

# **The Secret School Study Guide**

**The Secret School by Avi (author)**

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# Plot Summary

This novel for young people is the story of a group of schoolchildren in Colorado in the 1920s, who take matters into their own hands and educate themselves when their school is temporarily closed. As fourteen-year-old temporary teacher Ida and her fellow students struggle to keep their secret and continue their education, the narrative also explores issues relating to the power of perseverance and the importance of self-reliance.

On what seems to be a normal school day, the intelligent and academically ambitious Ida is shocked to discover that because of their teacher suddenly being called away, all the classes at the local school are being cancelled. Ida worries that the closure, six weeks before the end of the school year, will mean she will be unable to take an important series of exams that would, if she passed them, enable her to go on to high school and then to college. When the opinionated chairman of the school board (Mr. Jordan) suggests that education isn't necessary for young women and refuses to bring in a substitute teacher, at the suggestion of her good friend Tom, Ida agrees to take over the teaching of the school herself.

After successfully confronting a couple of initial challenges, Ida soon settles into an effective routine. She struggles to maintain a balance between her classroom duties and her responsibilities on the family farm, but she has the support of both her parents and the rest of the students and is able to keep going. One day, however, a representative from the county education office (Miss Sedgwick) arrives, and Ida is forced to reveal to her the nature of the situation. Miss Sedgwick goes away to consider her options, eventually returning a couple of weeks later with a decision - that the school can continue running as it is, but only if everyone agrees and only if everyone passes an exam at the end of the year. Ida and the students nervously agree.

The last few weeks of the term are taken up with frantic studying by all the students and an exhausting routine of chores, teaching and studying for Ida. As the date appointed by Miss Sedgwick for the exams approaches, however, Mr. Jordan discovers what the students have been secretly doing, and shuts down the school. For a while Ida is in despair, but when she learns that Mr. Jordan is arranging a meeting to shut down the school permanently and that only those parents who oppose the school are being invited, she resolves to confront him, and with Tom's help, she prepares herself, the other students, and the community.

On the night of the meeting, Mr. Jordan is surprised to see how many people are there, and is equally surprised when most of the people present seem inclined to support Ida, who speaks with eloquent passion of why she and the other students are doing what they're doing. Mr. Jordan and the board agree that the school can stay open, but only under certain conditions. Ida and the other students, as well as the members of the community, all agree, and Ida's frantic routine continues.



On the day of the exams, Miss Sedgwick returns to supervise their writing. At first Ida is somewhat nervous for both herself and her students, but is quickly able to settle down and get focused. A week later, the exam results arrive and Ida is thrilled to learn that not only has she passed, but that all her students but one have also passed. Ida is equally thrilled with Miss Sedgwick's offer to let Ida stay with her while she is away from home in high school.

The novel concludes with Ida, having been congratulated by her parents for her success, preparing for a busy summer of work on the farm before she goes off to achieve her dream of a high school education in the fall.



# Chapters 1 and 2

## Chapters 1 and 2 Summary

This novel for young people is the story of a group of schoolchildren in Colorado in the 1920s who take matters into their own hands and educate themselves when their school is temporarily closed. As fourteen-year-old temporary teacher Ida and her fellow students struggle to keep their secret and continue their education, the narrative also explores issues relating to the power of perseverance and the importance of self-reliance.

Chapter 1 - "On a cool Monday morning in early April, 1925", Ida drives her family's Model T Ford to school, her little brother Felix working the various pedals on the car's floor. When she and Felix get out of the car, they meet their fellow classmates, and in particular Ida's best friend Tom, the only other eighth grader besides Ida in the one room schoolhouse. Conversation between Ida and her classmates reveals that Mr. Jordan, the chairman of the school board, has come to the school for an unknown reason. The teacher, Miss Fletcher, comes out and, without her usual friendly greeting, hurries the students into school.

Once the children are all in their places, Mr. Jordan tells them that because Miss Fletcher has been called to the far-away bedside of her ill mother, and because the school board has decided to not hire a new teacher with only a month and a half left in the year, classes will be canceled once Miss Fletcher leaves in a couple of days. The worried Tom and Ida ask what will happen to their graduation exams, with Ida particularly concerned that not taking the exams will mean she can't go on to high school, and from there to college to become a teacher. Mr. Jordan tells her that sometimes life is inconvenient and she has to learn how to deal with that. He also tells her to think less about herself and more about the troubles of Miss Fletcher, adding that he doesn't think a young woman needs much education anyway. After Mr. Jordan leaves, Ida tells Miss Fletcher that she is indeed sorry to hear about her mother, but that she (Ida) is desperate to continue her education. Miss Fletcher tells Ida she did everything she could to keep the school open, but the board insisted. She then directs the students to start class ...

Chapter 2 - During recess, Ida and Tom discuss what Mr. Jordan said, with Tom saying he could always study the electronics course he wants to take through correspondence, and Ida feeling frustrated by the whole situation and saying there's no other way for her to realize her dream of becoming a teacher. Both of them feel hemmed in by the mountains. Miss Fletcher calls Ida in from recess for a chat, and again apologizes for what has happened. Ida again offers her condolences for what happened to Miss Fletcher's mother, and explains that it's particularly important for her to write the exams this year because it's been a good year on the farm and her family might actually be able to afford to board her while she goes to teacher's college. At that point, she realizes that Tom has been listening to the conversation. Miss Fletcher calls an end to recess,



and the other students come back in. At the end of the day, as Ida and Felix are getting ready to drive home, Tom suggests that since Ida wants to be a teacher so much and because she's so smart, she should teach the rest of the term. Ida dismisses the idea, but Tom insists she think about it. After Ida and Felix get the car going and head for home, she starts to wonder.

## Chapters 1 and 2 Analysis

This opening section introduces the central characters, situations and themes vividly and with economy. From her very first appearance, protagonist Ida is portrayed as spirited and determined, with her skills and fast thinking while driving the family car at fourteen, foreshadowing occasions later in the narrative, such as the encounter with Herbert that occurs in Chapter 7 in which she thinks and acts with the same sort of instinctive cleverness and insight. It's important to note, however, that she is also portrayed as sensitive, compassionate, and just a little bit insecure - in short, with characteristics that establish the potential for inner conflict in the same way as the appearance of Mr. Jordan and his speech clearly establish the potential for external conflict.

The book's central themes are also established here, as Ida's every action, here and throughout the book, defined by a determination and need to continue her education. Here it's important to note that the narrative never explains why, exactly, she wants to be a teacher so badly. She only knows that she does, and that she's prepared to go to considerable lengths to get it. In this, in Ida's character (i.e., her desires) and her actions, the narrative both explores and comments on all three of its primary themes - the importance of self-reliance, the importance of perseverance, and the importance of education, all of which are particularly important in the face of such strong circumstantial and opinionated opposition from the vividly antagonistic Mr. Jordan, who is a hissable villain if ever there was one.

