

Ages 10-12

Children's Book Reviews

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## **Review: The Secret School**

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*The Secret School*

By Avi

Harcourt, 2001

DESCRIPTION:

There are not many teachers willing to live in remote Western Colorado in the 1920's. So when Miss Fletcher must return to Iowa in the middle of the term to care for her ailing mother, Mr. Jordan, the head of the school board declares that the one-room school must shut down indefinitely unless someone can be found to complete the year, and he is in no hurry to look. Fourteen-year-old Ida Bidson is especially dismayed by the news, since she needs to pass the eighth grade exam in order to attend high school in the fall. This is crucial to her dream of someday becoming a teacher. Encouraged by Tom, friend and fellow eighth grader, Ida takes on the task of teaching, swearing her classmates to secrecy. What looked so easy for Miss Fletcher is more of a challenge than Ida thought as she works out how to establish her authority, direct the other children in their learning and still find time to study for herself. Unable to keep the secret from her parents, Ida gains their permission as long as she can maintain her chores and her own studies. Fighting exhaustion from teaching and keeping up with her own studies, Ida perseveres. When the local school examiner pays a surprise visit, however, the secret is out and the children must prove the validity of their experiment by passing their exams to go on to the next grade.

CRITIQUE:

Told with warmth and humor, this is an engaging story of an ambitious and determined young lady pursuing her dream. Avi's description of Ida steering an old Model T along dirt roads with her younger brother crouched on the floor pushing the brake and clutch pedals she can't reach, sets the tone for the story. This is just one of the obstacles however, that must be overcome. Education is not easy to obtain in 1920's in Colorado and the attitude of the head of the local school board that girls don't really need a high school education is not unusual. It takes grit for Ida to accomplish this lofty goal and she has it in ample supply.

RELATED SUBJECTS:

1920s, Boy-girl friendship, Brothers and sisters, Colorado, Frontier and pioneer life, Humor, One-room schools, School, Teachers

CHARACTER THEMES:

Cooperation, Coping, Courage, Determination, Duty, Friendship, Hope, Independence, Ingenuity, Initiative, Leadership, Maturity, Passion, Resolve, Resourcefulness, Responsibility, Spunk, Strength, Trustworthiness, Work ethic

AWARDS:

California Young Reader Medal, Iowa Children's Choice Award, IRA-CBC Children's Choice Award, Massachusetts Children's Book Award, Pennsylvania Young Readers' Choice Award, South Carolina Children's Book Award, *Smithsonian Magazine* Notable Books for Children, Teacher's Choice, Virginia Young Readers Program, Volunteer State Book Award (TN), Wisconsin Battle of the Books, Young Hoosier Book Award (IN)