

BOOKNOTES

EDUCATORS GUIDE

thematic connections

Abandonment
Values in Conflict
Self-Discovery • Family
Survival

Grades 5–8

about the book

When their 13-year-old guitar-playing cousin Tadpole arrives unexpectedly in the summer of 1955, he brings the Collins girls and their small Appalachian community the joy of music and a zest for life even though he harbors a dark secret.

Carolina Collins lives with her single mother and three older, boisterous sisters. When her orphaned cousin, nicknamed Tadpole, shows up for a surprise visit, his upbeat personality and musical talents are like a magnet, bringing everyone in their poor Appalachian town together in more ways than one. However, when the real reason for Tadpole's sudden appearance becomes known to all, Mama looks to the assistance of friends to wage a custody battle for Tadpole, but to no avail and he is forced to return to the abusive home he fled. When Tadpole runs away again, this time to the country music Mecca of Nashville, he's got a few more surprises of his own.



Dell Yearling paperback • 0-440-41979-4

awards & reviews

A *School Library Journal* Best Book of the Year

★ "The power of White's work derives from her seemingly easy evocation of ordinary people as they stumble into endearing truths about human strength and vulnerability."—Starred, *Publishers Weekly*

★ "[The] characters possess the resiliency of spirit necessary to transform themselves."

—Starred, *School Library Journal*

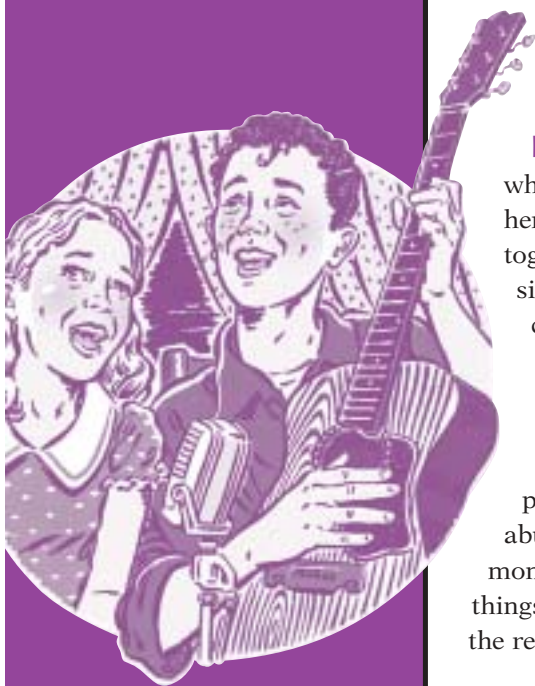
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pre-reading activity

A key to good historical fiction is the ability to recreate time and place as a setting for a poignant story about timeless characters with whom readers can connect.

Introduce students to Ruth White's portrayal of 1950s Appalachia. Have them locate this mountain region on a map. Ask what their lifestyle was like. Discuss how life in rural Kentucky, while poor in many material goods, was rich in heart, spirit, and hopes for the future.



thematic connections

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

Abandonment—The only one of her sisters who has no memory of Daddy, Carolina asks anyone who will listen why he left when she was only two. Mama said he left because he was “tired,” so when Mama uses that same word to describe how she feels when the electricity is cut off, Carolina worries she is going to leave like Daddy did. How did Daddy’s abandonment affect Carolina’s mama and each of the girls? How did it change their lives? Ask students how they might feel if one of the people who provides daily care for them went away one day and never came back?

Values in Conflict—Carolina has been told she should always obey the law. So, when the Collins family and all the townspeople conspire to keep the sheriff from finding Tadpole and returning him to his uncle, Carolina questions, “How can we be doing the right thing and breaking the law at the same time?” (p. 177). How does Mama explain their actions? Are there other circumstances in which people have done the right thing by breaking the law?

Self-Discovery—Tadpole’s optimistic view of life, despite his hardships, has a way of enabling others to discover new facets of themselves and those they love. What discoveries does Carolina make about herself? How do her perceptions of Mama change? What does Mama discover she has always had deep within herself, but never felt able to demonstrate? Ask students to share something they discovered about themselves that surprised them. What or who led them to uncover some previously unknown aspect of themselves?

Family—Carolina’s sense of family loyalty and love is forever changed when she learns of Tadpole’s life with his uncle after he is orphaned. How do her opinions of Mama and all she does to keep her little family fed and together change as the novel progresses? How do her relationships with her sisters change in the course of the novel? At story’s end, what significant change is about to take place in Carolina’s family?

