

## Literature Circle Guide to *The Secret School* by Avi

### **Book Summary**

In 1925 a young girl, living in a remote Colorado town, held very little hope of getting an education. Fourteen-year-old Ida Benson is only a few months away from earning the coveted diploma that will secure her entry into high school when her one-room school is abruptly closed. Afraid that her dream of becoming a teacher is slipping away, Ida convinces the seven other students in grades 1-8 to vote to secretly keep the school open with her as the teacher. The role of teacher that seemed so easy when Miss Fletcher managed the class becomes a test of Ida's confidence and courage. Keeping the students engaged, risking the loss of her friendship with classmate Tom, keeping up with her own studies and farm chores, and eluding the local school board are just some of Ida's problems. As the days progress, Ida learns it takes more than lesson plans to be a good teacher, and she proves that she is up to the challenge.

### **Author Information**

#### **In Avi's own words**

I was born in New York City, along with a twin sister. I am five minutes older than Emily. It was Emily, for reasons no one knows — she certainly doesn't — who called me Avi. It stuck. It's the only name I use now.

My father was a doctor, and my mother, later on, became a social worker. Every night I was read to. Every Friday we were taken to the library. I always received at least one book for my birthday. I have a few of them yet. Early on, I had my own collection of books. I loved to read. Still do.

I came from a family of writers, artists, and musicians. And today we have all that, plus filmmakers, actors, and theater and TV directors. (Two of my sons are in the rock music world. The third is a journalist.) When we get together there is much talk, disagreement, and laughter.

Growing up in Brooklyn, I went to a public school, and sat in the same class with my sister until eighth grade. I hated that. My older brother was considered a genius. He isn't, but he did go to college at the age of 15. My sister was very smart too. Guess who wasn't thought to be that smart?

When I went to high school I wanted to be a designer of airplanes. But flunking out of the science high school brought me to a small private school that provided some of the attention I needed. I got it when an English teacher insisted I get some help with my writing.

I did get help, and that help led me to think that I might become a writer. I made up my mind to focus on this when I was 17 and a senior in high school.

I began by writing plays, and wrote a lot of bad ones. It was only when my eldest son, Shaun, was born, that I took to writing for kids. Since then, I've never written anything else. My first book was published in 1970. I've published over 30 books since then.

For some 25 years I worked as a librarian, first at the New York Public Library, then at Trenton State College in New Jersey. My life has always been with, around, and for books.

### **More about Avi**

"I want my readers to feel, to think, sometimes to laugh. But most of all I want them to enjoy a good read."

Though the topics and the style of Avi's books range widely, one common thread unites them: they are all invitingly readable, even to the most reluctant readers. Avi explains, "I take a great deal of satisfaction in using popular forms — the adventure, the mystery, the thriller — so as to hold my reader with the sheer pleasure of a good story."

Honored with the Newbery Medal for *Crispin: Cross of Lead* and a Newbery Honor for *Nothing but the Truth*, Avi is the acclaimed author of several works of historical fiction, including *The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle* and *The Man Who Was Poe*. Avi faced and overcame many difficulties in his effort to become a writer. He suffers from dysgraphia, a dysfunction in his writing abilities that causes him to reverse letters or misspell words. "In a school environment," Avi recalls, "I was perceived as being sloppy and erratic, and not paying attention." Still, in the face of unending criticism, Avi persevered. "I became immune to it," Avi says. "I liked what I wrote."

Now an award-winning author, Avi enjoys visiting schools. He identifies with children who are lonely, frustrated, and isolated. "I always ask to speak to the learning-disabled kids. They come in slowly, waiting for yet another pep talk, more instructions. Eyes cast down, they won't even look at me. Their anger glows. I don't say a thing. I lay out pages of my copy-edited manuscripts, which are covered with red marks. 'Look here,' I say, 'see that spelling mistake. There, another spelling mistake. Looks like I forgot to put a capital letter there. Oops! Letter reversal.' Their eyes lift. They are listening. And I am among friends."