Finally, there are a couple of writing elements worth noting. For the most part, the book's narrative style is straightforward and unadorned but there are, on a couple of notable occasions, good examples of metaphor and symbolism. One occurs in this section, specifically in the quote from p. 15, in which the imagery here clearly evokes how both Ida and Tom feel the mountains are confining them in the same way as the situation imposed by Mr. Jordan. A similar use of imagery is used in the quote from p. 14, in which Ida, again feeling trapped and limited, feels herself as "going nowhere" in terms of her education in the same way as the children on the teeter totter are going nowhere in terms of physical movement.



# Chapters 3 and 4

## Chapters 3 and 4 Summary

Chapter 3 - When they arrive home, Ida asks Felix not to talk about what happened that day at school. After doing the evening chores and having dinner, Ida and Felix go to bed, with Ida staring thoughtfully at the ceiling. Unable to sleep, she goes down to talk to her busy mother, explaining what happened, why it's important to her, and what Tom suggested. Mrs. Bidson listens carefully, commenting that Tom suggested what he did partly because he's sweet on Ida, an idea that Ida scoffs at. Mrs. Bidson also reminds Ida that high school was only a possibility for her, dependent on how the farm does - she'll have to pay for her board while she's at high school, which is in Steamboat Springs, and if the farm has a bad year, the family won't be able to afford it. She also warns Ida that being even a temporary teacher would be difficult for a lot of reasons, including Ida's age (she's only fourteen), the fact that she'd have to get Mr. Jordan's approval, and the fact that she'd have to keep up her responsibilities on the farm. Ida asks whether Mrs. Bidson thinks she would make a good teacher, and Mrs. Bidson comments that neither she nor Ida's father had much education, and don't really know what being one involves. As Ida goes to bed, her mother smilingly tells her that if Ida does decide to teach, she will lend Ida some hairpins. "If you put up your hair," she says, "you'll look older."

Chapter 4 - At school the next day, Ida tells Tom what her mother said, and they both realize that the school board would never permit Ida to teach, so they hatch the idea that the school should continue in secret. They then put the idea to the other students, some of whom had been looking forward to a long vacation and others had already made plans to work on their family's farms. Many of them, however, also look forward to seeing how Ida will manage. Eventually, Ida calls a vote and everyone agrees to keep the school going and to the plan completely secret, even though some of them have already told their parents the school was closing. After the rest of the class has dispersed, Ida confesses that she's nervous. Tom encourages her by telling her what his uncle said about trying something new, and then goes off to feed his mule. Ida visits a pond in back of the school, where she lets out her braids and puts her hair up, looking at her reflection in the pond and pleased to see that she does look a little older. When the bell rings to call the students in for class, Ida tells Tom that she's going to go ahead.

## Chapters 3 and 4 Analysis

There are several interesting elements in this section, including another of the book's few explorations of poetic imagery - in this case, the narrative's comments on what Ida imagines seeing in the ceiling above her bed. Here, the "road to the school" can be seen as representing both the physical road to the physical school building and the metaphorical road/path Ida is following to her education. Other important elements include the close, warm relationship Ida has with her mother (as well as Mrs. Bidson's



perceptive comment about Ida's hair), and Ida's decision to put the question of whether the school should continue to a vote. This is the first of several instances throughout the narrative in which she governs democratically rather than from the authority innate in her position. There are two points to note here - the first is how she once again demonstrates a desire to innovate and to evolve the practice of teaching, while the second is that her choice to call a vote foreshadows not only later votes in the narrative (such as the vote on whether Herbert should be expelled in the following section) but also her comment to the school board in Chapter 16 that her practice of teaching from democratic principles is one of the reasons the school should be allowed to continue operating.





# Chapters 5 and 6

## Chapters 5 and 6 Summary

Chapter 5 - On Miss Fletcher's last day, Ida gives a short speech thanking her for her work and her attention, and also recites a poem she taught them, saying they'll all do their best to live by it. After the class presents her with a basket of gifts, the tearful Miss Fletcher thanks them but has to hurry off because the man driving her to the train station is honking his car horn impatiently. After helping Miss Fletcher carry her things to the car, the students watch as Miss Fletcher hands the key to the schoolhouse to the driver and is driven away. When one of the students asks Ida how they're going to get into the schoolhouse if it's locked, Ida says she has a plan, and gets Tom to help her up through a window. When she opens the door from the inside, the other students are surprised to see that she has put her hair up, and even more surprised to hear her tell them in, a very teacher-ish voice, that the school day is finished. After they've all gone, Ida and Felix head for home, Felix commenting that he likes her better with her hair down.

Chapter 6 - At the Bidson's supper table that night, Ida reveals the situation at the school to her father and explains her plan to teach. Mr. Bidson listens carefully and asks some pointed questions, including wondering what Mr. Jordan thinks. When Ida says that Mr. Jordan thinks young women shouldn't have an education, Mr. Bidson says that Mr. Jordan doesn't think much about any kind of progress, and gives his permission for Ida to keep teaching, on one condition - that Ida always remember the farm comes first. The next morning, Ida wakes extra early, does her chores, has her breakfast, puts up her hair, and hurries off with Felix to school where, after an initial attack of nerves, she calms herself and behaves as Miss Fletcher did.

As she gives the students their assignments, they all get out their books and do as she says ... all except Herbert Bixler, who dares her to make him.

## Chapters 5 and 6 Analysis

Once her decision has been made, Ida acts decisively in ways that clearly demonstrate how far she is prepared to go to receive her education. In essentially breaking into the school, she is once again enacting all three of the book's themes - demonstrating the importance of education (doing whatever it takes to achieve one), self-reliance (coming up with her own solutions to problems) and perseverance (continuing to pursue an important goal in spite of encountering considerable obstacles). Her actions in following her mother's advice to put her hair up also indicate a determination and courage that, again, embody and/or manifest these three themes.

Other noteworthy elements in this section include the support offered to Ida, perhaps unexpectedly, by her father, and his comments about Mr. Jordan, which clearly and



vividly echo Mr. Jordan's own comments and also foreshadow his later determination to see the school closed. Other foreshadowings in this section include Ida's recitation of the poem, which she does again in more challenging circumstances in Chapter 16, and the portrayal of Ida's competent handling of her chores juxtaposed with her sudden case of nerves. This foreshadows an almost identical set of circumstances and feelings in Chapter 17. Here it's important to note that on both occasions, Ida overcomes her nerves and triumphs, yet another manifestation of the narrative's thematic interest in, and emphasis on, perseverance.



# Chapters 7 and 8

## Chapters 7 and 8 Summary

Chapter 7 - For a moment, Ida is frozen in panic, coming out of it only when Tom moves threateningly towards Herbert. Ida tells Tom to move away, and glances at the whip-like switch that Miss Fletcher had used to keep discipline, deciding to note use it. She then goes to the defiant Herbert, who insists that he will do what he wants. Increasingly angry, but controlling herself, Ida gives him several chances to change his mind, and then suddenly changes tactic. She says that the students there all want to learn and voted to keep the school open, which means they can also vote to expel those who don't want to be there. As Herbert becomes increasingly uncomfortable, Ida goes on to say that if he's expelled by the group, everyone in the valley will know what a loser he is. She calls for the class to vote, and Herbert backs down, taking out his history book. The morning continues without disruption, and Ida eventually lets the class out for recess. As Tom goes out, Ida confesses that teaching is harder than she thought. Tom tells her she's doing fine, but reminds her to not forget who she really is. If she does, he says, what she's doing will be harder for both her and her friends.

