

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for The Dollhouse Murders by Betty Ren Wright

Book Information

Betty Ren Wright, The Dollhouse Murders
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Amy thinks the dolls in her aunt's dollhouse are trying to tell her something about the unsolved murder of her great-grandparents.

Award: Edgar Award/Honor Book; Misc./Other; State Award; Young Reader's Choice Award/Nominee

Topics: Family Life, Aunts; Family Life, Sisters; Horror/Thriller, Ghosts/Spirits; Mysteries, Misc./Other; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 6-8; READNOW - Perma-Bound, Perma-Bound - Read Now Grades 4-6

Main Characters

Amy Treloar a young girl who goes to live with her Aunt Clare because she is having difficulty coping with her mentally handicapped sister; Amy helps solve a family murder mystery by watching a doll in her aunt's dollhouse

Aunt Clare Amy's aunt, who lives with a tremendous amount of guilt because she thinks her delinquent boyfriend murdered her grandparents

Ellen Kramer Amy's new friend, who celebrates her birthday with Amy at Aunt Clare's home

Grandma Margaret Treloar the grandmother who helped raise Aunt Clare and Amy's father after their parents died; her spirit comes back to reveal the true identity of her killer

Grandpa James Treloar the grandfather of Aunt Clare and Amy's father; he was murdered by Reuben Miller

Kathy Sells a guest at Amy's birthday party who encourages Amy's friends to be kind to Louann

Louann Treloar Amy's younger sister, who is mentally handicapped; she adores Amy but often causes Amy to have problems making friends

Mrs. Peck the woman who agrees to take care of Louann after school; she tries to teach Louann to be more independent

Mrs. Treloar Amy's mother, who is very protective of Louann; she sends Louann to Amy's birthday party because she has to go out of town to help a friend

Paul Treloar Amy's father, who escaped being murdered years before because Grandma Treloar hid him in a closet

Reuben Miller the handyman who murdered Grandma and Grandpa Treloar for money but was never arrested for the murders

the mall florist a shopkeeper at the mall who is enraged when Louann damages one of his flowers; he refuses Amy's money after he realizes how bad his behavior looks to other people in the mall

Thomas Keaton Aunt Clare's bad-tempered fiancé, who died in a car crash the night the Treloar grandparents were murdered; Clare had been forbidden to see him because he came to the Treloar house drunk

Vocabulary

constructive useful or good

facade the front of a building

gaunt extremely thin, often from suffering

impudent disrespectful, rude

invalid extremely ill, bedridden

obituaries published announcements of deaths and funeral arrangements

Synopsis

Twelve-year-old Amy Treloar is frustrated with taking care of her mentally-handicapped sister Louann. Louann causes a scene at the mall while Amy is shopping with her new friend Ellen, and Amy is mortified. When Amy's mother picks Amy and Louann up, Amy complains about Louann. Amy's mother is appalled at Amy's impatience and lack of compassion for her sister and scolds her. When the

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car stops, Amy runs off in tears.

Instead of heading home, Amy visits her Aunt Clare, who is temporarily living in a house not far from town. Aunt Clare and Amy's father, who is Aunt Clare's brother, had been orphaned as children and been taken in and raised by their grandparents in this house. Aunt Clare had resented her grandparents' strictness and had rebelled against them. She has returned many years after her grandparents' deaths, however, to clean out the house and sell it.

When Amy arrives at the house, she interrupts Aunt Clare cleaning the attic. There Amy spots a dollhouse, which Aunt Clare bitterly says was an unwelcome birthday present from Grandma Treloar. Aunt Clare listens to Amy's troubles; she then suggests that Amy live with her for a while. Aunt Clare telephones to ask permission from Amy's father but does not get permission immediately. Amy returns home and hears her parents talking late into the night. In the morning, Amy discovers that her parents have agreed to let her stay with Aunt Clare, and Amy's father calls Mrs. Peck to ask her to watch Louann after school.

Before leaving for Aunt Clare's, Amy invites Ellen to visit her at her aunt's home that afternoon. When Ellen arrives, Amy happily shows off her new bedroom, and they later play with the dollhouse in the attic. They arrange the dolls in the dining room of the dollhouse when Aunt Clare calls them to eat. Amy is startled when she returns to the attic by herself and finds that the Grandma doll is in the parlor instead of the dining room, where Amy left her. This upsets her, but she is distracted and excited when Aunt Clare offers to give Amy and Ellen a double birthday party.

Amy's curiosity about her grandparents prompts her to ask her aunt about them a few days later. Aunt Clare does not want to talk about the subject, however. Ellen suggests that Amy ask her parents. Amy realizes, though, that her parents do not want to discuss the matter either. The next day Amy and Ellen go to the library to search through obituaries in

old newspapers. They discover that Amy's great-grandparents were murdered while Amy's father was in the house. Amy also reads that Aunt Clare's boyfriend Tom Keaton was killed in a car crash the same night as the murders.

That evening Aunt Clare gets upset when she overhears Amy talking on the telephone to Ellen about the murders. Aunt Clare tells her the killer was never found, and she then goes to work in the attic. Amy hears Aunt Clare cry out and races to the attic. Aunt Clare stands frozen in front of the dollhouse. She accuses Amy of placing the dolls where the bodies of her grandparents were found the night of the murder. Amy denies it, but Aunt Clare angrily orders the dolls put away and covers the dollhouse with a sheet to keep Amy from playing with it again.

That night Aunt Clare startles Amy by coming to apologize for yelling at her, although she still believes Amy moved the dolls. Aunt Clare explains that she feels guilty for telling her grandparents she hated them when they opposed her engagement to Tom because he drank too much alcohol.

