

WRITING

- Alan's grandfather tells him, "Family before country, Alan. Always." (p. 104). Write an opinion essay about whether you agree or disagree with this sentiment, giving reasons to support your opinion.
- Create a classified ad for recruiting spy trainees, listing the traits, skills and qualifications desired.
- In your opinion, what is the major theme in the book? Write an essay supporting your choice, and analyzing the ways in which the author supports this theme with characterization, plot or other story elements.
- Complete a detailed character analysis of Nadia or one of her team members. Drawing examples from the book, support the idea that this character will make a better CIA agent than the others on the team.
- Write a report comparing this book and another, either contemporary or classical, where young people are killers. Compare and contrast the characters, motives, weapons and setting. Can you draw any universal conclusions?
- Imagine an alternate high school where youths are taught to be peace activists, and write the introduction to the course catalog that encourages students to attend.

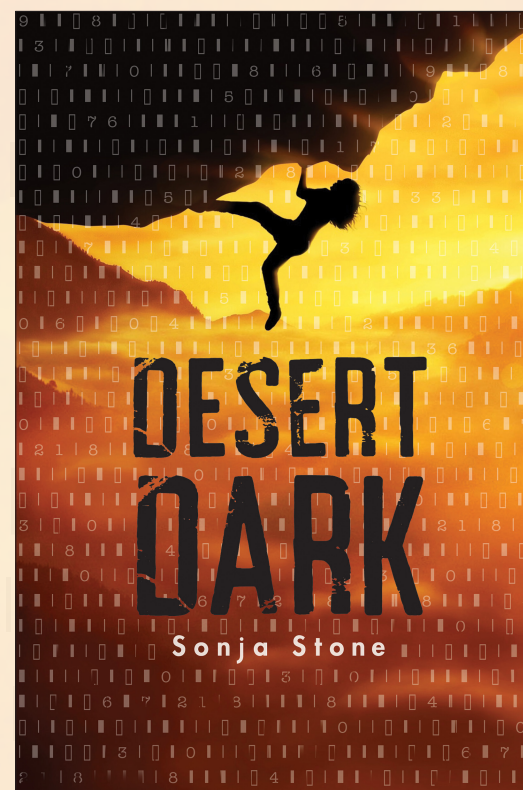
RESEARCH/CURRENT EVENTS

- Research and write a report, using both online and print sources, about how CIA agents are recruited and trained. Did the author of this book do her research?
- In chapter two, Nadia quickly solves a Vigenère cipher for her calculus teacher. Research and write a report, using both online and print sources, about this cipher and three others. Compose a message in one of the codes you chose.



About the Author

Sonja Stone collected intel on psychology and creative writing from Washington College, trained at Le Cordon Bleu for a cover job as head pastry chef and completed a solo course at the same survival school where Tom Hanks prepared for *Cast Away*. She is trained in jujitsu, knife throwing and fire guns. She lives in Scottsdale, Arizona, with her family. This is her first novel.



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"This thriller will keep readers guessing right to the very last page."
—*Kirkus Reviews*

Themes

Survival
Trust
Friendship
Secrets
Spies
Loyalty
Teamwork
Ethics
Government
Politics

With a setting that is *Hogwarts* meets *The Bourne Identity* this debut YA thriller will make readers mad with suspense.

Nadia Riley has earned a spot at Desert Mountain Academy, an elite Black-Ops government-funded training school. While struggling to fit in, Nadia learns someone on campus is a double agent, and she is being framed as the spy. In an attempt to clear her name, Nadia discovers dark secrets about her fellow teammates. Each of them is hiding something . . . could one of them be the traitor?