Chapter 8 - The rest of Ida's first day as teacher goes smoothly, although Tom has to remind her when it's time to dismiss the class. At home, Ida confesses to Mr. Bidson how tired she is and what happened, and he gives her a clock to keep in the desk. The next day, a Friday, Herbert is absent, but the rest of the day goes smoothly, and Ida enjoys the distracting, hard work she does with her father over the weekend. Herbert is back on the Monday, distracted but present, and all the days of that first full week go smoothly, as does the second week, Ida becoming more and more at ease all the time. One day in the third week, Tom brings in a radio that he made himself, and everyone in the class takes a turn listening to the radio stations he brings in. Ida uses the school's map to indicate where each radio station is, and during recess, thanks Tom (who ordered the parts and the plans for the radio from Popular Mechanics) for bringing it in. Suddenly one of the students, Mary, rushes in, saying there's a woman from the County Education Office who wants to see the teacher.

## Chapters 7 and 8 Analysis

The first point to note about this section, aside from the well-shaped and effective narrative tension that defines the action in Chapter 7, is the reference to the switch. At the time and place in which this novel is set (the American West of the 1920s) the educational system continued to rely on corporal punishment (such as that inflicted by the use of the switch for whipping) as a method of discipline and an incentive to both learn and behave. There are references in the text to Miss Fletcher having used the switch several times on Herbert (one of the reasons Ida is tempted, albeit temporarily, to do so herself). When Ida rejects the use of the switch to help her win her confrontation with Herbert, she and the novel both are rejecting old educational beliefs and practices,



perhaps in the same way as Ida has rejected/is rejecting Mr. Jordan's beliefs about the education of women and girls. In other words, Ida is portrayed as not only being determined to continue her education, but as determined to put into practice her own beliefs about what teaching should accomplish and how it should go about doing that. She is, in short, a pioneer, independent and self-reliant.

Another important point about this section is Ida's decision to turn the disciplining of Harold over to a vote, another example of both her determination to teach in a new way and the novel's foreshadowing of the moment in Chapter 16 when she stands up to the authoritarian Mr. Jordan and the rest of the school board, saying that her democratic practices are among the reasons why the school should be allowed to continue.

Other noteworthy elements in this section include a reiteration of the support of Ida's father and developments in the book's central subplot, the story of Herbert Bixler, which is developed further in the following section. Here it's important to note that this subplot is a clear and defining contrast to the main plot at the same time as it parallels one of the book's major themes. Harold rejects education with as much intensity as Ida pursues it, but as the end of the narrative makes clear, he is just as determined to pursue an independent, self-defined, self-reliant life as she is. This reiteration of the book's thematic interest in self-reliance is echoed in the character and actions of Tom, and his self-reliance in constructing the radio.



# Chapters 9 and 10

## Chapters 9 and 10 Summary

Chapter 9 - Ida recognizes the woman from the County Education Office as Miss Sedgwick, an official who has frequently come to the school to inspect its activities and who is also responsible for giving the grade eight exams. Miss Sedgwick, however, does not recognize Ida, who introduces herself as Miss Bidson and explains that she is filling in while Miss Fletcher is gone. Miss Sedgwick comments on how young she seems, and then asks how many students will be taking the grade eight exams. Tom introduces himself, Miss Sedgwick makes a note of him, and then prepares to leave. Tom quietly tells Ida that if Miss Sedgwick doesn't know about Ida in advance, she won't be able to take the exam. Ida calls after Miss Sedgwick and explains the truth of the situation. Miss Sedgwick asks whether the parents and/or the school board know what's going on, and when she learns that neither does, comments that she will "look into this" and drives off. Classes for the rest of the day are uneasy, and when she prepares to go home, Tom reassures the nervous Ida. She nevertheless drives home, feeling quite concerned.

Chapter 10 - As the next few days pass with no word from Miss Sedgwick, Ida and the other students become less concerned about what she might do. Meanwhile, Ida considers how all the students are doing, worrying particularly about the frequently absent Herbert, about her relationship with Tom, and about her own schoolwork, which she's neglected because of her teaching duties and what's required of her on the farm. One morning she sleeps late and, because she's hurrying, makes a mistake in the barn. When she tells her father, he speaks reassuringly that he understands she's taken on a lot and why she's done it, but also reminds her that the way she's chosen is a hard one and is going to stay hard. He also reminds her once again that her going to high school is not a sure thing. When she gets upset, he gently asks whether she wants to be treated like a child or like a grownup, and she says she doesn't know. When Ida and Felix finally get to school, Ida is surprised and humbled to see that someone has left an apple for her, a gift that really makes her feel like she's doing a good job. She is surprised to learn that the apple came from Tom, "the one person she didn't want thinking of her as just a teacher."

## Chapters 9 and 10 Analysis

The stakes are raised for Ida and the other students in this section, as none of them really knows what Miss Sedgwick is going to do. The portrayal of this character, at this stage of the narrative, is quite interesting, in that it's not at all clear what she's going to do - she is portrayed neither as particularly cold or particularly warm, neither rule bound nor free thinking. She is, in short, as unpredictable to the reader as she is to Ida and the students, an aspect of the book that draws the reader further into the narrative, curious about what she is going to do.



The other important element in this section is the conversation between Ida and her father, in which the latter basically says that Ida has a choice to make - continue to be a child, or commit to the painful process of becoming an adult. This doesn't necessarily help Ida decide what to do or how to react to what's going on, but it does clearly suggest to the reader that on a fairly significant level, Ida's story is a coming of age narrative, a genre of storytelling in which one of the main components is an exploration of how an individual leaves childhood behind and begins the process of maturing into adulthood. Mr. Bidson is essentially saying here that Ida has taken on some responsibilities that she didn't, perhaps, entirely understand, but now that she's done so, she has no choice to follow through ... in other words, be an adult and take responsibility for her actions and choices. Here it's important to note that Mr. Jordan, as distasteful as he is and as distastefully as he did it, said much the same thing when he said that life was inconvenient (Chapter 1), a point that could be seen as foreshadowing of the point made by Ida's father here.



# Chapters 11 and 12

## Chapters 11 and 12 Summary

Chapter 11 - Because Herbert hasn't been in school for three days, Ida decides to go to the Bixler farm and see if he's all right. When she gets there, she's shocked and saddened to see how poor and badly maintained it is. She is met by Mr. Bixler, who she tells that she's a classmate of Herbert's and that everyone at the school is wondering where he is. Mr. Bixler tells her that Herbert is needed at the farm, and that he told Miss Fletcher to no longer bother coming out to find out where he was. This startles Ida into confessing that she is in fact Herbert's teacher and then into explaining how it all came to happen. Mr. Bixler tells her gently but firmly that what happens on his farm is none of her business and that Herbert doesn't need to go to school, especially a "play school". When the indignant Ida starts to tell him that it's not a play school at all, he stops her by saying that she'd better leave before he decides to tell Mr. Jordan what's going on. Ida and Felix (who continues to help Ida run the car) then head to Tom's so Ida can talk to him. Tom's family farm, by contrast to the Bixler farm, is tidy and prosperous. When Ida explains what happened and worries that she's ruined everything, Tom (who is busy using his homemade printing press to print a circular for the church), reassures her, adding that his parents know everything and that they think she's doing a good job. As Ida and Felix drive off, Ida watches Tom in the rear view mirror.

