

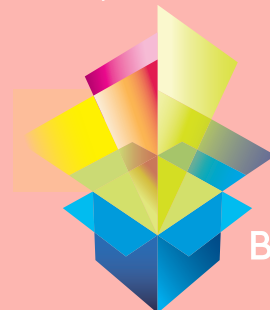


# U STUDY GUIDE

From the **John VanDuzer Children's Film Collection**

Prepared by:

CERI EVANS, B.A., Grad. Dip. Ed. (Australia)



Now in production

Reitman Square  
350 King St. W.  
Toronto, Canada

**BELL LIGHTBOX**  
FOR THE LOVE OF FILM  
[belllightbox.ca](http://belllightbox.ca)

# Table of Contents

Message to the Educator .....	3
Synopsis .....	3
Grade Recommendation .....	4
Themes and Topics .....	4
Curriculum Links.....	4
Focusing Questions.....	5
Pre-Screening Preparation.....	5
Discussion Question.....	5
Screening Activity .....	7
Post-Screening Activity.....	8
Suggested Extension Activity: Students Find a Mentor .....	9
Assignment Outline and Objective .....	10
Timeframe .....	10
Steps .....	11
Discussion Questions .....	12
Detailed Curriculum Applicability .....	13
Useful Websites.....	14
Appendix 1: Character Analysis Sheet (Student Handout).....	15

# Message to the Educator

The Youth Learning Department at the Toronto International Film Festival Group aims to provide children, youth and students with new academic opportunities and social experiences by introducing them to the language and power of the moving image. We are proud to introduce educators to the John VanDuzer Children's Film Collection. This initiative reflects our continuing commitment to educating and inspiring youth with the transformative powers of the moving image.

The collection, the first of its kind in the world, is empowered to purchase, archive and distribute the best children's and family films available from around the world. Developed with education experts, study guides accompany each film and are designed to address contemporary social issues and provide a wealth of synergistic programming with the Ontario Ministry of Education. For more information, please visit [reellearning.ca](http://reellearning.ca), our online film-literacy resource for educators.

## Synopsis

*U*

**Country of Origin:** France

**Release Year:** 2006

**Original Language:** French

**Director:** Grégoire Solotareff and Serge Elissalde

**Runtime:** 75 minutes

From Grégoire Solotareff, France's premiere children's author, comes *U*, a film that follows the life of two friends who experience love, friendship and growing up.

First we meet Mona (Isild Le Besco), an orphaned princess who lives in a crumbling castle by the sea. She is miserable and lonely, mistreated by a hectoring pair of guardian rats. When lonely little Mona weeps after cutting her finger, *U* (Vahina Giocante), a female unicorn, appears to console her. *U* insists she's not a guardian angel, just a friend who will stick with Mona to help her through life and assure her happiness.

Fast-forward a few years, and Mona has grown into a winsome preteen. One day *U* brings home a lively lizard named Lazare (Guillaume Gallienne) who introduces Mona and *U* to his family, a motley clan of musicians living in a tree near the castle. Despite others' insistence that Lazare and his itinerant kin move on, Mona asserts her royal authority for the first time and demands that they stay. Mona loves the music and merriment that Lazare's family brings, and soon begins to fall for the young guitarist, Kulka. *U* worries that she may lose her friend if Mona finds true happiness with Kulka.

In collaboration with co-director Serge Elissalde, a highly acclaimed animator, and the great French singer Sanseverino (who provides the voice of Kulka), the renowned Solotareff creates a world of smart talk, expressive characters and extraordinary visual images.

**Note to the Educator:** Grégoire Solotareff, the writer and art director of *U*, was a practising physician before he became a writer and illustrator, and doesn't believe in being condescending to children. In an interview published in the film's companion guide, Solotareff asserts:

“I've often been told that I address my children in a somewhat adult fashion, but children are not diminutive adults. They're people you need to talk to, and even though they may not understand everything and some words may be lost on them, it doesn't really matter as long as it inspires emotion in them.”

Teachers should be advised that the film explores the mature themes of love and sexuality both implicitly (through symbolism, metaphor and innuendo) and explicitly (through direct references in speech). The presentation and exploration of these themes provides teachers with a means to address these issues with their students should they wish. Also, teachers can use this film to engage students in critical discussions on acceptable, appropriate and effective means of talking to youth about sensitive issues such as love and sex, as presented in *U*.

