



TEACHER GUIDE

GRADES 6-8

COMPREHENSIVE CURRICULUM BASED LESSON PLANS

The Secret School

Avi

READ, WRITE, THINK, DISCUSS AND CONNECT

The Secret School

Avi

TEACHER GUIDE

NOTE:

The trade book edition of the novel used to prepare this guide is found in the Novel Units catalog and on the Novel Units website. Using other editions may have varied page references.

Please note: We have assigned Interest Levels based on our knowledge of the themes and ideas of the books included in the Novel Units sets, however, please assess the appropriateness of this novel or trade book for the age level and maturity of your students prior to reading with them. You know your students best!

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Skills and Strategies

Comprehension

Predicting, cause/effect,
inference, drawing conclusions

Literary Elements

Character analysis, genre,
theme, similes, dialogue, plot
structure

Vocabulary

Context clues, definitions, parts
of speech, dictionary work,
glossary

Listening/Speaking

Discussion, oral presentation,
dramatizing, debate

Writing

Creative writing, journaling,
school schedule, radio program,
speech writing, events program,
sequel, alternate ending,
acrostic, letter, book review

Critical Thinking

Compare/contrast, decision-
making, summarizing, pros/cons

Across the Curriculum

Math—bar graphs; Science—
history of communication
(inventions), crystal radios;
Geography—topography and
location of Colorado,
mapmaking; Art—book cover,
illustrated bookmark, collage,
diorama; Architecture—
blueprint; History—one-room
schoolhouses, regulations for
teachers; Literature—
Julius Caesar, *McGuffey's Eclectic
Readers*

Genre: historical fiction

Setting: northwestern Colorado

Point of View: third person

Themes: value of education, determination, loyalty, responsibility, friendship

Conflict: person vs. person, person vs. society

Tone: humorous, serious, emotional

Date of First Publication: 2001

Summary

In 1925, the teacher of a rural, one-room Colorado school must leave before the end of the school year. In order to keep the school running and take the exams that will allow her to enter high school, 14-year-old Ida Bidson secretly takes the place of the teacher. Helping out on the family farm, teaching, and studying for the high-school exams become challenging for Ida as she struggles to make time for everything. When the school board finds out about the school, Ida must prove herself as a teacher and pupil. Ultimately, Ida's hard work and determination result in success for all the students.

About the Author

Born Edward Irving Wortis in New York in 1937, "Avi" was nicknamed by his twin sister when they were about a year old and has been known by this name ever since. Avi liked to doodle and draw as a child but had difficulties in school, due to what was later diagnosed as dysgraphia. This causes reversals of letters and misspellings. However, dysgraphia did not discourage Avi from writing. A tutor taught him the basics in writing the summer before his senior year in high school and encouraged his creativity. Avi also credits his family's love of reading as the foundation for his writing ability.

Avi attended Antioch University and later the University of Wisconsin in Madison, avoiding English classes and enrolling in playwriting classes. He worked a variety of odd jobs before securing a position in the theater collection of the New York Public Library. He earned his M.A. in Library Science by going to night school at Columbia University. Avi worked as a librarian for 25 years.

A friend who was writing a children's book asked Avi to illustrate it. The publisher, impressed with Avi's drawings, asked Avi to illustrate other children's books. Then Avi wrote his first book, *Things That Sometimes Happen*, which was rejected by six publishers before it was accepted. Avi continued writing and became very successful with such books as *Something Upstairs: A Tale of Ghosts*, *S.O.R. Losers*, *Nothing But the Truth*, *The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle*, and *Crispin: The Cross of Lead* (also the winner of the 2003 Newbery Medal).

Avi's books for children and young adults have been translated and published in more than ten countries. Several of his books have been adapted into plays, for radio shows, and into films. Avi currently lives in Denver, Colorado.

Chapters One–Three

Ida Bidson is an eighth-grade student at Elk Valley’s one-room school. In order to attend high school next year, Ida must pass the state examination. Unfortunately, the Elk Valley school’s teacher must leave in the middle of the school term to care for her sick mother. As a result, the district decides to suspend the school year, leaving Ida and her friend Tom no way to finish school. Tom suggests that Ida become the teacher so that all the students in the class will get credit for their year of schooling and she and Tom will be admitted to high school.

