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Gregor the Overlander

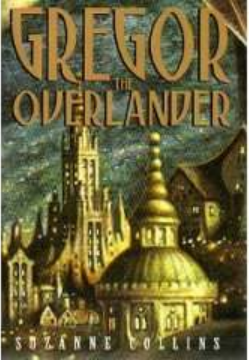
by Suzanne Collins

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Summary



When Gregor falls through a grate in the laundry room of his apartment building, he hurtles into the dark Underland, where spiders, rats, cockroaches coexist uneasily with humans. This world is on the brink of war, and Gregor's arrival is no accident. A prophecy foretells that Gregor has a role to play in the Underland's uncertain future. Gregor wants no part of it -- until he realizes it's the only way to solve the mystery of his father's disappearance. Reluctantly, Gregor embarks on a dangerous adventure that will change both him and the Underland forever.



About the Author

Since 1991, Suzanne Collins has been busy writing for children's television. She has worked on the staffs of several Nickelodeon shows, including the Emmy-nominated hit *Clarissa Explains it All* and *The Mystery Files of Shelby Woo*. For preschool viewers, she penned multiple stories for the Emmy-nominated *Little Bear* and *Oswald*. She also co-wrote the critically acclaimed Rankin/Bass Christmas special, *Santa, Baby!* Most recently she was the Head Writer for Scholastic Entertainment's *Clifford's Puppy Days*.

While working on a Kids WB show called *Generation O!* she met children's author James Proimos, who talked her into giving children's books a try.

Thinking one day about *Alice in Wonderland*, she was struck by how pastoral the setting must seem to kids who, like her own, lived in urban surroundings. In New York City, you're much more likely to fall down a manhole than a rabbit hole and, if you do, you're not going to find a tea party. What you might find...? Well, that's the story of *Gregor the Overlander*, the first book in her five-part series, *The Underland Chronicles*.

Suzanne also has a rhyming picture book illustrated by Mike Lester entitled *When Charlie McButton Lost Power*.

She currently lives in Connecticut with her family and a pair of feral kittens they adopted from their backyard.



Book Review

Booklist Review: /*Starred Review*/ Gr. 4-7. What if Alice fell down an air vent in a New York City apartment building instead of down a rabbit hole? Collins considers a similar possibility in her exceptional debut novel, a well-written, fast-moving, action-packed fantasy. Eleven-year-old Gregor expects a long, boring summer of baby-sitting his two-year-old sister, Boots, and his senile grandmother. Distracted with thoughts about his father, who disappeared three years ago, Gregor belatedly notices that Boots has crawled into an air vent in the laundry room. He dives in after her, and the two are sucked downward into the Underland, a fantastic subterranean world of translucent-skinned, violet-eyed humans, and giant talking cockroaches, bats, spiders, and rats. Eventually, the terrified Gregor is transformed into a warrior hero who leads a successful battle against an army of invading rats and discovers his father, who has long been held prisoner by the enemy. Collins creates a fascinating, vivid, highly original world and a superb story to go along with it, and Gregor is endearing as a caring, responsible big brother who rises triumphantly to every challenge. This is sure to be a solid hit with young fantasy fans -- Ed Sullivan (*BookList*, 11-15-2003, p608)

School Library Journal Review: Gr 4-8--In this accessible, almost-cinematic fantasy, Gregor and his two-year-old sister fall into an amazing underground world. Taken in by people who have lived beneath the earth for centuries, the 11-year-old learns about the giant-sized talking creatures that also reside there, including bats, cockroaches, and vicious rats. Gregor just wants to get home, but a prophecy hints that he may be the "overlander" destined to save the humans from the warlike rodents. He is reluctant until he learns that his father, who disappeared from their New York City home a few years before, is a prisoner of the rats. Gregor is not an eager hero, but with common sense, quick thinking, and determination he grows into the role. His sister, who provides some comic relief, also plays a key part because of her ability to befriend creatures, especially the giant cockroaches. Plot threads unwind smoothly, and the pace of the book is just right. Exciting scenes and cliff-hanger chapters are balanced by decisions and interactions that drive the action. Gregor is not the most compelling figure at first, but as the story progresses he becomes more interesting, maturing through the challenges he faces. Supporting characters are generally engaging, particularly the enigmatic warrior rat that claims to support the protagonist's mission. This is an engrossing adventure for fantasy fans and for those new to the genre.--Steven Engelfried, *Beaverton City Library, OR* (Reviewed November 1, 2003) (*School Library Journal*, vol 49, issue 11, p134)

Discussion Questions

Warning! Some of the questions contain key elements of the plot. Do not read if you don't want to know what happens!