## Grade Recommendation

Grades 7 to 12

The curriculum for this film has been written for secondary grades. However, it could also be adapted to meet course requirements of Grade 7 and above for students in a French immersion programme.

## Themes and Topics

Friendship, mentorship, coming of age, innocence, sexuality, symbolism, animation

## Curriculum Links

This lesson plan can help teachers meet the curriculum requirements for the Media sections of ENG1P/D, ENG2P/D, ENG3C/U and ENG4C/U, as well as the curriculum requirements for the Healthy Living and Living Skills sections of PPL1O and PPL2O. Please refer to the detailed curriculum applicability table at the end of this guide for a more comprehensive list of the particular criteria within each subject toward which the film can be applied.

## Focusing Questions

1. What is a symbol? What are the symbols in *U* and what do they represent?
2. What is the narrative style of *U*? What are the advantages and disadvantages of animated film? Does the animation help or hinder *U*'s message?
3. How effective is the characterization in the film?
4. What is a mentor? Who do you know who would make a good mentor for you?

## Pre-Screening Preparation

The film *U* is written by French children's writer and illustrator Grégoire Solotareff. Solotareff has said that the inspiration for the film came from a childhood visit to the Cluny Museum, where he saw the Lady and the Unicorn tapestries and was struck by the image of the unicorn. Years later, Solotareff learned that the unicorn was traditionally the symbol for "the protection of young maidens," and decided to write *U*.

It is important, therefore, for students to understand what a symbol is before the commencement of the film. Teachers should locate a number of common, everyday symbols and either draw, cut and paste, or describe them on an overhead. (Some suggestions include washroom signs, road signs, wedding rings, flags, a skull and crossbones, the peace sign and the no-smoking sign.) Uncover the symbols one by one to the students and ask them to explain what each of the symbols means. Once the students have worked their way through the list, ask them if they know the term to classify all of these pictures/items. If the students are unfamiliar with the term or fail to suggest it, write "Symbol" on the blackboard and ask students to attempt to define the word in light of the recent exercise.

## Discussion Question

Why are symbols useful in a culture?

Explain to students that symbols are prominent in narrative texts. The difference between narrative and everyday symbols is that the symbols in literature can have both a literal and a symbolic function. A common example is the Biblical story of Noah's Ark. After the earth has been flooded, Noah sends out a dove to search for land, and the bird returns with an olive twig in its beak to notify Noah that there is land nearby. The dove not only plays the literal role of the bird in search of land, but also plays the symbolic role of peace (signalling that God's wrath with humankind is over and He no longer wants to keep the earth submerged in water). Ask students if they can recall any other stories involving symbols. Draw up a list on the blackboard of common recurring symbols in literature. (Suggestions may include the following: dove = peace and hope; spring = birth and youth; rose = love and beauty, etc.) Inform students that the film they are about to watch involves a unicorn called *U* who plays both a literal and a symbolic role in the story. Ask students to brainstorm what a unicorn could represent – fantasy, romance, beauty, grace,

strength, power, medicine (some fairy tales suggest that a unicorn's horn is an antidote for poison), etc. Inform students that the writer wanted the unicorn to represent "the protection of [a] maiden." Ask students to write down ideas of what the "maiden" in the story could need protecting from. Ask students to support their ideas. For example, some students may suggest a dragon because both unicorns and dragons are usually found in fantasy stories. Also, ask students to predict what the format and genre of the film will be (e.g., live-action, animation, drama, comedy or tragedy). Ask them to justify these predictions. Once students have had some time to think about their predictions and write them down, encourage them to share their ideas with the class. Inform students that the film is an animated drama-comedy about growing up. Draw students' attention to the fact that the writer chose to present this story in an animated format. What other animated films have students seen or heard of recently? (Suggestions should hopefully range from children's Disney films to more serious adult films like *Persepolis*.) Ask students to think of the advantages and disadvantages of this medium for filmmakers. Draw a T-chart on the blackboard and ask students to volunteer their suggestions. (Potential advantages: animated films can more easily incorporate elements of fantasy; films seem more "innocent" because graphic acts, such as violence, seem less real and are therefore less offensive. Potential disadvantages: the films' subjects may be taken less seriously because the animated characters seem less real than human portrayals.)

