

A Curriculum Guide for

**Under Their Skin, Book Two: *In Over Their Heads***

By Margaret Peterson Haddix

**About the Book**

Nick and Eryn must figure out a way to save the world without sacrificing their newly discovered family in this follow-up to *Under Their Skin*.

In *Under Their Skin*, twins Nick and Eryn successfully met their new stepsiblings, Ava and Jackson. But in doing so, the twins found themselves on a mission to discover how to prevent humanity from facing certain doom.

Now their two families are joined together to save not only themselves, but everyone—human *and* robotic. Can they figure out how before it's too late?

**Discussion Questions**

The discussion questions below align with the following Common Core State Standards: (RL.5.1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 10) (SL.5.2) (RF.5.4A)

1. How is Ava different from her brother? Find quotes from the novel to support your opinion.
2. Eryn is aware that “the papers under Nick’s shirt said that even the caretaker robots were dangerous and had to be destroyed. Even the robots like Eryn’s parents. And Ava and Jackson.” What should Eryn do? If you had to “destroy” your family and those you love to save your world, would you do it?
3. Nick recognizes that “he was carrying instructions that said his life, his sister’s life—no, the very survival of humanity—depended on him and Eryn becoming murderers . . .” After reading this quote, do you believe that Nick sees destroying robots as heroic or savage? What evidence in the rest of novel supports your view?
4. Do you think that Eryn and Nick ever truly believe that they will kill their family? Explain your response.
5. Where is the novel set? When do you think the story takes place? What evidence do you have that supports your conjectures?
6. In the first half of the novel, all four siblings know what the papers say, but for the most part, they keep their feelings to themselves. What are their differing thoughts about the papers’ instructions? What do their different reactions to the papers tell us about the characters’ personalities? Which character’s attitude corresponds most closely with yours?

7. “Ava did not envy Nick and Eryn, having their every move psychoanalyzed and explained to them their entire lives.” Find places in the novel where Denise, the human twins’ mom, explains her kids’ lives to them. Would you prefer a parent who understands preteen psychology or one who does not?
8. In the first book, Eryn and Nick are angry that they have been lied to, or at least not told the truth. In this second book, we see that all of the kids, including Jackson and Ava, are worried about telling the truth and are suspicious of others. Why does this distrust happen?
9. “It felt like the surprise and fear mingled in their expressions were her fault.” What does this quote tell us about Lida Mae?
10. How do the different characters react to Jackson’s “breakdowns”? How are these reactions similar to the different ways that some people react to people who have mental breakdowns?
11. How does the human and robot conflict in the story relate to conflicts in today’s world? Is the conflict between the humans and robots caused by prejudice and fear? Explain why or why not. Do you believe that the robots and humans in the story could live together in peace?
12. Reread chapter 12. Jackson is hiding under a blanket in the back of the van. What is Jackson thinking and feeling before Dad comes back from the store?
13. Can one kill a machine? If you kill a robot, as Eryn almost does, is that murder?
14. Is Lida Mae an adult in a child’s body? What evidence from the novel supports your opinion?
15. What is the purpose of the prologue? What questions do you have after reading it? How does the prologue make you feel? Are your questions answered by the end of the book?
16. Before Ava announces the fact, did you uncover Lida Mae’s secret? Did the author provide any evidence earlier in the novel to allude to Lida Mae’s secret?
17. If the chapters were not labeled with the character’s name, could you tell if the chapter was from Ava’s, Jackson’s, Eryn’s or Nick’s perspective? Why or why not?
18. In what ways are Jackson and Ava more like humans than robots?
19. Using evidence from this series, who is more durable: a robot or a human? Explain your answer.
20. Explain what has happened to Lida Mae’s family.
21. How are the killer robots defeated? What is the message or theme that the defeat demonstrates?

22. Eryn says to herself, “This woman thinks humans are going to be nicer than robots!” What do you think? Which group is nicer: humans or robots?

23. What do you think is the purpose of the epilogue?

### **Extension Activities**

The activities below align with the following Common Core State Standards: (SL.5.1, 2, 5) (RF.5.3, 4) (W.5.3b, 5) (L.5.1) (RL.5.4)

1. Divide students into groups to discuss the following: What does it mean to be alive? What is the definition of life? Are the robots in the cribs dead or alive? Before having a class debate, be sure the students have researched the definition of life, using various sources.

2. Eryn feels like Lida Mae could be a character from *Little House on the Prairie*. Eryn uses the words “hoedown,” “barn raisings,” and “twang” in describing this puzzling girl. Make a list of words and phrases that others use to describe Lida Mae, or words that she says herself. What do these words or phrases say about Lida Mae’s character?

3. Perform chapter 9 as a Readers’ Theatre. Have students read Lida Mae, Nick, Ava, and then divide Eryn into three characters: narrator Eryn, Eryn’s thoughts, and what Eryn actually says. Explain how the siblings are trying to get information from Lida Mae without scaring her away.

4. Lida Mae speaks in a vernacular (a dialect). Take a few lines of what she says and “translate” them into Standard English.

5. A good writer, like Margaret Peterson Haddix, “shows” instead of “tells.” Ava is described as having eyes “downcast” and “tears glistening in her eyes.” Eryn is said to have “risked giving Nick a private smirk . . .” How are these characters feeling? What are some other examples from the novel that show how a character is feeling? Make a list of emotions such as: anger, jealousy, pride, ebullience, etc. Then write a sentence or short paragraph that show this emotion.

6. Research the author, Margaret Peterson Haddix. Then write a script in which the author has a dialogue with her characters. What would these characters ask her? How would she respond? Act out your work in front of an audience. You can even do some improvisation and take questions from the audience or have the author and characters answer questions.

7. *In Over Their Heads* is an action-packed novel. Have students recreate a particular striking scene as a graphic novel.

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