past tense. Trace the arc of their relationship. Why is it so lopsided? And was their break-up inevitable, in your view? Explain.
2. Explore the links between plot and memory in this novel. How, if at all, is the structure and pacing of this narrative determined by the recollections, associations, and rediscoveries of its narrator?
3. Stephen, the hero of *Spies*, is a professional translator who looks back—in painstaking, suspenseful detail—on his childhood. What else, in the fullness of the novel, do we come to learn about Stephen—as a boy and as a man? Discuss *Spies* as Stephen’s attempt to translate his boyhood self into the person he is now. What can *Spies* teach us about the changing nature of the self, about the flux that is identity?
4. In Chapter Three, Keith’s mother turns from her household duties to address Keith and Stephen jokingly and directly: “Bang, bang!” she says humorously, pointing an imaginary gun at us, as if we were children. “Got you, the pair of you!” Discuss various ironic connotations of this remark.
5. Much of the action in this novel concerns game-playing. What sorts of games are played here? Are they innocent or dangerous, imaginary or real? And who plays them—children, adults, both? Later in Chapter Three, Stephen observes: “Never before, though, has [the game he plays with Keith] become real, really real, in the way that it has this time.” Where else in the novel are we (and/or Stephen) alarmed, even frightened, by the tension between how things seem and how they “really” are?
6. Review the scene shared by Stephen and Barbara Berrill inside the lookout in Chapter Eight. How do such adolescent pastimes as kissing, smoking cigarettes, sitting in a hideout, and gossiping reflect the broader themes of *Spies*? Discuss how human longing and love itself function amid the key mysteries in this mystery novel.
7. Explain the meanings and properties attributed to “X” in *Spies*. What does this letter mean to Stephen and Keith? What does it mean to Keith’s mother? What about the symbolic/semiotic/semantic baggage of the letter? Also, explain why and how Stephen links the words *germ* and *German*.
8. Identify those passages where Stephen, looking back on the people and events of this tale, is conflicted by what he did say or do and what he could have—or should have—said or done. What other characters herein are likewise conflicted? Support your views with excerpts from the novel.

9. Define the German terms Fernweh and Heimweh. What does Stephen mean when he applies these terms to his own experiences? How, if at all, might these two terms also be applied to the novel in general?
10. Look again at the last pages of Spies. Who, after all, was the man hiding out in the pit? Why was he there? Discuss this man's reasons for his actions, both during the war and after. Discuss, also, the "shame" that Stephen attributes to him.

For more information on Picador Reading Group Guides:

Call: 646-307-5259

Fax: 212-253-9627

E-mail: [readinggroupguides@picadorusa.com](mailto:readinggroupguides@picadorusa.com)

For a complete listing of reading group guides visit: [www.picadorusa.com](http://www.picadorusa.com)

**PICADOR**

What to Read Next<sup>®</sup>