


ELVIS AND THE UNDERDOGS

BY JENNY LEE

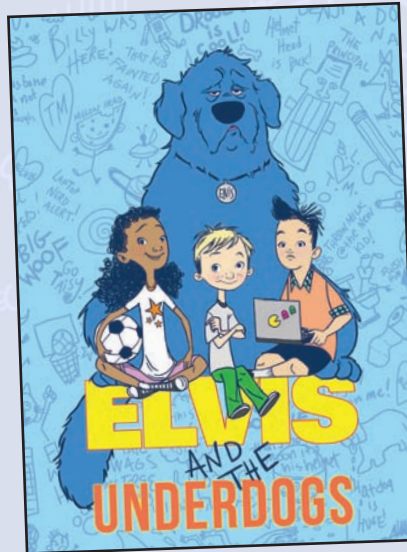
DISCUSSION
GUIDE 

ABOUT THE BOOKS

Benji Wendell Barnsworth is a small ten-year-old boy with a big personality. Born prematurely, Benji is sickly, accident-prone, and at the hospital so often he even has his own punch card. So when Benji wakes up one day from a particularly bad spell, his doctors take the radical step of suggesting he get a therapy dog. But when a massive crate arrives at Benji's house, out walks a two-hundred-pound Newfoundland who can talk! And boy, is he bossy.

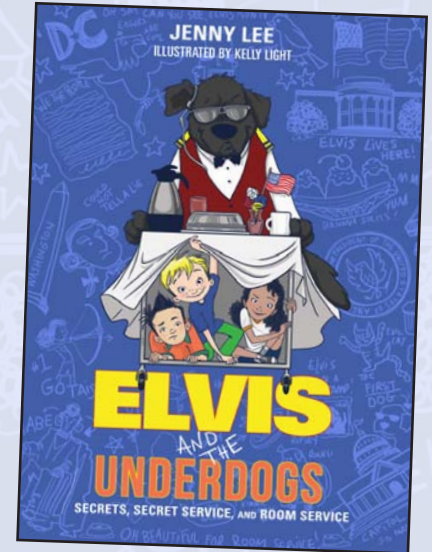
In this hilarious and heartwarming series full of madcap adventures, Elvis brings out the dog lover in the most surprising people and shows Benji that even underdogs can save the day.

Book 1



Elvis and the Underdogs

Book 2



*Elvis and the Underdogs:
Secrets, Secret Service,
and Room Service*

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In *Elvis and the Underdogs*, Parker Elvis Pembroke IV comes as a surprise to Benji, who is expecting a more traditional therapy dog. Discuss what Elvis is like and what makes him different from other dogs. Give examples of how the author uses dialogue to convey his personality.
CCSS (Reading): RL.4.1, RL.4.3, RL. 4.4
2. When Elvis first arrives in *Elvis and the Underdogs*, he and Benji don't hit it off. What events, actions, and conversations lead to their friendship? Describe ways they still clash even after they become friends.
CCSS (Reading): RL.4.1, RL.4.3
3. Near the end of *Elvis and the Underdogs: Secrets, Secret Service, and Room Service*, Benji thinks, "I can't quite explain it, but I felt a little older. Like I learned a bunch of life lesson stuff" (p. 269). How does Benji change over the course of the two books? How do different people and events influence those changes?
CCSS (Reading): RL.4.1, RL.4.3
4. Why is Benji surprised that Taisy wants to be his friend? Compare their personalities and what they like to do. What do they have in common? What are their differences? What do they like about each other?
CCSS (Reading): RL.4.1, RL.4.3
5. Benji also becomes friends with Alexander Chang-Cohen. Find actions and dialogue that convey Alexander's personality. Compare and contrast him with Benji. Why do you think the author has Benji always include Alexander's last name when he mentions him?
CCSS (Reading): RL.4.1, RL.4.3




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Aligns with Common Core State Standards for Grade 4

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (CONTINUED)

6. In *Elvis and the Underdogs*, Billy is a bully at first but later shows a different side of himself. Discuss how he acts in different scenes. How does he bully other kids? How does he end up helping Benji and his friends? What parts of Billy's home life might affect how he acts?

CCSS (Reading): RL.4.1, RL.4.3

7. Describe Benji's mother, drawing from what she says and does in both books. What kind of person is she? What is her relationship with Benji like? Find specifics of what Benji thinks and says that show how he feels about his mother.

CCSS (Reading): RL.4.1, RL.4.3

8. Benji's mother and Taisy's father are important in both books. How are the two adults alike? How are they different? Compare and contrast how each of them treats their child.

CCSS (Reading): RL.4.1, RL.4.3

9. Kimmie, the daughter of a reporter, appears in *Elvis and the Underdogs: Secrets, Secret Service, and Room Service*. What is she like? Describe her first encounter with Benji. What role does she play in the plot?