When asked how different *U* is from other animated films, Grégoire Solotareff, the film's writer, states:

"All I know is that from the outset, I've meant to make a psychological drama for children rather than an actioner filled with car chases and goodies vs. baddies stuff. What I like is human relationships. In my work as an illustrator, I like to portray characters. At the end of the day the film has remained true to this, and that may well be what's original about it. The action is purely psychological. My children have often asked me questions about death, separation, love. I've never avoided answering them – quite the contrary, I've been willing to talk about those issues, but I didn't want to sound gloomy or corny. Life is life. I've often been told that I address my children in a somewhat adult fashion, but children are not diminutive adults. They're people you need to talk to, and even though they may not understand everything and some words may be lost on them, it doesn't really matter as long as it inspires emotion in them. I believe in stories – that's all there is to it. We all feed on them, whether we're children or adults. The film's mostly a love story, and love stories are eternal – they begin at a very early age, even at three years old, in their romantic dimension ... I like coming-of-age tales because they involve the exploration of like and the loss of innocence. I'm interested in such turning points – and that is what the film is about."

Share Solotareff's quote with the students and ask for their thoughts in response, particularly on how Solotareff describes his relationship with his children. Ask students if

they feel that adults misunderstand how they need to be spoken to. Have they ever felt that an adult has assumed they know or understand less about an issue than they really do? Are there issues they wish adults would be more direct with them about?

Inform students that the film *U* is a coming-of-age story about a girl named Mona who discovers love. Inform them that although the story retains some elements that are designed to appeal to children (most notably the cartoon format), some of the issues regarding growing up and experiencing first love are treated in a very open and mature way.

## Screening Activity

Ask students to make a note of all the symbols they notice in the film. Students should note both the literal and the symbolic role that each symbol plays in the story.

Ask students to also consider the following questions while watching the film:

1. What objects/issues/events are addressed explicitly (directly) in the film? What objects/issues/events are addressed implicitly through symbolism?\*
2. Why do you think the filmmakers address some things more directly than others?
3. Do you think it is more effective for the filmmakers to present the issues explicitly or implicitly? Why?
4. Was there any symbolism in the film that you felt was ineffective? Why?
5. Given the sometimes sensitive nature of the film's subject, do you think the animated format of the film works? Why or why not?

Immediately after viewing the film, discuss these questions with students.

**\*Note to teacher:** Most students will notice some of the sexualized symbols in *U* (e.g., the cherry buns that Mama, from the Yeah-Yeahs, feeds to His Lordship). Do not discourage students from pointing out this symbolism – it was, after all, a conscious decision for the filmmakers to include it. Ask students to offer suggestions as to why the filmmakers would choose to make some sexual references in such an obvious but indirect way.

## Post-Screening Activity

Remind students of the Solotareff quote that they read before the screening of the film. Does the film do justice to the themes of growing up and experiencing love for the first time? Why or why not? Draw students' attention to the lines in the quote where Solotareff talks about the characterization in the film:

“I’ve meant to make a psychological drama for children rather than . . . goodies vs. baddies stuff. What I like is human relationships. . . . I like to portray characters. . . . The action is purely psychological.”

Ask students to explain what they think Solotareff means by this. How effective is the characterization in the film? Can they relate to any of the characters? Which ones? Why? If students comment on the fact that the characters are animals, write the word “anthropomorphic” on the blackboard and explain that this word describes animals and objects that assume human-like qualities in stories. Ask students to suggest other stories where the characters have possessed human-like characteristics despite being animals or objects. Why might writers use anthropomorphic characterization?

Hand out the Character Analysis Sheet (appendix 1) and ask students to complete it. Lead a discussion on the characterization in the film:

1. Are the characters believable?
2. What traits do the characters possess that make them easy to relate to? What traits do they possess that make them difficult to relate to?
3. How does each character contribute to the film’s message? How would the film be different without him or her?

Conclusion: Use this film and discussion to compare and contrast the characterization in other texts studied in class.

## Suggested Extension Activity: Students Find a Mentor

The character of U is interesting for various reasons: she looks, sounds and – on occasions – behaves like a little girl, yet she is over 5,000 years old and the moral anchor, adviser and confidante for the character of Mona. When Mona comes of age, falls in love with Kulka and starts to attain her independence, U physically begins to shrink to emphasize the diminishing role she is playing in Mona’s life. While U’s symbolic role as the protector of young Mona has already been identified, it is important to note how U’s character also demonstrates effective mentorship.

Exploring the idea of mentorship is a good conclusion to the study of *U*, considering the film’s objective to provide an honest portrayal of relationships and people. Students should aim to find a mentor who will provide them with the same honesty and directness that the filmmakers tried to incorporate into the film.