Survival—When Carolina asks Tadpole how he can go on smiling when such bad things have happened to him, Tadpole says, “When the truth hurts too much, you gotta invent your own truth.” (p. 180) What personal truths did Tadpole invent to help him cope with loss, hurt, and abuse? Ask students what mechanisms they have used to survive painful moments. Why do they agree or disagree with Tadpole’s philosophy that bad things can sometimes bring about good fortune? (p. 195) Ask them to explain the reasoning behind their answers.

connecting to the curriculum

Music—Tadpole draws on a musical heritage known as bluegrass music. Host a Bluegrass Festival Day in which students learn more about the musicians that brought national attention to this musical form. Using these tunes and others made popular in movies like *Oh Brother, Where Art Thou?* have students listen for the “layers of music” in the vocal harmonies and the instruments that give this music its special, down-home flavor. Using Internet or library resources, have students learn more about the Grand Old Opry and how it served as a major stepping stone in helping young country musicians like Tadpole on their way to making it big.

Art—The painting that Eugene loved and studied by flashlight is very similar to one titled *Sunday Afternoon on la Grande Jatte* by the French painter Georges Seurat. Introduce students to *pointillism*, where solid forms are created by small, distinct dots of color. Ask students what it is about the scene and its use of color, line, shape, and shadow that might have evoked Eugene’s response to it as a “happy” place. What emotional responses does it evoke in your students? Have students create their own pointillistic masterpieces by coloring in simple shapes with fine-pointed color pencils or paintbrushes.

Science—Carolina’s family cans the food they harvest. Discuss with students how oxygen and the enzymes in food cause the growth of undesirable bacteria, yeasts, and molds. Demonstrate how canning helps to prevent spoilage through an experiment in which some blackberries or blueberries are stored in a plastic container and others are heated and stored in vacuum-sealed mason jars.

Social Studies—Have students research the famous Hatfield and McCoy clan war that has become an enduring part of our national folklore. What incidents seemed to fan the flames of their hostilities toward each other? How long did the feud last? Ask students if conflicts between individuals, families, groups, and even nations may be addressed other than through violence?

History—At the Fourth of July celebration, conversation turns to coal mining and Mama speaks of a time when she and her family lived in a coal camp, an experience shared by author Ruth White as a young child. Ask students to consider how Thomas B. Allen’s illustrations tell a story of their own and offer counterpoint to the child narrator’s loving reminiscence of friends and family.

Literature—According to Carolina, Georgia reads to escape into another world. Yet, if one looks closely at her reading choices, these stories and their authors bear interesting connections to her Appalachian world and those who inhabit it. Discuss what aspects of her reading would have significant meaning for Georgia.

vocabulary/ use of language

Ruth White’s first-person narrative is given depth through the use of the lilting dialect of the Kentucky hill-country. Discuss with your students how the use of vocabulary (*pokes*, p. 185), colloquial expressions (“*I feel like an old horse that’s been rode hard and put up wet,*” p. 80), and pronunciations (*kaint*, p. 21), particular to this region, breathe life into the story. Have your students search for and list other dialectical examples used throughout the novel. How would this story be affected if all traces of regional speech were removed?

related titles

by theme

Belle Prater's Boy

Ruth White

Historical Fiction • Abandonment
Self-Discovery • Family
Grades 5–8 / 0-440-41372-9
Dell Yearling paperback

Bud, Not Buddy

Christopher Paul Curtis

Historical Fiction • Self-Discovery
Survival • Family
Grades 4–8 / 0-440-41328-1
Dell Yearling paperback

Nory Ryan's Song

Patricia Reilly Giff

Historical Fiction • Values in Conflict
Survival • Family
Grades 4–8 / 0-440-41829-1
Wendy Lamb Books hardcover

The Year Without Michael

Susan Beth Pfeffer

Self-Discovery • Survival • Family
Grades 6–8 / 0-553-27373-6
Dell Laurel-Leaf paperback

on the web

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about the author

Ruth White was born and raised in the 1940s and 1950s in and around the coal-mining town of Whitewood, Virginia. She holds Bachelor of Arts degrees in English and Library Science. She worked in schools as both a teacher and a librarian in North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia before moving to Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, where she writes full time. In addition to *Tadpole*, she is also the author of *Memories of Summer* and *Belle Prater's Boy*, a Newbery Honor Book. *Belle Prater's Boy* has also been named an ALA Best Book for Young Adults, an ALA Notable Children's Book, a *School Library Journal* Best Book of the Year, and a *Publishers Weekly* Best Book of the Year.

Courtesy of Farrar Straus and Giroux.

internet resources

Georges Seurat

www.artchive.com/artchive/S/seurat.html

This provides a biography and images by Georges Seurat, the French painter.

Opry History

www.opry.com/05_history/05_origins.asp

A Web site for the history of the Grand Ole Opry.

Edgar Allan Poe

bau2.uibk.ac.at/sg/poe/Bio.html

This provides a biography and works of Edgar Allan Poe.