The next day Amy goes home to get some tapes for her party. Louann finds her there and tells her about the fun she is having with Mrs. Peck. Amy accidentally mentions her party, but she refuses to let Louann come to the party despite her mother's wish that Amy invite Louann.

After Amy returns to Aunt Clare's house, she heads to the attic to get a blanket for Ellen, who will be spending the night. However, she runs away frightened when she sees the dollhouse uncovered and a light mysteriously coming from it. The next morning Amy goes to the attic to keep Aunt Clare from finding the dollhouse open. The dolls are again moved to their positions the night of the murders. Amy closes the dollhouse, covers it, and grabs a blanket.

When Amy returns to Aunt Clare's house from school, she is surprised and upset to find that Louann is in the kitchen. Aunt Clare tells Amy that her mother had to help a friend and there was no

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one to watch Louann. Amy is upset, but when her friends arrive, Amy sees that they are being kind to Louann. The evening goes smoothly until Ellen suggests that they all look at the dollhouse. Aunt Clare reluctantly gives her permission. Full of dread, Amy opens the dollhouse and sees the dolls still in their positions on the night of the murder.

After the party Ellen goes to bed in one of the bedrooms, while Louann sleeps with Amy in Amy's bedroom. In the middle of the night, Amy wakes to find Louann has left the bedroom. Amy finds her in the attic watching the Grandma doll crying and pulling books off the shelf. The next day the girls are on a picnic when Louann lets slip to Ellen what she has seen. Amy admits the dollhouse is haunted. When the girls return to the house, Aunt Clare is angrily waiting on the porch. After Ellen leaves, she accuses Amy of acting out the murder with the dolls for her friends' entertainment. Louann yells that she saw the doll crying, and Amy tells Aunt Clare the truth. Aunt Clare sobs at the thought of an unhappy spirit haunting the house.

That evening Aunt Clare says that Tom, her fiancé, probably killed her grandparents. After everyone goes to bed, a thunderstorm wakens the girls. Amy and Louann sneak up to the dollhouse to watch the ghosts, but as they see the Grandma doll about to be murdered, they rush downstairs to wake Aunt Clare. Aunt Clare makes them cocoa and Amy explains what happened. Aunt Clare says it must be Grandma Treloar wanting Aunt Clare to feel guilty for Tom murdering them, but Amy thinks Grandma is trying to tell them something. They guess that by pulling books off the shelves, Grandma is trying to tell them to look behind the books in the parlor. They go to the parlor and search through the books until Louann finds a letter from Grandma identifying the handyman as the killer. Aunt Clare feels tremendous relief at discovering that she bears no responsibility for the murder.

When Amy and Louann are picked up by their parents, Amy's mother agrees to let Mrs. Peck continue to baby-sit Louann so Amy can have more freedom. And Aunt Clare, no longer burdened by the

horror associated with the dollhouse, gives the dollhouse to Louann.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

How does Amy's mother feel about Louann?

Amy's mother feels guilty about Louann's handicap. As a result, she feels protective and possessive of Louann. She does not even like to let other people take care of Louann and is angry when people give advice about her. Her feelings toward her daughter are so intense that she places an unfair burden of responsibility on her family, especially Amy.

Literary Analysis

Why is it significant to the plot that the dollhouse is located in the attic rather than in a more accessible part of the house?

The author intends that the plot be a mystery that slowly unfolds. This requires that the activities of the dollhouse remain largely hidden. The activities are first revealed to Amy and then gradually other characters are able to see what happens in the dollhouse.

Inferential Comprehension

What effect did Tom's death have on Aunt Clare's life?

Aunt Clare spent most of her life feeling guilty about what happened to her grandparents. She thought that Tom had murdered them, but since Tom was dead, he could not tell her the truth. Since there was no way to question Tom about the murders, Aunt Clare assumes she was indirectly responsible for her grandparents' deaths. Out of guilt she moved away from her relatives and has never married or allowed herself to have much of a personal life. She also has a pattern of destructive mood swings, which causes her to lose jobs and have debilitating headaches.

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Constructing Meaning

After Ellen leaves the day after the birthday party, Aunt Clare's words to Amy are described as cutting "like a blade across the chirping, buzzing peace of late afternoon." What does this mean?

This phrase has at least two different meanings. First, it refers to the harshness of Aunt Clare's words: Aunt Clare is speaking angrily and accusingly while all around her is the quiet countryside. Second, Aunt Clare's words cut the day into two parts for Amy. Amy has had a pleasant day with Ellen and has not been anticipating any conflict with Aunt Clare. Aunt Clare's accusations about the dollhouse, however, jar Amy out of her happiness and make the rest of the day unpleasant.

Teachable Skills

Responding to Literature In this story Grandma Treloar had given Aunt Clare a dollhouse years ago that is a replica of the home Grandma had loved. So that students may appreciate the effort and love Grandma put into this project, have the students make a model of a place of their choice. They could use a box as the frame for their building.

Understanding the Author's Craft This story is told from Amy's perspective, but Aunt Clare and Louann probably have very different feelings about the events that occur in this story. Have the students choose one of these characters and retell an event from that character's point of view.

Making Predictions Amy's family seems on the verge of making many changes in their lives and in their relationships. Have the students write a story about Amy's family a year after this story ends.

Describing Actions or Events The newspaper never reported the identity of the murderer because the killer was never found. Have the students write an article for the newspaper detailing the story of how the Treloar family discovered the truth about the murder of Grandma and Grandpa Treloar.