Ask students to brainstorm the definition of the word “mentor.” Assist students in developing a definition that includes the qualities of a mentor. Some suggestions are listed below.

**Mentor:** a good listener; someone who can empathize with you; someone who can see things from your point of view; someone who opens up your mind to new ideas and perspectives; someone who motivates you; someone who helps you get excited about your possibilities; someone who helps you identify your options; someone with whom you have a good rapport; someone with whom there is mutual respect; someone with more life experience and knowledge than you, etc.

Once an adequate definition has been constructed, point out the mentor role that U played in Mona’s life. Was U an effective mentor? Why or why not? At the end of the film, why did U encourage Mona to let her go? Was that the right encouragement to give? Did Mona need U’s mentorship by the end of the film?

Ask students to raise a hand if they have a mentor or have been a mentor. Ask those students to describe the relationship they have with their mentor and to explain how their mentor mentors them. Did they benefit from this relationship? If so, how? If not, explain why.

Ask those students who did not raise their hands if they wish they had a mentor.

- Why or why not?
- For those students who do wish to have a mentor, what role would they like their mentor to play in their life?
- Is there one aspect of their life (e.g., school, work, friends) that they would like a mentor to help them with?

- Would they want a mentor who is direct with them about issues or a mentor who “sugar coats” and handles issues more sensitively?
- Would students like a mentor who allows them to make mistakes or a mentor who intervenes and prevents them from making mistakes?
- Would they like a mentor who is their peer or someone who is a bit older?
- Why are these qualities important to students in the selection of a mentor?

For those students who claim they do not wish to have a mentor, ask them why not. Do they feel they do not need one?

Explain to students that they are going to explore the idea of mentorship by locating a mentor and organizing at least two sessions with that person. Outline the procedure of the mentorship assignment with students.

## Assignment Outline and Objective

Students will organize two sessions (approximately 30 minutes each) over the course of eight weeks with a person who they believe will be an effective mentor for them. In the first session, students will describe an aspect of their life that they would like to improve, and mentors will offer some advice on how students can improve that situation. In the second session, students will return to their mentors and discuss how successful the implementation of their advice was. Students will write a reflective journal before and after each visit with their mentor and will submit this journal to their teacher after their second meeting. This assignment will not only help students identify an area of personal development for themselves, but will also provide them with an exercise in time management, diplomacy, interpersonal skills and self-reflection.

## Time Frame

- Two weeks for students to identify, contact and confirm a mentor
- Two weeks for students to organize their first consultation with the mentor
- Four weeks after their initial consultation, students revisit their mentor

## Steps

**Step One:** Students must identify what area they would like a mentor to help with. Is there one aspect of their life that they feel can be improved? What is it? Some suggestions include personal relationships, school, work, confidence, health, spirituality, personal development (e.g., improving public speaking or leadership skills), emotional development (e.g., anger management, overcoming shyness) or family relationships. Students should each be provided with a journal to document their mentorship experience. Ask them to write a paragraph explaining why they would like to be mentored in this particular aspect of their life.

**Step Two:** Students need to identify someone in their life (not a parent or sibling) who could be an effective mentor for them on this issue. It could be a peer, a neighbour, a family friend, a religious leader, a guidance counsellor, a teacher. Ask students to write in their journal why they think this person will be a good mentor for them.

**Step Three:** Students must determine the most appropriate method of approaching this person and asking him or her to be their mentor. How well the student knows this person will probably determine the medium for communication. If the student does not know the person well, a more formal approach might be best (such as a letter or email); if the student knows the person very well, it might be more appropriate for the student to ask the person face to face or by phone. Students must be prepared to explain the mentorship assignment to this person (i.e., what it entails from the mentor, why the student selected this person to be a mentor and what the student wants mentoring about).

**Step Four:** Students prepare for their initial meeting with the mentor. What information do they need to share with their mentor before they seek advice and guidance? Students write a journal entry describing how they feel in anticipation of the meeting, what they hope to get out of the experience, etc.

**Step Five:** Students contact their mentor and set up a date and time to meet for the initial consultation.

**Step Six:** Students meet with their mentor and document the conversation as best they can in their journal. Students should be sure to write down some advice that their mentor gives them, including a list of things they can do to change, grow or improve. Students and mentors decide on the date and time of their follow-up meeting (it should be approximately four weeks after the first meeting). After the meeting, students write another journal entry describing how they feel about the meeting with their mentor and the advice that they received.