1. How have the inhabitants of the Underland adapted to their environment? What do you think would happen if any of them came to the surface?
2. Do you think that, at the beginning of the story, Gregory has given up hope of ever finding his father? Once his adventures in the Underland get under way, do you think he believes he'll find his father?
3. The Underlanders see Gregor as the great warrior told of in the Prophecy of Gray, and because of that he is to lead the quest to prevent their annihilation. But Gregor sees himself differently – he says to Vikus, "You've got the wrong guy. Really, I promise you, I'm not the warrior." Why do you think he feels this way? Why is Vikus so convinced that Gregor is the right one?
4. Talk about Gregor's personality. Of all his character traits, which do you find most admirable? Could he be your friend? Why?
5. How does Gregor's relationship with Luxa change over the course of the novel?
6. One of the most interesting characters in the novel is not a human, but a rat that Vikus has enlisted to be the guide for the questers. What traits does Ripred possess that set him apart from the others, both rats and humans?
7. Giant cockroaches, rats, and bats inhabit the Underland. Gregor is scared but keeps his cool. How and why do you think he does it, and why is it important to him that he appear brave? How would you react if you were staring down into the face of a four-foot cockroach?
8. Although he doesn't show it, it seems that Vikus knows who Gregor is from the time Gregor arrives. Why doesn't he tell Gregor from the very start? What does Vikus say that suggests he was testing Gregor to see if he was worthy of leading the quest?
9. Vikus tells Gregor: "The journey will be difficult. The prophecy warns that four of the twelve will lose life. It may be wisest to leave Boots here." While it seems that Gregor's desire to bring his baby sister on the quest is foolish, she does play a crucial role as a quester. What is it?
10. Authors sometimes plant clues in a story to foreshadow future events. Often these clues can be very subtle and it's not easy to pick up on them. Looking back in the story, what things did Henry say and do that pointed to his treachery?
11. Before leaving for the quest, Gregor is brought to the Underland museum to choose things that might aid him on his journey. He selects a flashlight and batteries, a construction worker's hardhat with a light, and a can of root beer. What did you think he would do with these items? How in fact do these things come in handy? He could have taken a baseball. Why didn't he?
12. Despite the great perils, Gregor insists on taking Boots with him on the quest. He recalls what his mother once said to him, "Stay together." Do you think his mother would have wanted him to put Boots in that kind of danger?

Was there ever a time when you followed something your parents said and it got you into trouble in school or at home? Was there a time when you did what your parents told you and it paid off?

13. Gregor, Luxa, Vikus, Solovet, Temp and Tick, Aurora and Ares, Gox, King Gorgor, and Ripred – from what each of these characters say and do, imagine their voices. Then cast the actors who might play them or do their voices in a feature film of Gregor the Overlander.
14. "Good late day," said Vikus, nodding to the Underlanders. "Meet you Gregor and Boots the Overlanders, brother and sister, who have most recently fallen among us." The characters in the Underland speak in a very stylized, somewhat old-fashioned way. How does this help define who they are? Why doesn't Ripred talk this way?
15. In many fantasy stories, the main character doesn't plan to go on a quest, but is forced to do so by circumstances, and then rises to the occasion. You could call them "reluctant heroes." Why is this an appealing idea?
16. Gregor, like Alice (in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, by Lewis Carroll); Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy (in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* by C.S. Lewis); and Dorothy (in *The Wizard of Oz* by L. Frank Baum), travels through a passageway from "the real world" to a fantastic one. Discuss the variety of ways characters find their way into fantasy worlds in these and other novels you have read.



Author Interview



Okay, the rat is fake. Read below to see why...

Here is an interview that I did with Jen Rees at Scholastic Press:

1. Of all the places Gregor could have traveled to, why the Underland?

I liked the fact that this world was teeming under New York City and nobody was aware of it. That you could be going along preoccupied with your own problems and then whoosh! You take a wrong turn in your laundry room and suddenly a giant cockroach is right in your face. No magic, no space or time travel, there's just a ticket to another world behind your clothes dryer.

2. Is there anything you find/found difficult or challenging in writing from the perspective of an 11-year-old boy?

I remember being eleven very clearly and I had a lot of friends who were boys so it felt pretty natural being in Gregor's head.

3. Are you anything like Gregor?

I think I'm like Gregor because we both want to do the right thing but sometimes have trouble figuring out what it is. Also, neither of us likes to ride roller coasters and we've both changed a lot of diapers. But Gregor is much braver than I am...if I even see a regular sized rat in New York City I immediately cross the street.

4. What kinds of things did you enjoy doing when you were 11?

Gymnastics, like Luxa. Reading. Running around in the woods with my friends.

5. Many people think bats, rats, cockroaches, and spiders are creepy! Did you have to get over your fear of any (or all!) of them to write this story?