Vocabulary
throttle
privies
acknowledged
kerosene
stealthy
humiliated
pensively
conceded
glumly
mucked

Discussion Questions

1. How is Ida Bidson different than most 14-year-old girls? (*Ida is very responsible for a person her age. She drives herself and her brother Felix to school every day and is an extremely conscientious student. She often thinks about the future and having a career. She is respectful of her teacher and helps keep the other students in line. She is unusually perceptive of others' feelings. This makes her an excellent friend to Tom, sister to Felix, and pupil of Miss Fletcher.*)
2. Why do you think the setting of this novel is important? (*Since the novel is set in 1925, the situations, technology, sense of community, and opinions about the value and necessity of education will be significantly different than novels written about the present. Readers will learn about the difficult lifestyles of people in the 1920s.*

The rural setting is also important to the story, as it illuminates the hard work adults and even children were expected to perform on a daily basis. The setting also demonstrates the difficulty in travel that everyone faced since locations were so far apart from each other.)

3. How do the children know Miss Fletcher is about to give them bad news? What does this say about the relationship Miss Fletcher has with her students? (*She uses the word “grave,” does not smile, and does not greet them with “good morning.” The fact that the students can perceive something is wrong by Miss Fletcher’s words and body language shows that they know her very well. The student/teacher relationship must be very close.*)
4. How do you think Miss Fletcher feels about leaving the school? How can you tell? (*Miss Fletcher is saddened at having to leave the school. Also, she is being pulled in two directions at once, so she might have mixed emotions. On one hand, her mother has had a stroke and needs her. On the other hand, her students need her as well. The reader can tell that Miss Fletcher still cares about her students since she begs Mr. Jordan on their behalf not to close the school and apologizes to Ida for having to leave during her most critical year. She also encourages Ida to not give up.*)
5. How will Ida and Tom be affected by not finishing the school year? (*They will not be allowed to take the exit exams they need in order to qualify for high school. If the school year ends early, Ida and Tom will not get credit for the partial year they have completed. Their dream of going to Steamboat Springs High School will be unattainable.*)
6. As she looks out at Elk Valley, Ida feels that “the surrounding peaks [feel] like a cage” (p. 14). What does she mean by this? (*With seemingly little hope of getting a higher education, Ida feels she is trapped in Elk Valley and rural life.*)

7. Why does Ida feel this is her only chance to go to high school? (*Ida's parents have had a good year financially, and if Ida is accepted to high school this year, they might be able to afford to send her. Money is usually tight, and the family has no idea if the next year's crops will prove profitable; therefore, Ida feels that this is her one chance to leave the farm.*)
8. Discuss the pros and cons of Tom's idea that Ida become the teacher for the remainder of the school year. (*Answers will vary. Pros—Ida is certainly intelligent enough to do the job. She studies religiously and was Miss Fletcher's best pupil. She is responsible and willing to do the job. She might even be better able to help students since she is closer to being their peer than Miss Fletcher was. Ida teaching would allow the children to finish the school year and not have to repeat the work the next year. Ida and Tom would be able to take their exams for high school. Cons—Ida is not a trained teacher. Even if she has the ambition and knowledge to teach younger children, she does not know what teaching methods to use or exactly how to teach the concepts. Ida will have to carefully ration her time between teaching, studying, and chores at home. This might prove difficult and exhausting. Also, school officials might find out about the plan and decide to invalidate that year's credit anyway.*)
9. What chores does Ida perform at home? What does the description of Ida's work indicate about her character? (*Ida helps with the baby, mucks out the horse's stall, milks the cow, checks on the other animals, helps with laundry, and helps make dinner. All the work that Ida does at home indicates that she is a dedicated, thoughtful, and competent young person who is considerate of her family. The fact that Ida performs these chores and is able to stay at the top of her class in school suggests that Ida is a very mature and ambitious young person.*)
10. **Prediction:** How will Ida's class respond to her as their teacher?