CCSS (Reading): RL.4.1, RL.4.3

10. In *Elvis and the Underdogs: Secrets, Secret Service, and Room Service*, Elvis says, "I personally believe it's the interesting people who add spice to life" (p. 118). Later, Kimmie says, "I don't want to be like everyone else. I want to be an original" (p. 130). Do you think originality is important? In what ways are the major characters in both books interesting and original? Give specific examples.

CCSS (Reading): RL.4.1, RL.4.2

11. One of the most exciting scenes in *Elvis and the Underdogs: Secrets, Secret Service, and Room Service* occurs when Kimmie brings the cat, Sally Claws, into the White House kitchen (starting on p. 282). Look closely at the language the author uses to describe it. What verbs paint a vivid picture? What figures of speech bring this part of the story to life? Which words help you hear the scene as well as see it?

CCSS (Reading): RL.4.1, RL.4.4

12. Describe and compare the settings of the two books in terms of time and place. How important are the settings for each book? What do they add to the story? Could the events have taken place in another town or city?

CCSS (Reading): RL.4.1, RL.4.3

13. Despite the problems that the characters face, the tone of both books is humorous. Some of the humor comes from exaggeration. For example, in *Elvis and the Underdogs*, Benji says that if he doesn't get home soon, "My mom would probably call in the SWAT team to come find me" (p. 263). Find examples of exaggeration, sarcasm, and others types of humor in the books. How do the illustrations reflect the tone?

CCSS (Reading): RL.4.1, RL.4.4

14. Why are the first book and the series called *Elvis and the Underdogs*? Which characters are underdogs? What shows that they are? On p. 235 of the second book, Elvis calls Benji "a feisty little David" and explains the expression "David and Goliath." Give examples from both books of how Benji is like David.

CCSS (Reading): RL.4.1, RL.4.2

15. Elvis, who has a sophisticated vocabulary, sometimes uses words Benji doesn't know. Make a list of unfamiliar words that Elvis and others use. Try to define the words from context, then look them up. Below are some possibilities.

CCSS (Reading): RL.4.4

From *Elvis and the Underdogs*:

- subdued (p. 20)
- liberating (p. 60)
- honed (p. 81)
- trauma (p. 94)
- bane (p. 133)
- overbearing (p. 155)
- covert (p. 224)




From *Elvis and the Underdogs: Secrets, Secret Service, and Room Service*:

- acknowledge (p. 59)
- porter (p. 85)
- behoove (p. 108)
- affable (p. 119)
- invoking (p. 167)
- concur (p. 236)
- protocol (p. 264)

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EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

1. Canine Correspondence

Have students imagine that they are a dog going to a new home like Elvis did. They should write a letter to their new owner, describing their appearance, personality, and any magical powers. First, they should decide what breed of dog they are. For example, Elvis is a Newfoundland and Ripley is a Labrador. (You can refer students to the American Kennel Club website for descriptions of breeds with facts and photos.) Post the letters on a Canine Correspondence bulletin board.
CCSS (Writing): W.4.1, 4.3

2. Ask the Expert

Taisy excels at sports, but she's not sure what role they'll play in her future. Have pairs of students research sports that Taisy might pursue either for fun or as a professional. Once they've gathered information, each pair should write an interview in which Taisy asks an expert about that sport and why it might be a good fit for her now or in the future. Have the students record the interview to share with classmates, with one partner playing the role of Taisy and the other playing the role of the fictional expert.
CCSS (Speaking & Listening): SL 4.5

3. 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue

In *Elvis and the Underdogs: Secrets, Secret Service, and Room Service*, readers are introduced to the White House, some of its rooms, and some of the pets who've lived there. Have students do simple research to find out more, using the White House website, which includes a slide show on presidential pets. Each student should find three interesting facts to share in a class discussion.
CCSS (Speaking & Listening): SL.4.4



4. Book It

The two Elvis books are rich with figurative language. Have students create an 8-page mini-book of such language. (One option for a bookmaking how-to can be found here: makingbooks.com/hotdog.shtml). Students should find similes and metaphors from both books to print on each page, choosing ones that are easy to illustrate such as "flopped around like a fish," so they can add a picture to each page. Display the mini-books on a shelf for everyone to read.
CCSS (Reading): RL.4.4

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jenny Lee is a writer and producer on the new ABC Family sitcom *Young & Hungry*. She was also a writer and producer of the TBS sitcom *Ground Floor* and the Disney Channel's number-one-rated *Shake It Up* for all three seasons. Jenny is also the author of four humor essay books for adults. She lives in Los Angeles with her 110-pound Newfoundland, Doozy (and yes, it's a toss-up on who's walking whom every day).



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Discussion guide prepared by Kathleen Odean, librarian, author, and Common Core workshop presenter.

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