



Teacher Notes

S.I.G.M.A. 1: Web of Spies

Written by Tim Ayliffe

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Publication details

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Reader ages: 10-14 years

Themes

- Friendship
- Family
- Teamwork
- Trust and betrayal
- Courage and resilience
- Identity and belonging
- Espionage and intelligence
- Technology and surveillance
- Truth and deception
- Justice
- Grief and loss
- Curiosity and critical thinking

Learning Areas

- English
 - Language
 - Literature
 - Literacy

Core capabilities:

- Critical and Creative Thinking

- Ethical Understanding
- Personal and Social Capability
- Digital Literacy

About the Book

When Ollie heads out for a run in the park, the last thing he expects to find is a dead body. But the real shock is that Ollie recognises the man. And somehow, he's connected to Ollie's father ... who vanished ten months ago. And then he learns that the dead man was a spy.

With everything he thought he knew about his dad now in doubt, there's only one way for Ollie to get answers. He's going to have to solve the murder.

Armed with an old spy kit, a couple of bikes and a drone, Ollie and his friends Ella and George are about to step into a world that is more dangerous than they could ever have imagined ...

From bestselling author Tim Ayliffe comes a children's debut that will have you on the edge of your seat.

About the Author

Tim Ayliffe's thriller novels have been informed by his 25-year career as a journalist in Australia and around the world. He writes about espionage, extremism, and the global power games at play in the 21st Century. He has been the Managing Editor of Television and Video for ABC News and also Executive Producer of *News Breakfast*. He is the author of the standalone novel, *Dark Desert Road*, and the 'John Bailey' series including *The Greater Good*, *State of Fear*, *The Enemy Within*, *Killer Traitor Spy* and *The Wrong Man*. Tim's thrillers are also in development for TV. When he's not writing or chasing news stories, Tim watches rugby and surfs. He lives in Sydney.

Before Reading

- Study the cover of the novel. What clues does it give you about the genre? What expectations do you already have about spy stories?
- Before reading, brainstorm everything you know about spies. Where have you encountered spies in books, films or television? How realistic do you think these portrayals are?
- The title includes the acronym S.I.G.M.A. What predictions can you make about what it might stand for? Why might the author choose to reveal it as an acronym rather than a full title?
- Read the blurb. What questions does it raise? Which mystery do you think Ollie will be trying to solve?
- Discuss the difference between a mystery story and a thriller. What features do readers expect from each genre?
- Technology plays an important role in modern espionage. Brainstorm different kinds of technology that governments, investigators or intelligence agencies might use to gather information.
- The blurb tells us Ollie's father disappeared ten months ago. How might living with uncertainty affect the way someone sees the world?
- Throughout the novel, Ollie is encouraged to ask questions and search for the truth. Why are curiosity and critical thinking important skills, both in fiction and in everyday life?
- Why does Ollie initially decide not to tell the police that he recognises the dead man?
- What clues lead Ollie to suspect that his father was involved in something far more dangerous than international trade?
- What is the significance of the photograph labelled "Before S.I.G.M.A."?
- Why does someone break into Henry's study, and what does this suggest about the mystery Ollie has uncovered?
- How do the discoveries Ollie makes throughout the investigation change his understanding of his father?
- How does Ollie respond to learning that Henry used multiple identities? Why is this discovery so confronting?
- Throughout the novel, Ollie must decide who he can trust. Which characters prove trustworthy, and which characters keep important secrets?
- George often provides humour during tense moments. Why do you think the author includes humour in such a suspenseful story?
- How does Ella's interest in journalism influence the way she approaches solving the mystery?
- What role does technology (including drones, tracking devices and surveillance equipment) play throughout the investigation?
- Why does Ollie continue investigating even when the adults tell him to stop? How does Henry's advice influence this decision?
- How does the mystery become increasingly dangerous as Ollie, George and Ella uncover more information?
- In what ways do the three friends demonstrate courage? How is their bravery different from recklessness?
- Why do the adults in the novel keep secrets from the children? Do you think their reasons are justified?
- How does the novel challenge Ollie's understanding of who his father really was?
- Why is teamwork essential to solving the mystery? Could Ollie have succeeded on his own?
- What difficult choices do the characters face as the investigation progresses?

Comprehension questions

- Why is Ollie so determined to improve his running at the beginning of the novel?
- What effect has Henry Speed's disappearance had on Ollie and his mother?
- Why does finding the dead man in Centennial Park become more than simply witnessing a crime for Ollie?
- Describe Ollie's friendships with George and Ella. How do they each contribute different strengths to the investigation?

- How does the novel build suspense through clues, red herrings and unexpected revelations?
- By the end of the novel, how has Ollie changed as a person?
- What questions are answered by the conclusion, and which mysteries remain unresolved?
- Why do you think Web of Spies is an effective title for the novel?
- play again?
- Where do the campers cook their dinner?
- How would you describe the ending of the book?

Literacy:

Genre / Spy thriller and mystery

S.I.G.M.A 1: Web of Spies combines the conventions of the spy thriller with a fast-paced mystery. As Ollie uncovers clues about his missing father, readers are invited to solve the mystery alongside him while navigating danger, deception and unexpected twists.

- Create a class list of the conventions of the spy thriller genre. As you read, add examples from the novel beside each convention. Consider:
 - secret organisations
 - hidden identities
 - surveillance
 - gadgets and technology
 - international espionage
 - coded information
 - danger and suspense
- Choose another spy or mystery novel, film or television series. Create a Venn diagram comparing it with Web of Spies.
- Find three moments where an ordinary setting becomes tense or dangerous. Highlight the language choices that transform familiar places into suspenseful ones.
- Research a real intelligence or law enforcement agency, such as ASIO, ASIS, MI6, the AFP or the CIA. Create a short presentation explaining its role and compare it with the fictional intelligence world of S.I.G.M.A.