### **Suggested Answers to Literature Circle Questions**

1. Why did Miss Fletcher stop teaching the school?  
**Miss Fletcher had to stop teaching and leave the school because her mother, who lived in Iowa, had become ill and she was leaving to tend to her (pg. 9).**
2. How did Ida change her appearance to transform into the teacher? What other changes does she make to step into her new role?

**Ida changed her appearance by putting her hair up with hairpins given to her by her mother (pgs. 28 and 41). She also insisted that all the children call her Miss Bidson (pg. 47) and she did not partake in recess anymore (pg. 55).**

3. What does Tom want to be when he grows up? What device does he make and bring to school?

**When Tom grows up, he would like to become an electric specialist (pg. 130). Tom brings a crystal radio to school that he constructed himself (pg. 61).**

4. Why do the children decide they have to keep the school a secret?

**The children decide to keep the school a secret because they believe that the school board would not approve of Ida taking the role of the teacher (pg. 33).**

5. How does Ida know that the Bixlers have a "poor farm"? What does she see that tells her that? Compare it with the Kohls' farm.

**Ida knew the Bixlers had a poor farm because the house was small, worn from weather, and unpainted. The truck was rusty, without wheels, and the other two pieces of farm equipment were quite rusty. The swing had fallen down with only rope remaining. The barn had lopsided doors which made them appear to always be open, and there was a general sense of disorder about the place (pgs. 83-84). Ida compared the shabby Bixler farm to the neat and tidy Kohl farm. At the Kohl farm, all of the buildings, fences, and machinery were in good order (pg. 87).**

6. If you were Ida, would you be more worried about passing your exams or being the teacher? What are the consequences of failing at each one?

**Ida's dream is to become a teacher and not a sheep farmer (pg. 16), and in order to accomplish this desire, she will have to pass her exams and go on to high school. Ida realizes that while she needs to concentrate on her studies to pass the exams, it has become her responsibility to make sure that the entire school passes their exams (pg. 74). So have your students think about the fact that if Ida focuses only on her students, she might fail her own exams and suffer the consequence of never making it off her family farm. While on the other hand, if she focuses only on her herself, her pupils might not pass the exams and the consequence would be a sense of failure and guilt that Ida would have to bear for the rest of her life.**

7. How does Ida make Herbert behave on her first day of teaching? How else could she have made him behave? Why doesn't she use the same method as Miss Fletcher?

**Miss Fletcher used an aspen switch for discipline (pg. 7), but Ida did not want to use the switch because that was not the type of discipline she believed in and she believed that Herbert would fight back if she chose this method of discipline (pg. 52). Instead Ida accuses Herbert of being lazy and rallies the students to vote Herbert out of the school if he interferes with their studies (pgs. 53-54).**

8. Compare Herbert's attitude towards Ida at the beginning and at the end of the book. What evidence can you find that his feelings have changed?  
**At the beginning of the book, Herbert lives up to his reputation of a trouble maker and challenges Ida in class (pgs. 53-54), continues to be absent often, and does not work very hard while he is in school (pg. 75). But after Ida pays a visit to Herbert's home, he begins to show up to school more often (pg. 93), confides in Ida about the difficulties he has with his father (115-119), and confides in Ida about his dreams of joining the navy (pg. 151).**
9. Why doesn't Ida go to recess when she first starts teaching? How might the students have behaved differently if she had gone to recess in the beginning?  
**Ida does not take recess when she first starts teaching because teachers never take recess with their students (pg. 55). The students might not have been able to see Ida as an authority in the classroom if she continued to play with them at recess.**
10. What does Tom mean when he tells Ida "don't go forgetting who you are? It'll make it harder for you. And your friends"? Does Ida "forget" who she is?  
**Because Ida was thrown in the position of authority as the teacher, she had to adjust her behavior to fit the situation. She now had to be the one to discipline students, plan lessons, and help the school to succeed. Tom just wants her to remember that she was not completely prepared for this position and that she should not isolate herself from her peers, or forget that she is young too and needs to act like a child at times.**
11. How would the story be different if Ida's parents believed that girls didn't need an education? What if they had told her she couldn't go to high school next year?  
**If Ida's parents believed that girls didn't need an education then Ida would not be worried about passing her exams to go to high school and the school would probably have shut down for the school year. Her parents do support her getting an education, even though it will be a great economic strain on their farm to board her in Steamboat Springs in order to attend high school (pg. 16). If Ida's parents had told her that she couldn't go to high school next year, she might try and figure out a way to escape Elk City on her own, or she might try to convince her parents to send her as soon as they could.**
12. If you had the same choice as Ida, would you have become the teacher? If you were a student there, would you have voted to keep the school open? Why or why not?  
**Have your students consider that Ida is living in 1925, and that there were not many different career options for women to choose from. Consider the greater historical context of women's suffrage, immigration, and the tenuous economic period, and have your students think about the opportunities available to women, men, and children. The students could investigate the history of public education in the United States and the pros and cons of children attending school. For example, Herbert Bixler's father does not want him to attend school for fear that he will become "uppity" (pg. 115) while Tom's parents place great**