Chapter 12 - As the days and weeks pass, Ida struggles to find the balance between her life at school (both her life as a teacher and as a student preparing for important exams) and her life at home (which, as the season turns to spring) now involves new lambs. One day, when the weather is particularly fine, Ida feels the same restlessness as her students, and joins them for recess. Running and enjoying her freedom, Ida joins in a game that ends up with her in a pond, covered in mud. At that moment, Miss Sedgwick appears, but seems to be having difficulty keeping her friendly amusement in check.

Calling the students together, Miss Sedgwick announces that the school can continue running as it is, but at the end of the year, all the students have to take an exam to prove what they've learned. She adds that the whole class must agree if they want the school to continue as it is. At first Herbert is the only person to vote against the idea, but eventually he votes for it. Miss Sedgwick also urges the children to tell the school board and all their parents what's happening. At home, Ida tells her mother both what happened at recess and with Miss Sedgwick. Mrs. Bidson then tells her that Mr. Bixler told her that Herbert's been spending too much time at school, and that he (Mr. Bixler) might just tell Mr. Jordan what's been going on. When Ida complains about Mr. Bixler, her mother gently reminds her that Mr. Bixler's wife died a short time ago and that he's had a run of bad luck on his farm. She adds that because the community is so small, sooner or later everyone knows what everyone else is, or has been, doing. When Ida worries about passing her own exams, her mother tells her the first thing to do is change out of her muddy clothes.



## Chapters 11 and 12 Analysis

Chapter 11 is primarily taken up with developments in the Herbert Bixler subplot. Here there are several important elements to note, in particular the contrasts between Herbert and Ida and how Ida's actions here manifest all three of the book's primary themes. At the end of Chapter 11, during Ida's visit to Tom, there are a couple of further points - not only the contrast between his family's farm and the Bixler farm, but also the reference to the church circular (which foreshadows the printing of an important circular in Chapter 15) and the reference to Ida looking at Tom in her rear view mirror, the most recent of several situations throughout the novel that indicate she thinks of him as something more than just a friend and fellow student.

Chapter 12, meanwhile, sees the return of Miss Sedgwick, who is portrayed here with a little more warmth and feeling than she displayed (or was allowed to display by the author) in her first appearance in Chapter 9. The portrayal here foreshadows how she is portrayed in Chapter 18, as warm, respectful, and even admiring towards Ida and her accomplishments. That said, Miss Sedgwick functions here as she did earlier and will function in Chapter 17 - as a kind of antagonist for Ida, the setter of obstacles and challenges that Ida has to overcome to realize her goal.

Other important elements include another example of Ida governing her classroom democratically rather than autocratically (i.e., by vote rather than by decree) and further developments in the Herbert Bixler sub-plot, in which both the attitude of Herbert's father and the state of the farm are explained (at least to some degree) and in which the stakes are raised even further for Ida and the other students.





# Chapters 13, 14 and 15

## Chapters 13, 14 and 15 Summary

Chapter 13 - Over the next couple of days, Ida hurries through her chores and stays up late so she can spend more time on her own studies, which she does even in class, at one point asking Tom quietly for help with a math problem. Her mother warns her she's pushing herself too far, but Ida says she has to. One day, schoolwork is interrupted by the arrival of a powerful thunder and hail storm, the hailstones so big that Tom brings his mule (who is frightened of hail) into the boys' cloakroom. Shortly afterwards, while Mary is reciting a poem, Mr. Jordan bursts in, cries out that what he was told was true, and closes the school.

Chapter 14 - The day after the school is closed, Ida is miserable. Mrs. Bidson asks her to take care of her baby brother Shelby while she does some work around the house, and Ida takes him down to the creek in the back of the property. She tries to read, but Shelby is too distracting. Ida is surprised by the arrival of Herbert Blixon, who at first says he just wandered over to say hi, but then after Ida suggests that he's happy there's no school he says that while he can't admit he's happy out of fear of what other kids might say, he might just want to go to school. He also hints that Mr. Jordan is putting together a secret meeting to make sure the school stays closed, that only parents who feel the same way as his father does are being told about the meeting, and if Ida wants to keep the school open, she'd better do something - the meeting, he says, is happening the following evening. Ida says she truly likes him, and Herbert wonders whether she likes him more than she likes Tom. Ida shoos him away and hurries off, saying to her brother she's got a lot of work to do.

Chapter 15 - Ida tells her parents, who are busy shearing sheep, what Herbert told her and asks for permission to go into town and inform people about the meeting. Mrs. Bidson is initially reluctant, pointing out how much work there is to do on the farm, but after Ida pleads and promises to work extra hard in the summer, she and Mr. Bidson agree, and also agree to attend the meeting. Ida grabs Felix and together they take the car hurry to Tom's family's farm, Ida having the idea of having Tom print a circular, like he did for the church, to let people know about the meeting. When Ida gets to the farm, she is greeted first by Tom's friendly German parents (who, when she explains what she's there for, agree to go to the meeting) and then by Tom himself, who agrees to print up a circular and help her hand it out. After they've printed the first one to proof it, Tom reminds Ida that she'd better be ready to speak at the meeting, since the teacher always speaks.

## Chapters 13, 14 and 15 Analysis

One of the most effective, commonly used, and arguably necessary elements of good narrative is the use of obstacles to define and/or portray how important a particular goal



or purpose is to a character. The harder a character has to struggle to achieve a goal, the more the reader gets to know about that character, what she is made of, what s/he believes, what are her strengths and weaknesses. With the closure of the school and the revelation of the meeting, Ida faces her biggest obstacles yet, and how she rises to meet them (in Chapter 15 and in the following section) tells the reader a great deal about the character and also about the book's themes, given that what Ida chooses to do in this situation both embodies and manifests all three themes (self-reliance, the importance of education, perseverance).

Another important point to note about this section include another use of metaphor and/or symbolism, only in this case it's not found in the description of an event but in the event itself - specifically, in the thunderstorm, which clearly echoes and/or foreshadows the appearance of Mr. Jordan at the end of the chapter and the "storm" of trouble he brings into the schoolroom and the lives of the students. Still other important points include developments in the Herbert Blixon plot (in which he reveals himself to be more complicated, and arguably more sensitive, than he had been portrayed as being in the earlier parts of the narrative) and still more hints about the feelings Ida has for Tom, and vice versa.



