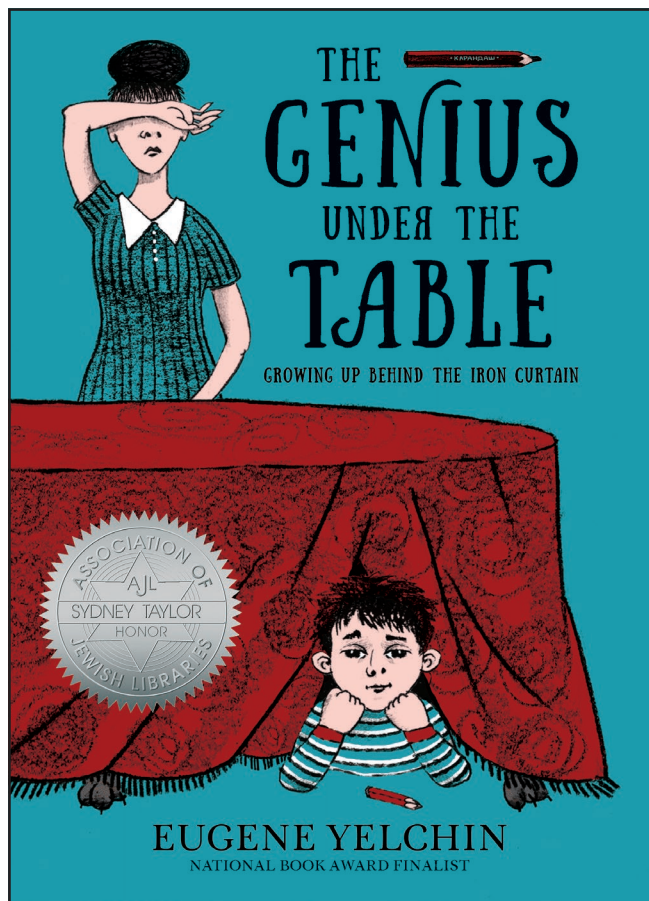


# THE GENIUS UNDER THE TABLE

## GROWING UP BEHIND THE IRON CURTAIN



**A Sydney Taylor Honor Winner**

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Also available as an e-book

### Common Core Connections

This discussion guide, which can be used with large or small groups, will help students meet several of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) 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.

### About the Book

How will Yevgeny ever fulfill his parents' dream that he become a national hero when he doesn't even have his own room? He's not a star athlete or a legendary ballet dancer. In the tiny apartment he shares with his Baryshnikov-obsessed mother, poetry-loving father, continually outraged grandmother, and safely talented brother, all Yevgeny has is his little pencil, the underside of a massive table, and the doodles that could change everything.

With a masterful mix of comic timing and disarming poignancy, Newbery Honoree Eugene Yelchin offers a memoir of growing up in Cold War Russia.

### About the Creator

Eugene Yelchin was born in Leningrad, Russia, in 1956 and immigrated to the US in 1983. He is an author, painter, and illustrator who has designed theater sets, created fine art, produced advertising campaigns, illustrated editorial pages, and worked on animated movies and now creates children's books. 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.



## Discussion Questions

1. *The Genius Under the Table* is an intriguing title. What did you think the book would be about?
2. Did you know the term *Iron Curtain* before you read this book? It is not a physical barrier but an imaginary line, the political and military barrier between the Soviet Union and other countries that existed from 1945 to 1990. It served to keep people in the country and information out of it. What did you learn about life behind the Iron Curtain from this book?
3. This is a fictionalized memoir; in other words, it is about the young Eugene (Yevgeny) Yelchin's life, but it is not a strict account. What do you think he omitted? Is there anything you would like to know more about?
4. Opposite the title page are pictures of the people in Yevgeny's family set up like a photo album: Mom, Dad, Grandma, Grandpa, brother Victor, and Yevgeny himself. But the grandpa picture has had the face cut out. Why would someone have done that?
5. What does Yevgeny think about Americans and America? From where does he get his impressions? Do you think they are accurate?
6. Children are generally very curious, and Yevgeny is no exception, but his parents tell him that asking questions is considered not patriotic. What do they mean by that? How do you think he feels when he is told that?
7. It is hard for most of us to imagine living like Yevgeny did when he was a child. Not only did he have to share a single room with his mother, father, grandmother, and brother, but worse, there was a spy who lived in the next room who reported to the KGB (Soviet secret police) anything he heard or saw that might be against the government. What do you think you would do to remain safe in these circumstances?
8. On page 95, Yevgeny's father says, "You can never be a great poet, Yevgeny, if you're afraid to tell the truth. But truth is a dangerous thing. Most people don't like it." What do you think he means by this?
9. When Yevgeny goes to the public bath with his father, he meets a man who has a tattoo of Stalin on his chest. According to this man, Stalin was a great man who was poisoned by "yid doctors." He asks Yevgeny if he is Jewish, and Yevgeny, thinking of all the anti-Semitic sentiment currently in Russia and worrying about his safety, says no (pages 99–100). Were you surprised at his answer? What do you think you would have done in his place?



10. Yevgeny mixes up the words *defect* and *defecate*, which results in hilarious statements like this one to his mother: “When I was a little kid, I was always afraid that you might defecate” (page 116). Can you think of any words that you mixed up when you were little? Before reading this book, were you familiar with the word *defect*, meaning to leave a country for another one?
11. After Yevgeny’s artistic talent is discovered, his mother gives him a present—blue jeans that belonged to ballet star Mikhail Baryshnikov. What does that gift mean to the various family members?
12. When Yevgeny and his mother are on the way to his art teacher’s house for the first time, his mother tells him about the artistic accomplishments of the Bruni family. She reminds him of a painting that he had seen in the Russian Museum, *The Brazen Serpent*, a painting that had given him nightmares. Have you ever seen a painting, or a picture of a painting, that left a huge impression on you? If yes, what was it, and why did it affect you?
13. Tatiana Georgievna did not teach art in a traditional manner. She allowed Yevgeny to take any of her art books off the shelf and copy whatever paintings interested him. When he first took down a book, she would tell him a little about the artist, and then after he had created his copy, she would explain techniques to improve his work. What do you think of this method? Would you want to learn this way?
14. In chapter 39 (pages 157–160), Yevgeny explains that he has realized that there are three kinds of Russian artists: those who defect so they can continue painting the way they want; those who stay and continue to paint the way they want, but may be arrested or even killed; and those who stay and learn to paint by the rules. Whichever way artists choose, they have a lot to lose: their country, their freedom or possibly their life, or meaningful art. Which path do you think you would choose?
15. We know how much Yevgeny’s father loved poetry, so it is not a surprise that he wanted to acquire a new book by the famous poet Osip Mandelstam. What is a surprise is that he was so excited he ran off without his coat, hat, scarf, and gloves in the middle of a snowstorm to stand in line all night to get a copy of the book. Can you imagine wanting something so much that you would be willing to do this? Are you passionate about anything the way Yevgeny’s father was?