value on education and want him to go to high school so that he can become something different from what they are (pg. 29).

13. Who do you think learns more in the Secret School, Ida or her students? What extra lessons did she learn from becoming the teacher?

**Have your students think of the myriad ways that both Ida and her students learned at the Secret School; through their experiment, both teacher and students learned more than reading, writing, and arithmetic, they also learned cooperation and that they have the power to accomplish their goals. Have your students consider what Ida had to think about in her work as a teacher: she had to assess each child's abilities in the school and figure out how to help them to learn, she had to negotiate with adults and argue for her right to an education, and she had to learn a special lesson from Herbert, that one should not judge or underestimate another person.**

14. Do you think Ida eventually became a teacher? How do you think teaching the Secret School helped her make that decision? Do you think Herbert joined the Navy? How do you think going to the Secret School influenced Herbert's decision?

**Have your students think about both the positive and negative experiences that Ida had at the Secret School, and how those experiences might have affected her ideas about becoming a teacher. Have them discuss how Ida's life would change if she became a teacher and what her life would be like if she did not. Have them think about the same questions in regards to Herbert. Would Ida and Herbert be satisfied if they did not achieve their dreams?**

*Note: These literature circle questions are keyed to Bloom's Taxonomy: Knowledge: 1-3; Comprehension: 4-5; Application: 6-8; Analysis 9-10; Synthesis: 11; Evaluation 12-14.*

## **Activities**

1. Draw a scaled map of the town of Elk Valley, Colorado based on descriptions in the book. Include the school and the farms of the Bidsons', the Kohls' and the Bixlers'. Now take a survey of the students in your class and find out how far they travel to get to school. Make a scaled map of your town, with your school, and the houses of your classmates. Compare the two maps. Do you live closer to or farther from school than the children of the Secret School?

**Have your students work in groups to draw the map of Elk Valley and have discussions about why the maps might have been interpreted differently. When discussing the students mode of transport to school, discuss what changes have occurred in American towns, cities, and communities to bring about these differences between the student's school experiences compared to the student's at the Secret School. This would be a good opportunity to delve deeper into the time period. Groups could investigate different topics like transportation, education, government, or rights for men and women. Students could report back to the class orally or do a written report.**

2. Imagine your local school board was having a "real quiet" meeting to decide whether or not to close *your* school. What would you do to get the word out? What methods are available to you today that the children of 1925 didn't have?

**Divide your class into groups and have the different groups investigate communication in 1925: telephones, telegrams, newspapers, radio, and letters. Students can compare their research to the methods of communication today and discuss how these changes have altered the way people live.**

3. Would you like to go to a one-room school with mixed ages? Make a list of the advantages and disadvantages of such a school.

**This would be a good opportunity for a written report at the end comparing and contrasting the different schools: one room vs. the larger schools that public education offers today; students could also do opinion pieces on which school might make a better educational model.**