# Chapters 16 and 17

## Chapters 16 and 17 Summary

Chapter 16 - When he arrives at the board meeting, Mr. Jordan is surprised to see so many people there. In addition to the other three members of the board, all the students are there, as well as their parents and several other members of the community. As he tries to explain that he'd closed the school because there wasn't enough time to find a replacement for Miss Fletcher and the fact that the students were trespassing, other board members take the situation less seriously. At one point Ida stands to speak, in spite of Mr. Jordan's objections but with the support of the other members of the board. She explains why she and the other students decided to carry on with the school, how everything is decided by majority vote, and explains the conditions imposed by Miss Sedgwick. She concludes by reciting the same poem she recited when Miss Fletcher left and earns applause from the crowd. The board withdraws to decide what to do, and Ida receives the congratulations of the crowd. When the board returns, Mr. Jordan announces that the board has decided that the school can continue, that the parents have to take some of the responsibility for the maintenance of the school and its grounds, and that if the students don't must their exams, it will not be the board's fault. After the meeting, Tom congratulates Ida, who gives him a sudden hug and then runs outside, embarrassed.

Chapter 17 - Ida and the other students work desperately hard over the final two weeks of the school year and Ida occasionally resents having to help the other students when she wants to focus on her own work. On the morning of the exam, Ida wakes particularly early and hurries to complete her chores. While she is milking the cow, however, the tensions of the past six weeks overwhelm her and she breaks down and cries. When she's through, she finishes the milking and carries the milk back into the house, where her mother notices that she's been crying and confesses how proud she and Mr. Bidson are of her. On the way to school, Ida is in such a hurry and is so anxious that she runs the car off the road, but just as she and Felix are despairing of getting to the exams in time, Tom appears and offers them a ride on the back of his mule. The children arrive shortly before Miss Sedgwick does, and everyone prepares sharpened pencils and paper. When Miss Sedgwick gets to the school, she notices the preparations approvingly, and then describes the sequence of how the exams are going to be taken. When the students sit down to write, Ida is at first distracted by wondering how the other students are doing and then worried by the questions she has to answer, but finds one she feels comfortable with and starts working. At the end of the long day, Miss Sedgwick says the results will be mailed to the students as soon as the exams have been marked, and leaves. The other students leave as well, with only Tom remaining behind - to help Ida pull the car from the mud.



## Chapters 16 and 17 Analysis

This section of the narrative contains its climax - or rather, two contenders for the "title" of the climax. The first is the board meeting in Chapter 16, the second is the writing of the exams in Chapter 17. To determine which is the true climax of the work, it's useful to remember what a climax is and does and how it functions. A climax in narrative is the point of highest emotional intensity, the point of greatest struggle and conflict, of the most vivid statement of the piece's theme, and the most important turning point in the narrative journey of the protagonist.

Other important elements in this section include Ida's recitation of the poem she first recited at the departure of Miss Fletcher in Chapter 5, a poem which, it could be argued, sums up all three of the play's central themes. There is also the reappearance of Miss Sedgwick, functioning here as she has throughout the narrative as a representation of obstacles that Ida and the other students have to overcome. Finally, there are vivid portrayals of Ida's emotional state - her impulsive embrace of Tom at the conclusion of the board meeting, her tears on the morning of the exam, and her attack of nerves as she's sitting down to write the exams. All three are clearly evocative of the pressure that Ida and her emotions have been under throughout the narrative, pressure that she has, in many ways, put on herself - she has, in short, been dealing with inner obstacles (i.e., self-expectation) at the same time as she's been dealing with outer ones. The thematically significant point here is that characteristics like determination, self-reliance and persistence can be just as useful in overcoming inner difficulties as outer ones.



# Chapters 18 and 19

## Chapters 18 and 19 Summary

Chapter 18 - Every day for six days after the exams are written, Ida and Felix take the Model T a mile down the road to check the mailbox, and on every one of those six days, the mailbox is empty. On the seventh day, however, the mailbox holds two envelopes, one for Felix and one for Ida. When Ida opens hers, she finds three letters from Miss Sedgwick. The first says Ida has graduated with honors, the second says that all the students (except Herbert) passed, and the third offers Ida free board in Miss Sedgwick's home as a kind of scholarship, when Ida attends high school in Steamboat Springs. When Ida tells Felix that Herbert didn't pass, she adds that she thinks he failed on purpose so as not to anger his father.

A week later, the school holds Last Day exercises at the schoolhouse, at which time all the students (even the late arriving Herbert) make presentations of what they've accomplished. Mr. Jordan is the master of ceremonies, and he compliments all the students, but particularly Ida, on their achievements. During refreshments afterwards, Ida talks privately with Herbert, who doesn't quite admit that he failed the exam deliberately, but does reveal his plans for the future - to join the navy when he's old enough and leave home for good. Later, Tom tells Ida that he's glad to be able to call her just Ida from then on. And finally, when she and her family are on their way home, Mr. and Mrs. Bidson tell Ida how proud they are of her and how hard they're going to work her on her last summer before she goes to high school. After Felix jokes about how the family could get Tom to help, because "he'll do anything for Ida", Ida blushes and smiles.

## Chapters 18 and 19 Analysis

Following the climax of the previous section, this final chapter of the book can be seen as falling action and/or denouement, the section of narrative in which loose ends in the various plots are tied up, thematic statements are summarized, and the various inner journeys of transformation experienced by the characters come to a close. In terms of the book's two main plots, the question of whether Ida is going to pass her exams and go on to high school is clearly resolved, as is the subplot about what's going to happen to Herbert Blixon. The ending of this particular subplot is perhaps something of a surprise, but seems to fit with his character and his situation. It's also interesting to consider how what Herbert reveals about himself and his plans might be seen as having a parallel relationship to Ida's plans and character. Meanwhile, all three central thematic statements are affirmed with Ida's test results - education is valued, perseverance is rewarded, and self-reliance is, more clearly than ever, seen as an essential component of success, particularly since it clearly comes into play to help Ida overcome her nerves and uncertainty as it did in the previous section.



Finally, there are the journeys of transformation undergone by the characters, and here again there can be seen parallels between the experiences of Ida and of Herbert. The former has journeyed from being an uncertain teenager worried about moving on in school to being a confident young woman facing a promising future in high school and beyond. Herbert, meanwhile, has journeyed from someone who seemed to be uncomfortable in both his primary environments (home and school) to being someone who has a clear vision for his future, an idea for making his way to a place where he can be comfortable in his own skin and his own life. Like Ida, he too has a dream, and there is the sense that as the novel concludes, he has been taught by her about things that aren't just useful in the classroom, but in life - the thematic centerpieces of the work, self-reliance and perseverance. Here again, the central theme comes into play, only it's not just classroom education at work, for both these characters - it's the education, as suggested by Mr. Blidson and by Mr. Jordan, of life.



# Characters

## Ida Bidson

Ida is the novel's central character and protagonist. Fourteen years old, she is determined and spirited, but at times insecure and indecisive. She is portrayed as the most intelligent student in the school, but in some ways is not necessarily the most mature - Tom, by contrast, comes across as wiser, more patient, and less impulsive. Ida, however, is inventive and clever; her handling of the various challenges she faces (particularly those posed by Herbert Blixer) demonstrate a capacity to think on her feet. Over the course of the narrative, she becomes increasingly aware of and confident in her positive characteristics, conquering her self-doubt and lack of experience as she learns to trust herself and those around her, particularly her parents. This, in short, is her protagonist's journey of transformation (an inner change in character and/or identity that triggers and/or is triggered by outer experiences, circumstances and choices). To be specific, as a result of the challenges Ida encounters and overcomes in her outer life (i.e., the closing of the school, being placed in a position of responsibility, living up to that and all her other responsibilities), Ida becomes a stronger, more secure, more able person inside. Here it's important to note that this transformation is clearly connected to the novel's three central themes, which is perhaps the most important aspect of Ida's character is the fact that over the course of the narrative, her attitudes and actions embody, at various times, each of the narrative's primary themes - the importance of education, perseverance, and self-reliance.