Craft / Building suspense

Tim Ayliffe carefully controls the flow of information throughout the novel, revealing clues gradually while introducing new questions and complications that encourage readers to keep turning the pages.

- Keep a clue tracker as you read. Record each clue Ollie discovers, what you think it means at the time, and how your understanding changes later in the novel.
- Select one chapter ending that finishes on a cliffhanger. Explain how the author encourages readers to continue reading.
- Find three examples where the author withholds important information from both Ollie and the reader. How does this create suspense?
- Rewrite one scene from the novel by revealing all of the hidden information immediately. How does this change the tension?
- Create a timeline of the investigation, mapping the major discoveries and twists in the order they occur.
- Highlight examples where fast-paced action is balanced with quieter moments of reflection. Why are both important to the story?

Characterisation

Although the novel is driven by action and mystery, it is equally a story about relationships, trust and identity.

- Create a character profile for Ollie, including his strengths, weaknesses, fears, motivations and how these change throughout the novel.
- Draw a relationship map connecting Ollie to the other major characters. Annotate each connection with quotations or evidence from the novel.
- Choose one important relationship (for example, Ollie and Henry, Ollie and George, or Ollie and Ella). Write a paragraph explaining how this relationship develops throughout the story.
- Find three moments that reveal Henry Speed's character, despite him being absent for most of the novel. What do these moments suggest about him?
- Select one supporting character and argue why they are essential to the success of the investigation.
- Rewrite an important scene from George's or Ella's perspective. How does changing the narrator alter the reader's understanding?

Themes / Trust, truth and identity

As the mystery unfolds, Ollie begins questioning everything he thought he knew about his father, forcing him to reconsider ideas about trust, honesty and identity.

- Create a table with the headings Secret, Who keeps it?, Why is it kept?, and What are the consequences? Complete it as you read.
- Find quotations that explore trust, truth or identity. Explain how each quotation develops one of the novel's major themes.
- Hold a class debate: "People are justified in keeping secrets if it is to protect others." Use evidence from the novel to support your position.
- Research one piece of surveillance technology mentioned in the novel. Create an information poster explaining how it works and discuss the ethical issues surrounding its use.
- Write a short reflection responding to Henry's advice to Ollie: "Never stop asking questions." Why is this idea central to the novel?
- Throughout the story, Ollie learns that people can have many different identities. Create a visual representation (such as a concept map or collage) showing the different roles Henry Speed occupies throughout the novel and how each contributes to the mystery.
- Working in small groups, identify the moment you believe Ollie changes the most as a character. Present your reasoning to the class using evidence from the text.

Final reflections:

- How did your understanding of Henry Speed change throughout the novel? Which revelation surprised you the most?
- Which moment in the story did you find most suspenseful or memorable? Explain why it stood out to you.
- Which relationship changes the most over the course of the novel? Why?
- If you had been in Ollie's position, would you have made the same decisions? Why or why not?
- Which character did you find most interesting or

complex? Support your response with evidence from the text.

- The novel explores the tension between keeping secrets and telling the truth. What message do you think Tim Ayliffe is communicating about honesty, trust and responsibility?
- How does Web of Spies challenge readers to think differently about courage? How does Ollie's understanding of courage change over the course of the novel?
- What questions are left unanswered at the end of the novel? How do these encourage readers to continue with the series?
- If you could ask Tim Ayliffe one question about the novel, what would it be?
- Would you recommend Web of Spies to other readers? Who do you think would enjoy it most, and why?

Creative activities:

- Design the front page of the S.I.G.M.A. Operations Manual. Include the organisation's logo, motto, classification level and any rules new recruits should follow based on what you've learnt from the novel.
- Create a confidential S.I.G.M.A. personnel file for one of the main characters. Include a code name, strengths, weaknesses, special skills, equipment and a recommendation for future missions.
- Create a visual timeline of the investigation, including the major discoveries, red herrings and turning points.
- Write an additional chapter set between two events in the novel. Ensure it matches Tim Ayliffe's style and maintains the tension of the story.
- Imagine George starts his own YouTube channel reviewing spy gadgets. Write or film a short review of one piece of technology featured in the novel.
- Design your own spy gadget for young agents. Draw and label your invention, explain how it works, and describe a mission where it would be useful.
- Create a coded message using a cipher or simple encryption method. Swap messages with a classmate and attempt to decode each other's work.
- Write a newspaper article reporting the events in

Centennial Park from the perspective of a journalist.
Consider what information would be publicly available
and what details would remain secret.

- Imagine the story was told from Ella's perspective.
Rewrite an important scene, focusing on how her
observations and ambitions as a journalist influence
the narrative.
- Create a storyboard or comic strip illustrating your
favourite action sequence from the novel. Consider
how pacing, camera angles and dialogue contribute to
the suspense.
- Write a blurb for S.I.G.M.A. 2 predicting what might
happen next in Ollie's story without using information
from the actual sequel.
- S.I.G.M.A. is looking for its next generation of agents.
Create an application for Ollie, George or Ella,
outlining the skills, qualities and experiences that
make them suitable recruits. Include examples from
the novel to justify your assessment, and recommend
whether the applicant should be accepted, accepted
with further training, or rejected.