**Step Seven:** Students try to follow the advice of their mentor for four weeks. Students should keep track of their experiences during this time in their journals.

**Step Eight:** Students and mentors meet for the follow-up session. Students tell their mentor what they have done over the past four weeks and the changes that have occurred as a result. The mentor should provide feedback and perhaps offer further suggestions on how the student can continue to improve. After the meeting, students write another journal entry describing how they feel about the meeting with their mentor and the feedback and advice that they received.

**Step Nine:** Students submit their journal to their teacher. If students feel that any section of the journal is too personal to share, they have the right to cover the pages up so that the teacher will know not to read them.

**Step Ten:** Once the entire class has completed the assignment, the teacher should lead the class in a discussion about the mentorship experience.

## Discussion Questions

1. Did you feel that your mentor was helpful? Why or why not? Will you continue to meet with your mentor now that the project is complete?
2. Did the experience change some aspect of your life in any way?
3. What did you learn from the experience?
4. Is there anything you would change about the experience if you were to do it again?
5. If you were to mentor someone in a younger grade, what kind of mentor would you be? What would you do differently from your mentor? What would you do the same?

# Detailed Curriculum Applicability

Below is a list of selected subjects that relate to issues raised in the film, including the particular strand of that course to which the film can be applied and the criteria that has to be addressed.

Subject	Strand	Expectations
Grade 9, 10, 11 and 12 English	Understanding Media Texts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explain how both simple and complex media texts are created to suit particular purposes and audiences.</li> <li>• Interpret simple and complex media texts, identifying and explaining the overt and implied messages they convey.</li> <li>• Evaluate how effectively information, ideas, issues and opinions are communicated in both simple and complex media texts and decide whether the texts achieve their intended purpose.</li> <li>• Identify and explain different audience responses to selected media texts.</li> <li>• Identify the perspectives and/or biases evident in both simple and complex media texts and comment on any questions they may raise about beliefs, values and identity.</li> </ul>
	Understanding Media Forms, Conventions and Techniques	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify general characteristics of several different media forms and explain how they shape content and create meaning.</li> <li>• Identify several different conventions and/or techniques used in familiar media forms and explain how they convey meaning and influence their audience.</li> </ul>
Grade 9 Health and Physical Education	Healthy Living	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify the factors that contribute to positive relationships with others.</li> </ul>
	Decision Making	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify short- and long-term goals for personal growth.</li> <li>• Analyze the impact of media and culture on decision making.</li> <li>• Produce a sequential action plan to achieve personal goals related to new situations.</li> <li>• Explain the reasoning for personal choices and actions related to health and well-being.</li> </ul>
Grade 10 Healthy, Active Living Education	Decision Making	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify short- and long-term goals for personal growth.</li> </ul>

## Useful Websites

<http://www.primaline.com/u/index.html>

<http://www.siff.net/festival/film/detail.aspx?id=22290&FID=32>

# Appendix 1: Character Analysis Sheet (Student Handout)

Complete the following table to describe the characters in the film *U*, then answer the questions that follow.

Character	Appearance	Personality	Attitudes	Relationships with others
<b>U</b> the unicorn				
<b>Mona</b> the dog				
<b>Kulka</b> the cat				
<b>Lazare</b> the lizard				
<b>Mama</b> the rabbit				
<b>His Lordship</b> the male rat				
<b>Goomi</b> the female rat				

Answer the following questions:

Which character did you find the most or least interesting? Why?

---

---

---

A stereotype is a set of widely held assumptions that people have about a particular social group. In the space below, write down any stereotypes that you feel were shown in the film. (For example, Mona may be considered a stereotypical teenager because she cares so much about her appearance.) How do you feel about these stereotypes?

---

---

---

Which relationship between two characters in the film did you find the most or least convincing? Why?

---

---

---

Currently under construction in downtown Toronto, Bell Lightbox is soon to be the world's leading destination for film lovers. This major new cultural institution on the Canadian and international landscape will be structured around five state-of-the-art cinemas celebrating film from around the world. Bell Lightbox programming will give context to films through innovative cross-media exhibitions, lectures, and film-related learning opportunities for all ages. Designed by the innovative architecture firm KPMB, Bell Lightbox's fluid design encourages exploration, movement and play within its soaring atriums.

TIFFG is a charitable, not-for-profit cultural organization whose mission is to transform the way people see the world. Its vision is to lead the world in creative and cultural discovery through the moving image.