## Tom Kohl

Tom is Ida's classmate in the eighth grade. He is equally as determined as she is to pass his exams and has just as clear an idea of what he wants to do with his life when he does. While he seems less generally intelligent than Ida is, he is still fairly smart, as indicated by the fact that at one point, Ida goes to him for help in working out a math problem (Chapter 13). He is quiet, supportive and responsible - and, as Ida's mother points out, he's "sweet" on Ida. His steadfast faith in Ida, along with the occasional firm nudge in the direction of confidence, help her live up to her responsibilities and, in a significant way, help her along her inner journey of transformation.

## Herbert Blixon

Herbert is a younger student, a farm boy whose attendance in classes is intermittent and irregular, partly because his widowed father (Mr. Blixon) needs him on the farm, partly because neither Blixon really sees the need and/or the value of school, and partly because in his own way, Herbert is just as independent and determined as Ida. All these factors combine to make him one of the narrative's key antagonists (i.e. characters that confront and/or challenge the protagonist and, in doing so, are important triggers in the



protagonist's journey of transformation). Clever, outspoken and confrontational, Herbert nevertheless develops a grudging respect for Ida and what she's doing with the class, eventually becoming as supportive as the other students. In other words he, like Ida, undergoes a journey of transformation that, again as is the case with Ida, results in greater self-confidence and independence.

## **Mr. Blixon**

Herbert's father is as outspoken and as direct as his son, determined that Herbert be raised the way he (Mr. Blixon) wants and not welcoming of what he sees as the interference of the school's teachers (first Miss Fletcher, then Ida).

## **Mary, Charlie, Susie, Natasha**

These are the other students in the school, all younger than Ida, Tom and Herbert. Mary is Tom's younger sister. All four students support Ida in her assuming the duties and responsibilities of being the teacher, including working hard to prepare for their exams so that she, and in fact all of them, look good in the eyes of the school board.

## **Felix**

Felix is Ida's younger brother, and another student in the school. He is portrayed as playful but hard working, in some ways a combination of Herbert (in that he is more interested in working on the farm than in school) and Tom (in that he is loyal to, and fond of, his sister). Felix is, in some ways, indispensable to Ida, in that he works the various pedals on the car (gears, accelerator, brakes) while she drives.

## **Mr. and Mrs. Bidson**

The parents of Ida and Felix (and the baby, Shelby) are, as Mrs. Bidson herself says, relatively uneducated. Hard working farm people, they are both supportive of Ida's plans and intentions, but insist that her responsibilities to the farm and to the family have to come first. Both are wise and occasionally witty, with Mrs. Bidson helping Ida realize important things about her circumstances and choices (i.e., pointing out Tom's feelings, pointing out the value of looking more mature) and Mr. Bidson realizing, perhaps even more so than his wife, the value of the kind of education Ida is pursuing. He is, perhaps, idealistically more supportive of education in general, and education for women in particular, than real-world farm fathers in his situation might be, but ultimately his support is an important influence on Ida, her outer choices and her inner journey of transformation.





## Miss Fletcher

Miss Fletcher is the school's first teacher. Her sudden, unexpected departure at the beginning of the novel is the catalyst and/or trigger for the action. She is portrayed as being affectionate and sensitive, but with an armor of firmness and discipline that both masks that affection and helps her accomplish what that affection drives her to do - educate her students well.

## Mr. Jordan

The conservative Mr. Jordan is the chairman of the local school board, authoritarian and controlling. He is one of the novel's primary antagonists, a real threat to what Ida and her fellow students are trying to accomplish. His negative attitudes towards the education of young women and girls in particular (see Chapter 1) are particular triggers for Ida, making her more determined than ever to prove him wrong. He eventually comes around, albeit grudgingly, when he sees how insistent she and the other students are, how generally supportive their parents (not to mention the town as a whole) are, and when he sees what they've managed to accomplish.

## Miss Sedgwick

Miss Sedgwick is the representative of the County Education Office, basically a school inspector. Her visit to the school early in Ida's term as teacher raises the stakes for Ida and the other students, giving them greater challenges to overcome. She is portrayed in a similar fashion to Miss Fletcher, sensitive and compassionate but with a veneer of firmness and discipline. She is, in many ways, yet another antagonist for Ida, but clearly has her best interests at heart, and those of the other students. At the end of the narrative, her invitation to Ida to stay with her while she (Ida) attends high school is both a symbol of her personal and professional respect and, on another level, solves one of the key obstacles Ida faced to furthering her education.



# Objects/Places

## Elk Valley, Colorado

This is the small farming community in which the narrative takes place. Surrounded by mountains, the community feels somewhat isolated from the rest of the world, a circumstance that both Ida and Tom experience personally and metaphorically.

## The Bidson Farm

Ida and her family live on a small but busy farm outside Elk Valley. Ida's responsibilities on the farm and her father's insistence that she c, make fulfilling both sets of responsibilities a challenge.

## The Elk Valley Schoolhouse

This is the setting for much of the narrative's action, the departure of the original teacher (Miss Fletcher) setting the stage and/or triggering the book's main plot / narrative line - fourteen-year-old Ida's taking on the responsibilities of teaching.

## The Year End Exams

The scheduled exams at the end of the school year are important to all the students, but particular to Ida and Tom, whose future education (i.e., attendance at high school) is put in jeopardy when the departure of teacher Miss Fletcher leads school board chairman Mr. Jordan to cancel the exams. Ida's determination to write and pass the exams is a fundamental factor in her decision to take over the teaching of the school.

## Steamboat Springs, Colorado

This larger community is where Ida would attend high school once she passes her grade eight exams. The fact that she would have to pay for room and board while attending school there is a significant obstacle to Ida's continuing her education. Miss Sedgwick makes her home in Steamboat Springs, and her offer to let Ida board with her free of charge removes that obstacle.

## Tom's Radio

The radio Tom constructs and brings to school serves two functions. The first is that it illustrates Tom's capacity for self-reliance, and as such is a manifestation of one of the book's key themes. The second function of the radio is to awaken Ida, Tom and the



other students to the existence of the outside world, and the possibilities out there for all of them. These possibilities are yet another important incentive for Ida, Tom and the other students to succeed in their plan.

## The Switch

For centuries, physical discipline and corporal punishment was a fundamental component of the educational system - whipping as a form of punishment, avoidance of whipping an incentive for good work and good behavior. Ida's choice to not use the switch as a means of winning her battle of wills with Herbert Blixer is an important one.