Supplementary Activities

1. Literary Devices: Mr. Jordan is described as being "as miserly as a sleeping marmot" (p. 8). Choose a character from this section of the novel, and compare that person to an animal by describing his/her characteristics. (Examples: Ida is as wise as an owl; Mrs. Bidson is as hardworking as a beaver, etc.)
2. Architecture: On a poster or sheet of butcher paper, draw a blueprint of the one-room schoolhouse. Compare your blueprint with others'. What features differ between yours and your classmates' blueprints? (Some suggestions for features to include are the students' desks, teacher's desk, "library," stove, chalkboard, and wardrobes.)
3. Pros/Cons: Using the Pros and Cons chart on page 24 of this guide, list the advantages and disadvantages of attending a one-room school.
4. Venn Diagram: Use the Venn Diagram on page 25 of this guide to compare and contrast schools in the 1920s (like Ida's) with schools in the present.

Chapters Four–Seven

After considering Tom's idea, the other schoolchildren vote that Ida become the teacher of the "Secret School." On Miss Fletcher's last day, the students present her with a gift basket and bid her a sad goodbye. Ida reveals her plan to her father, who reminds her that the work on the farm comes first. Ida finds that classroom behavior, especially Herbert's, is her first challenge. However, Ida proves to be outwardly confident and organized while attempting to fill Miss Fletcher's shoes.

Vocabulary

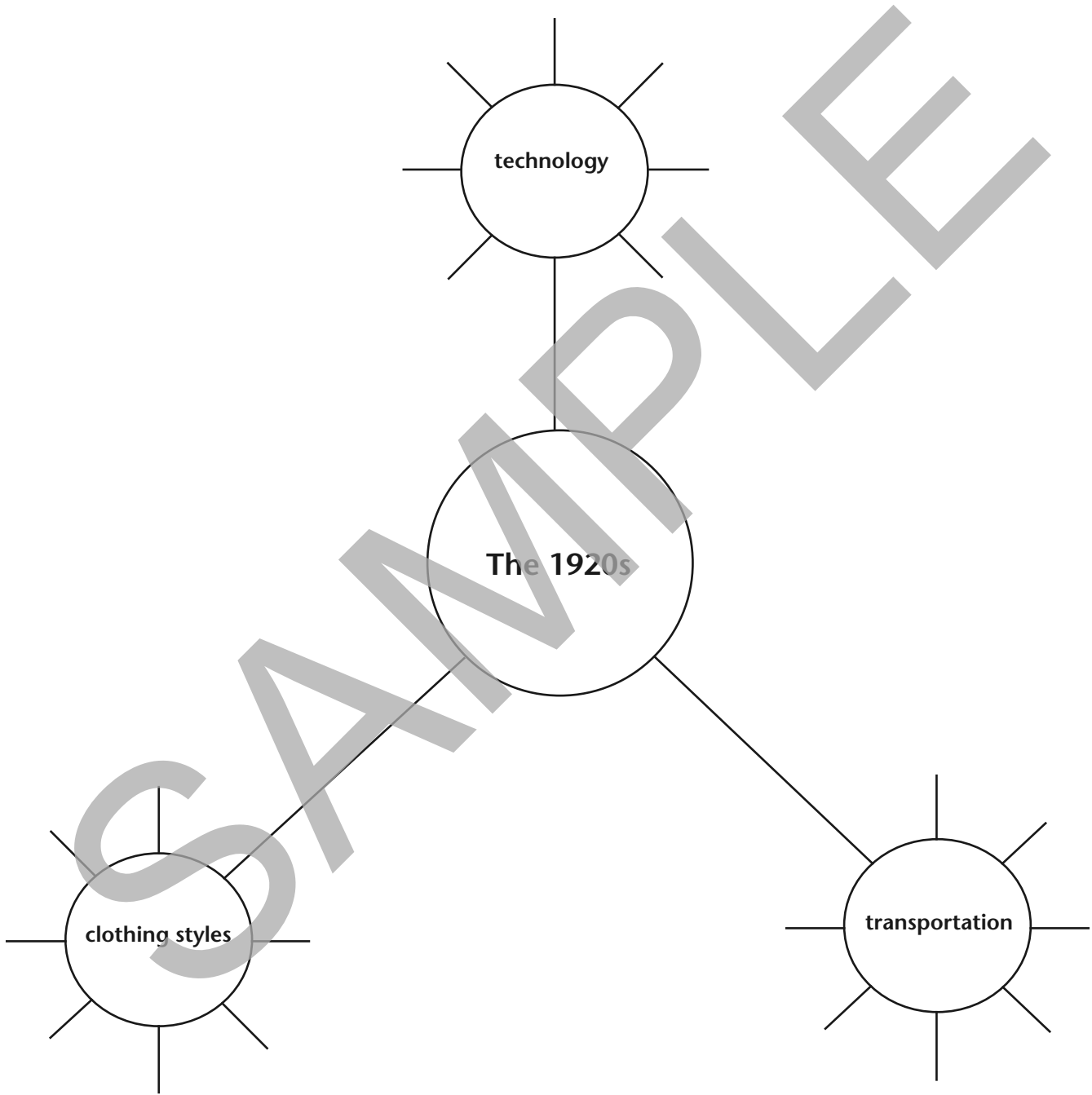
unconstitutional
notion
earnestly
rebraided
solemnly
recitation
reluctant
prim
akimbo
boisterous
parse
flippant