Questions for Discussion

1. The opening chapter of the book is an action sequence that introduces the characters. The second chapter begins the story three months earlier, and subsequent chapters relate the events that lead up to chapter one. In what ways does using this “flashback” method set you up with expectations for the rest of the story? What character and plot clues are you given in this first chapter? Do any of them turn out to be false?
2. Does the Desert Mountain Academy seem like it could be a real place? Do you believe that a government would subsidize a school like this? Discuss the moral implications of teaching young people how to kill or hurt each other. How would high school be more treacherous to navigate if everyone had these skills?
3. In what ways is the Academy just like any high school, except for the curriculum? In what ways is it different? Describe some of the ways that being a teenager is a lot like being a secret agent, and then describe some of the ways it's different. In your opinion, is a spy school the perfect place for young adults—or is it pretty much the worst place?
4. In chapter seventeen readers discover that Jack turned in his best friend for cheating. What is worse in your opinion: lying, cheating or tattling? Which of these would your peers disapprove of most?
5. Discuss the author's choice to use different character voices in alternating chapters. Does this make it harder to identify a “main” character? Does this make it easier to identify with, champion or suspect multiple characters? Discuss how the different voices enhance the story's themes. Does everyone agree that Nadia is the main character? Why or why not? Give examples to support your answer.
6. Each of Nadia's teammates is motivated by something different. For example, Jack is presented as extremely loyal and patriotic while Damon is looking for revenge. Discuss each person's motivation. Do you believe one of these motives is stronger than the others? Is the author successful in making you understand why each character acts as they do?
7. In chapter sixty-seven Nadia wonders, “*Am I the only one in the world with nothing to hide?*” (p. 290). Is that true? Doesn't she have any secrets? What secrets are the others hiding? How does this contribute to their role in the story and at the Academy? How are the characters able to trust one another, or not? Discuss how suspicion corrodes the relationship between Jack and Nadia. How much harder would a romance be at this school?
8. In your opinion, which of the major characters is best suited for the life of a spy? Why? Is it due to their physical skills, intellectual ability, moral compass? Share your thoughts on whether or not you would make a good spy.
9. Why is spying presented as such an attractive occupation in fiction and on film? Why is the idea of a “Black Ops” unit, free from government control, so prevalent? Do you believe that such units are necessary and should have unlimited freedom in their actions? What are the positive and negative sides to them?
10. Discuss the pros and cons of being a government spy. In chapter nine Libby tells Nadia, “your rights and privileges no longer apply” (p. 37). Is this concession worth the “cool” aspects of the career—excitement, world travel? At one point Nadia wonders, “*Could I really kill another human being because someone ordered me to?*” (p. 201). Could you imagine doing that? Under what circumstances?
11. “There's nothing wrong with a little moral flexibility,” Damon says in chapter fourteen (p. 55). Do you agree with him? Discuss how “good spy” qualities can also be “bad spy” qualities. For example, Nadia tells Alan that she is “naturally suspicious” (p. 133). How could that trait be good or bad?
12. Do the adults in the book exhibit their moral flexibility? How? Why did the author choose to exhibit some of the adults' questionable choices? Talk about the role of the teachers in the books—the good ones and the bad ones. Discuss how the relationship between Sensei and Nadia mirrors other heroes and mentors in literature.
13. Dean Wolfe says to Nadia, “I cannot overstate the importance of team unity” (p. 26). Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of being on a team vs. being a loner. Which would you prefer? What constitutes good team qualities at this school? What other qualities can you suggest? Do you think Nadia's team members are loyal to one other or only to themselves? Give examples from the book to support your opinion.
14. Do you think the author is successful in maintaining the suspense about the double agent throughout the book? Why or why not? How does she use characters and incidents to build suspense convincingly? Share examples of when she leads you to believe that multiple characters could be the double agent.

This guide aligns with Instructional Standards for Grades 7–10

RL.7.1–2, 6; RL.8.1–3, 6; RL.9–10.1–3, 5

W.7.1–2, 4, 6–9; W.8.1–2, 4, 7–9; W.9–10.1–2, 4, 8–9

SL.7.7; SL.8.1; SL.9–10.1

L.7.1–3; L.8.1–3; L.9–10.1–3