## Tom's Printing Press

Tom's printing press, used initially to print flyers to publicize a church event, gets used for a similar purpose later in the narrative - to print flyers letting the community at large know about a supposedly secret meeting called by Mr. Jordan to reveal what's been going on at the school. The press is, therefore, an important tool utilized by Ida and Tom to realize their goal of continuing to pursue their education on their own terms.

## The Clock

When Ida reveals to her father that she has had difficulty keeping track of the time at school, he gives her a loudly ticking clock to help her do so. The clock can be seen as a metaphoric representation of his confidence and/or trust in her, as well as his respect for what she is trying to accomplish and why.

## Ida's Hair

When she learns of Ida's intention to take over the responsibilities and authority of the school teacher, Mrs. Bidson wisely advises her to put her hair up in a more adult-looking style. This, Mrs. Bidson suggests and Ida soon learns, makes Ida look both more mature and more authoritative. Later in the narrative, students (including Felix) comment that Ida was more fun with her hair down, and Ida herself becomes tired by the constant responsibility that having her hair up implies, and lets it down herself. There are clear echoes here of the saying "letting her hair down) which traditionally implies letting go of strict, disciplined behavior and, quite simply, playing and relaxing instead.



# Themes

## The Value of Education

The entirety of the book's action, the development and choices of its characters, and its secondary themes are all built upon this primary theme, a commentary on the importance of education. Ida and the other schoolchildren, their parents (with the exception of Mr. Blixer), most of the other secondary characters (in particular Miss Fletcher, the first teacher) all do what they do in the way they do it because of their belief in the importance of learning. It's interesting to note, however, that there is little if any discussion of why education is important - little direct discussion, that is. Ida never says why she wants so desperately to both learn and teach, her parents never discuss why they support her in her drive to do so, and the same can be said of the other students and their parents. A clue, however, can be found in the incident with Tom's radio (Chapter 8). As a result of listening to the many radio stations the radio can pick up, radio stations from outside the students' geographical sphere of experience, Ida and the others learn about the outside world and become excited by the possibilities this new knowledge represents. In other words, the experience of listening to and being changed by the radio can be seen as a metaphor for the experience of education, of the excitement about learning more, or the possibility of learning more. This, it seems, is the book's thematic position on the value of education - that there is innate, intrinsic, embedded value in learning about, or even wondering about, more experience of and/or insight into the ways of the world.

## Perseverance

In the same way as the entirety of the book's action is grounded in its primary thematic consideration of the value of education, most of the situations in which that theme is explored are in turn defined, and/or triggered by, perseverance and persistence. Most notably, Ida persists in pursuing her education in the face of increasingly challenging obstacles, and also persists in fulfilling her responsibilities both on the farm and in the schoolhouse, again against increasingly challenging odds. She has learned this lesson, it seems, from her parents who, like many farming pioneers in that time in North America, strive continually and persistently against challenging circumstances like climate and isolation to carve out their own independent space and success. Other characters, in their actions and attitudes, also exhibit perseverance, albeit in negative terms. These characters include Mr. Jordan and Mr. Blixon, both of whom persist in putting into practice their negative views on education and the continued existence of the school in the face of opposition, most notably from Ida (acting on her own sense of persistence). Granted, Mr. Jordan's perseverance eventually gives out when faced with such firm and determined opposition from Ida and the rest of the community, an aspect of the novel which raises an interesting, thematically relevant question - is perseverance only a positive value when it's undertaken and/or practiced within the context of what is



generally viewed as a positive value? In other words, is perseverance in pursuit of a negative value by definition itself a negative?

## The Importance of Self Respect / Self Confidence

An important manifestation of both these thematic interests, the entwined values of self-respect and self-confidence, itself forms an additional thematic consideration in the book. This secondary theme plays out most apparently in the experience and transformation of protagonist Ida who, as previously discussed and as the result of her experiences, moves from being intelligent and committed but somewhat insecure into being still intelligent, even more committed, and far more confident in herself. This is because she has been persistent and persevered in pursuit of her much valued education. Over the course of the novel she not only teaches her fellow students, but she teaches herself not only to have self-confidence and self-respect, but that she has good reason to have confidence.

In other words, she develops self-respect which, in turn, adds fuel to her capacity for persistence and perseverance, which drives her to achieve more and succeed at more which, in turn, triggers her to believe in herself more. It's a cycle of self-valuing that, the novel thematically suggests, is the perhaps inevitable result of both learning and a commitment to learning. Meanwhile, quieter and less overt explorations of this theme occur in several other characters - in Tom (whose confidence in his own skills as an electrician and young inventor leads him to the construction of his radio) and in Mr. Bidson (whose confidence in himself and his values enables him to, in turn, have confidence in his daughter). Finally, there is the character of Herbert Blixon who, in his eventual decision to eventually leave his father's farm and strike out on his own, there is an expression of self-confidence, self-respect and self-determination. The character would probably argue that his choice is the result of his determination to get away from education. On the other hand, Ida would probably argue, and the book does argue, his decision is still the result of his experiences at the secret school, albeit his life education (i.e., the example of self-confidence supplied by Ida).

# Style

## Point of View

The story is told from the third person, limited point of view - that is, from the perspective of protagonist Ida. The term "limited" refers to the fact that the narrative explores only her feelings, her experiences, and her interpretations of those experiences, without providing similar and/or equal interpretation to the experiences of the other characters. In other words, the narrative and thematic focus is entirely on Ida, with considerations of both incident and theme being filtered from the position of her personal context. She drives the narrative in the same way as she drives her father's Model T.

In terms of the book's thematic point of view, and as previously discussed, virtually everything about the narrative is geared to and/or defined by its contention that education is both essential and valuable. Here it's important to note the relationship between the narrative and thematic points of view. The book's narrative point of view is that of a female, while its thematic point of view is a positive take on the value of education. Because both these aspects of the book come into play in opposition to a character who clearly states that education for women and girls is not important, there is the very clear sense that a core component of the book's thematic point of view is the idea that education for women and girls is particularly important. In addition, because the book's two secondary themes (the value of persistence, the value of self-worth) are so thoroughly tied to the primary theme, it follows that those two themes also apply particularly to women and girls. In other words, it's again important important for them to develop a positive sense of self-worth, and it's important for them to persevere in both their educations and that sense of worth. In this context, it's possible to infer or understand the book's authorial point of view (i.e., the reason the author wrote the book). This is the idea that because the views of Mr. Jordan about women and girls were held for centuries, and because they continue to be held in some contemporary circumstances in spite of massive advances in women's rights, it's important for young female readers to be exposed to the positive values and practices that contradict those views.