I wish I could say that after I researched the creepy animals I was no longer at all afraid of them...but that would be a big fib! Cockroaches aren't really scary, just a little germ, so I don't mind them much. I love bats...except these really loud ones that get in my attic in the summer and hold some kind of party all night long. Spiders still scare me some, although I'm also fascinated by them and I can happily watch them from a distance. But rats...not pet rats but the wild kind...I will always have what I consider to be a healthy fear of rats. You should, too.

6. Are you kinder to cockroaches, bats, rats, and/or spiders nowadays?

I don't think I was ever particularly unkind to them...but I do have more of a connection with them now. I'm more aware of their similarities to humans. And I'm sympathetic to their desire to survive, which all creatures share.

7. Did you have a sibling who, like Boots, got you into a world of trouble?

I have two older sisters and one older brother and hold them largely responsible for the trouble I got into growing up. I believe as the youngest child, that is my right.

8. Have you ever lived in New York City?

I lived in New York City for 16 years, from 1987 to 2003. But when I was growing up we moved all the time because my dad was in the Air Force. We were mostly on the eastern half of the U.S. and in Europe but, like Gregor, I definitely know what it feels like to be a stranger somewhere.

9. If you had to go to the Underland, what items would you take along with you? And who would you take with you?

I'd take all the flashlights and batteries I could find. I'd also take a couple of bottles of water and chocolate, because I don't like traveling without either of these things. I would wear very comfortable clothes and sneakers...in case I had to run.

My husband, Cap, would be great to have in the Underland, since he is very good in an emergency, but I'd want him to be with our kids up in the Overland so I'd know they were in safe hands.

(Note: Cap says he would not take me to the Underland because I am not good in an emergency and I would constantly make him stop and ask for directions. Both of these things are true.)

So I think I would take my good friend Christopher Santos with me, because he is very diplomatic and travels a lot and he seems at ease in foreign places. Also, he would never make loud, mean remarks about the creatures which could get a person in all kinds of trouble.

In the Underland, I would make it my first order of business to hook up with a couple of bats because, let's face it, without a bat you're probably going to end up as someone's lunch.

10. Have you ever been lost and wanted to find your way home?

All the time. I have a terrible sense of direction. I get lost practically every time I leave my house. Fortunately, people are usually very kind about giving you directions if you ask politely.

11. Do you think you were destined to be a writer? (or is there some free will involved?!)

I...have no idea how to answer this. I would have to go to a cave and meditate on it or something, and then I probably still wouldn't know.

12. If you could invite one of the characters to have dinner with your family, who would it be? What might you cook for them?! What questions would you ask them?

I would invite Ripred to dinner because I think he would tell the most interesting stories. We would have to serve shrimp in cream sauce because this is his favorite dish of all. Just to irritate him, I would tell him he has to use a napkin—or he won't get dessert. He would use the napkin, because dessert would be a fabulous chocolate cake and he loves food, but I bet he would glare at me the whole time.

I would ask all kinds of questions about being a rat, and living alone in the Dead Land, and about his family. Ripred sometimes sneaks up to the Overland, so I would ask him his opinion of New York City, too.

After dinner, we'd play Scrabble.

13. All fun aside for a moment, Gregor is also about war and battling forces and survival. Can you tell us a little bit about this?"

Gregor falls into a fantastical world, but he's really acting out the main role in a war story. Almost as soon as he arrives in the Underland, he's recognized as the "warrior" of the prophecies and he's called upon to undertake what are essentially a series of military missions. For instance, in Book I he goes into enemy territory to rescue a prisoner of war who also happens to be his dad. It's never described as such, but that's what's really happening.

As the series continues, Gregor is faced with increasingly difficult quests and choices as the Underland breaks into a massive global war. His struggle to survive—both physically and spiritually—forms the arc of The Underland Chronicles.

Further Reading

If you liked **GREGOR THE OVERLANDER** by Suzanne Collins you might like the following books, too!

Try the rest of the books in the Underland series:

Gregor and the Prophecy of the Bane: Book two in the Underland Chronicles

Gregor and the Curse of the Warmbloods: Book three in the Underland Chronicles

Gregor and the Marks of Secret: Book Four in the Underland Chronicles

Gregor and the Code of Claw: Book five in the Underland Chronicles

City of Ember by Jeanne DuPrau

The Game of Sunken Places by M.T. Anderson

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland by Lewis Carroll

The Dark is Rising series by Susan Cooper

Inkheart by Corneila Funke

Redwall by Brian Jacques

The Guardians of Ga'Hoole series by Kathryn Lasky

The Keys to the Kingdom series by Garth Nix

Eragon by Christopher Paolini

His Dark Materials Trilogy by Philip Pullman

<http://www.multcolib.org/talk/guides-gregor.html>

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<http://www.suzannecollinsbooks.com/>