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- ★ “An exceptional work.” —*Kirkus Reviews* (starred review)
- ★ “Gut-wrenchingly relevant.” —*Booklist* (starred review)
- ★ “A compelling story, and Yelchin tells it with grace.”
—*The Bulletin of the Center for Children’s Books* (starred review)

ABOUT THE BOOK

In a stunning sequel to his acclaimed memoir *The Genius Under the Table*, Eugene Yelchin’s graphic memoir depicts his harrowing journey from Leningrad’s art scene to a state-run Siberian asylum—and to eventual safety in the US.

Yevgeny is now a young adult, pursuing his artistic dreams under the constant threat of the KGB’s stranglehold on Russia’s creative scene. When a chance encounter with a young American woman opens him up to a world of romance and possibility, Yevgeny believes he has found his path to the future—and freedom overseas. But the threat of being drafted into the military (and sent to fight in the Soviet army’s occupation of Afghanistan) changes everything in a terrible instant, and he takes drastic measures to decide his fate, leading to unthinkable consequences in a mental hospital.

With bold art bringing a vivid reality to life, National Book Award Finalist and Newbery Honoree Eugene Yelchin shares Yevgeny’s saga, balancing the terror and oppression of Soviet Russia with the author’s signature charm and dark wit. *I Wish I Didn’t Have to Tell You This* shines a stark spotlight on history while offering a poignant, nuanced, and powerfully resonant look at growing up in—and ultimately leaving—Cold War Russia in the early 1980s.

Instructional Standards

This discussion guide, which can be used with large or small groups, will help students meet several of the instructional standards for English Language Arts. These include the reading literature standards for key ideas and details, craft and structure, and integration of knowledge and ideas (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL), as well as the speaking and listening standards for comprehension and collaboration and for presentation of knowledge and ideas (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL). Questions can also be used in writing prompts for independent work.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. This book is a sequel to *The Genius Under the Table*, but it is for older readers, and the story is told as a graphic memoir. Why do you think the author changed the format for this volume?
2. Even though we are told not to judge a book by its cover, a cover is certainly one way to figure out what to expect. What did you think this was about when you saw this cover?
3. As the book begins, Yevgeny lives in Leningrad with both his mother and his grandmother. What are these women like? How are they the same? How are they different?
4. Showing your art is a very big deal, so it is understandable that Yevgeny wants to participate in the show in a private apartment coordinated by his friend Mark. But the show is illegal, and participants could be arrested by the KGB. What would you do? Risk showing your work or stay safe and have your paintings not seen by anyone? Why?
5. Americans are presented in two very different ways in this book. What are they, and how have these different views developed?
6. Usually, in comic strips and graphic novels, dialogue is shown in speech bubbles with a little tail pointing to the person speaking. The author chose not to use tails in this book. Did you notice that? Do you prefer one way over the other? Were you ever confused about who was talking?
7. Yevgeny appears to fall in love with Libby when he first meets her. Do you believe in love at first sight? Do you think his love is sincere?
8. The places where people grow up often hold a lot of meaning for them. For some, a homeland represents family, childhood, happiness, and friends. For others, it is a reminder of poverty, violence, and fear. Leaving one's homeland is a huge decision. Mark can't wait to leave for Israel, but Yevgeny says he can't imagine leaving the beautiful city of Leningrad. What are reasons to leave one's homeland?
9. When Mark tells Yevgeny about Libby learning what is happening to the refuseniks, Yevgeny says, "That's funny. She doesn't even look Jewish" (page 107). Were you surprised that he thought that only Jews could be sympathetic to the plight of Jews? Do you see this happening all over the world with different races and ethnic groups? Can people be just as concerned about people who are totally different from themselves as they are about people who share commonalities with them?



10. The art is an effective combination of crisp closeups and blurry backgrounds. For instance, what is the effect of the spread on pages 114 and 115?
11. People often tell one another that no matter where they are, they will be looking at the same stars. Libby says this to Yevgeny. However, he says, “Not exactly, Libby. There is a big difference looking at stars in America and looking at stars in Russia. We’re looking at very different stars, Libby. Very, very different stars” (page 153). What does he mean by this?
12. The same event can elicit very different reactions from different people. How do Yevgeny and his mother react when they find out that Libby has broken up with him? Why does his mother respond that way?
13. Yevgeny was facing the draft and would likely have been sent to Afghanistan to fight. He avoided this, but at what cost? Was being imprisoned in a mental asylum a better option?
14. Why did Yevgeny’s feelings about his beloved Leningrad change when he was in Siberia?
15. Did you think Yevgeny would get permission to join Libby in the US? What made you think that? Were you surprised by the ending?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Eugene Yelchin was born in Leningrad in 1956 and immigrated to the United States in 1983. He is an author, painter, and illustrator who has designed theater sets, created fine art, produced advertising campaigns, and worked on animated movies and now creates books for children and young adults. His book *Breaking Stalin’s Nose* received a Newbery Honor, and *The Assassination of Brangwain Spurge*, co-created with M. T. Anderson, was a National Book Award Finalist. The first volume of his memoir, *The Genius Under the Table*, was a Sydney Taylor Honor Book and earned seven starred reviews.

These questions were prepared by Grace K. Worcester, former youth services consultant for the Vermont Department of Libraries. She has spent her entire professional life working with books and children and has served on the Newbery, Caldecott, *Boston Globe-Horn Book*, and National Book Award for Young People’s Literature committees.