## Setting

In terms of the novel's setting in time, the important point to note is that the period in which the action unfolds (the 1920s) is one in which education in general, and for women in particular, was considered by society in general to be of limited value. In other words, the attitudes of school board chairman Mr. Jordan and in many cases fathers like Mr. Bixler (particularly fathers in rural communities, as will be discussed momentarily) were the rule, rather than the exception. This, in turn, makes Ida and her attitudes exceptional on a couple of different levels - as a young person eager to learn, and as a young woman eager to learn. Both sets of attitudes were in the process of changing at



the time in which the novel is set, but this is where the importance of the novel's setting in place becomes important. The situation for both the educated in general and for women in particular was, the 1920s, improving more in urban, more populated centers than in small, isolated communities like Elk Valley Colorado. Those larger centers were also, for the most part, on either the east or west coast of America (more likely the east coast), meaning that Colorado is as physically distant from centers of learning and expansive thought as Elk Valley is intellectually distant. One final noteworthy point about setting is the novel's description of Elk Valley's particular geographic location, on a plain surrounded by mountains. As the novel itself suggests in one of its few diversions into poeticism and imagery, both Ida and Tom feel as intellectually and emotionally hemmed in by the mountains as they are physically. Here, setting functions as metaphor and/or symbol.

## Language and Meaning

For the most part, the language utilized throughout the narrative is clear and straightforward. There is the sense, in fact, that the use of language is stylistically evocative of both time and place, since communities of the sort portrayed in the novel were themselves fairly simple in what they had to do (simply survive) and how they had to do it (in as straightforward and focused a way as possible). In other words, unadorned language tells a story of unadorned lives. It's important to note, however, that language does evoke a clear sense of time and place. Descriptions of the farms, the school-house, the Model T, the clothes, and the habits and practices of the people of the community all create a strong, clear sense of atmosphere and setting.

All that said, while the narrative is relatively free and clear of poeticism, imagery or complex language, there are some notable exceptions. These include the previously discussed references to Tom and Ida both feeling as intellectually and emotionally hemmed in as they are physically by the mountains, and the reference to Ida feeling that her life is like the games being played on the teeter-totter, lots of motion but no actual forward movement. There is also the reference to Ida's imagining of the patterns in the wood of her ceiling as different things, roads or maps. Here the metaphoric meaning is clear - she's not only considering the physical map to the school, but the future map of her life.

## Structure

The book's structure is, like its language, straightforward and quite simple. The plotting is basic, traditional cause and effect, with action leading to reaction, choice leading to response, obstacle triggering tactic. Each action, each choice and each tactic triggers increased narrative tension and building momentum to the book's point of climax - that is, whichever point of high tension is, in fact, the climax. It's important to note, meanwhile, that in this novel (as is the case with many/most novels), narrative structure, and the momentum that builds as the result of that structure, are entirely tied in and/or affected by the situation, actions and reactions of the central character. The choices and

tactics that define the action and the structure are, in the case of "Secret School", connected to the will and the ways of protagonist Ida. It is her reaction to Mr. Jordan's decision to close the school, not to mention her reaction to Tom's idea, that leads her to take action to keep the school running. Later in the novel, her reaction to news of the so-called "public" meeting leads her to take action in order to meet the challenge posed by that meeting. At all points in between, whether dealing with her parents, Herbert Blixer or Miss Sedgwick, it is Ida's determination and Ida's purpose that defines what happens, when it happens, and how it happens. In short, structure throughout the book is tied inextricably to character, and through character to theme, since (as previously discussed) the actions of all the characters, particularly Ida, are tied to all three of the book's primary thematic considerations.





## Quotes

"Tom ... gazed out at the mountains that ringed Elk Valley. Ida followed his look. At the moment the surrounding peaks felt like a cage."

Chapter 2, p. 14

"Ida ... marched past the little kids playing on the teeter-totter. Just up and down, she thought. Going nowhere. Suppose if I'm not going to graduate, I won't be going anywhere either."

Ibid, p. 15

"Look, your legs weren't long enough to reach your car pedals, right? So you figured how to get Felix to work them ... same thing here. Just have to find a way. And the way is, you be our teacher."

Ibid, p. 18 - Tom.

"She liked to imagine different pictures for the grain patterns. It always soothed her. One night it was a map. Another time it was secret writing. Sometimes it was even music.

Tonight it was the road to school."

Chapter 3, p. 23

"If you want to try something new, and you're not scared, means you're not really trying something new."

Chapter 4, p. 34 - Tom

"Do what conscience says is right / Do what reason says is best / Do with all your mind and might / Do your duty, and be blest".

Chapter 5, p. 37

"Momentarily, Ida clanked at the switch that hung close by on the wall. She knew she could not use it. It wasn't in her. Besides, she knew Herbert would only fight back. IF that happened, it would be the end of school. No, she'd have to try something else."

Chapter 7, p. 52

"More and more she found herself listening to them, thinking about what they said, rather than worrying about what she should say."

Chapter 8, p. 60

"As Ida drove off ... she recalled the places they had heard on the radio: Salt Lake City, Albany, Spokane, Chicago. In one day the world had become so big. But Elk Valley had never seemed so isolated."

Chapter 9, p. 73

"And Tom? He was working steadily, wanting, she knew, to do well in her eyes. But she had become more his teacher and less his friend. It didn't feel right."

Chapter 10, p. 75



"See, my dad, he never had much learning. Sometimes I think he gets fretted up about me knowing more than he does. Worries I'll get uppity. Thinks If I know too much, I might take off ... never come back. Which I just might do. Someday. Angry old cuss, he is. Lonely, too."

Chapter 14, p. 115 - Herbert

" I tell you, Miss Bidson, knowing things can worry you deep."

Ibid, p. 117 - Herbert.

"Ma, I keep remembering what Mr. Jordan said: Girls don't need to go to high school.' 'Only shows that some grown-ups could use some schooling themselves.'"

Chapter 17, p. 137 - Ida, Mrs. Bidson

"...she smiled and looked out the window, and though it was dark outside, all she could see was brightness."

Chapter 18, p. 153



## Topics for Discussion

List and discuss the contrasts between Herbert and Ida. In what ways are their lives and situations different? What is it, do you think, about Herbert's life that makes him who he is? What is it about Ida's life that makes her who she is? Do you agree or disagree with the comments in Chapter 8 that suggest that there are also parallels and commonalities in their two lives and experiences? Why or why not?

In what ways do Ida's actions throughout the narrative enact and/or manifest the work's primary themes? Consider, in particular, her actions in Chapter 11.

Keeping in mind the criteria for or the description of a work's climax in the Analysis for Chapters 16 and 17, determine which of the two key points in this section (the school board meeting, the writing of the exams) is the work's climax. Explain your answer.

In what way does the poem recited by Ida at the beginning of the book and again at the end reflect the book's themes? Do you think Ida has lived by the suggestions of the poem? Why or why not?

Consider and debate the comments on perseverance made in "Themes - Perseverance". Is perseverance only a positive value when it's undertaken and/or practiced within the context of what is generally viewed as a positive value? In other words, is perseverance in pursuit of a negative value by definition itself a negative?

What is your position on the value and importance of education? What is the value of education in general? Do you believe in education for its own sake? Where do you place the relative values of education and experience - is one more valuable than the other?

Have you ever, like Ida, faced a challenge and had difficulty believing you could meet it? How did you manage to face that challenge? How did you overcome it? What effect did meeting the challenge have on your self-confidence and self-respect?

How does your sense of self-respect and self-confidence show up in your daily life? What difference, do you think, does having good self-confidence, bad self-confidence, or too much self-confidence have on your work? Your relationships? Your pursuit of goals and dreams and purposes?