Discussion Questions

1. Why are Tom's parents angry that the school is closing for the year? *(Tom's parents are German immigrants who never got an education. They want Tom to have a better life than they did. Since they have had to work so hard for their money, they see Tom's education as a way for him to have a less stressful and more financially stable life.)*
2. Herbert says "there ain't no laws can force [me] to go to school" (p. 31). Why do you think children in 1925 weren't required to go to school? *(In 1925, many families like Ida's, Tom's, and Herbert's probably owned farms or some type of family business that provided for the family and required constant attention. Education was seen as secondary to working on the farm or in the family business. Children were needed as workers first. Also, children were often expected to grow up and take over the family business. Therefore, learning the trade they would practice for the rest of their lives trumped school. An education was incidental and often considered an unnecessary waste of time.)*
3. What are the children's reactions when they find out they will have to repeat a year of school? Do you think Mr. Jordan's ruling was fair? What do you think motivated his decision? *(The students are shocked and dismayed that they have wasted a year of schooling. Answers will vary, but most students will probably agree that Mr. Jordan's ruling was highly unfair. The children have worked hard in school and deserve credit for the work they did. The decision was probably financially motivated. Perhaps the school district didn't have enough money to hire a new teacher for Elk Valley.)*
4. What are the risks involved in starting the Secret School? *(The school board and Mr. Jordan do not know about it, so they could step in and halt the children's schooling at any time. Ida could get into trouble for posing as a teacher, and all of the children could get into trouble for breaking into the schoolhouse. If the school is discovered, Tom and Ida would probably not be allowed to take their high school entrance exams. Most of the children did not tell their parents about Ida taking over as the teacher, but the school is in danger of closing if any one of them lets it slip.)*
5. Describe the difference in Ida when she opens the school door. What are the other students' reactions, and why do they react this way? *(Ida has pinned her hair up, looks more mature, and speaks like a teacher. She alters her mannerisms and image to reflect those of a teacher. The other students laugh and whoop at the "changed" Ida because, for the moment, it seems as if she is just playing a part. When she shuts the door in their faces, however, they are surprised and immediately disperse as she instructed them.)*
6. What are Mr. Bidson's concerns about Ida's plan? Are his concerns reasonable? *(Mr. Bidson is concerned that the children won't be able to keep the school secret long enough to execute their plan, and this concern is certainly justified. Elk Valley is a small place, so a secret would be extremely difficult to keep. Also, many young children are involved, and they are probably more inclined to tell their parents the truth if pressed. Mr. Bidson's biggest concern is that Ida won't be able to handle the workload of farm chores, studying, and teaching. This concern is also justified since Ida would definitely have more responsibility than she had previously.)*

Attribute Web

Directions: Use the attribute web below to fill in any information you know about clothing styles, technology, and transportation in the 1920s.



Pros and Cons

Going to school in a one-room schoolhouse



Pros

Cons

Handwriting lines for notes:

Left side (under Pros): 8 horizontal lines.

Right side (under Cons): 8 horizontal lines.