

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

## Belle Prater's Boy

by  
Ruth White

### Book Information

Ruth White, Belle Prater's Boy  
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Book Level: 4.4  
Interest Level: UG

When Woodrow's mother suddenly disappears, he moves to his grandparents' home in a small Virginia town where he befriends his cousin and together they find the strength to face the terrible losses and fears in their lives.

**Award:** ALA Notable/Best Books; Boston Globe/Horn Book Award/Honors; NCTE Notable Children's Books in the Language Arts; Newbery Honor; Publishers Weekly Best Book; State Award

**Topics:** Family Life, Cousins; Family Life, Death; Family Life, Mothers; Mysteries, Missing Persons; Mysteries, Secrets; Power Lessons AR, Grade 4; Read Now with Power Up Recommended Lists, Just Connect: Relationships; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 9+; READNOW - Perma-Bound, Perma-Bound - Read Now Grades 9+; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 6-8; Recommended Reading, Children's Literature Choice

### Main Characters

Belle Prater Woodrow's mother and Love's sister, who disappeared without a trace one October morning

Granny and Grandpa grandparents of Gypsy and Woodrow, who take Belle's son in after she disappears

Gypsy Leemaster the principal character in the story; a twelve-year-old girl haunted by the death of her father

Love Dotson Gypsy's mother and Belle's sister, who lives with the memory of betraying Belle

Porter Dotson Gypsy's stepfather, who struggles to gain Gypsy's trust and love

Woodrow Prater the second principal character in the story; a twelve-year-old boy who, after his mother disappears, goes to live with his grandparents

### Vocabulary

**addled** confused

**admonitions** cautionary advice or warnings

**aggravate** to annoy, provoke, or irritate

**chiggers** various small larvae of mites that stick to the skin and suck the blood, causing severe itching

**conjured** called to mind

**festering** becoming a source of irritation

**pagan** not Christian, Moslem, or Jewish

**unplait** unbraided

### Synopsis

Twelve-year-old Gypsy Leemaster is excited to learn her cousin, Woodrow Prater, is moving in with their grandparents. Woodrow's mother, Belle, mysteriously disappeared without a trace one October morning, but Gypsy is hoping Woodrow will have the answers. Despite being the same age as Gypsy, Woodrow is very different from her. He is gawky and backward and wears hillbilly clothes handed down from his daddy. Woodrow also has the misfortune of being somewhat cross-eyed.

Once Woodrow moves in, he and Gypsy become fast friends. He admits to his cousin that his mother kept reading a poem over and over again in the days before she disappeared. He is positive the secret behind her disappearance is hiding in the lines of that poem. Gypsy discovers that her mother, Love, was far more beautiful than her sister, Belle. A terrible rift occurred between them when Love married Belle's sweetheart, Amos Leemaster. Later, Belle left the family and ran off to marry Everett Prater. Gypsy also discovers she had something in common with Belle--they both played the piano and were unhappy with the way people perceived them.

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Woodrow enrolls in the same class as Gypsy, and he soon finds himself a very popular young man. Classmates can't seem to get enough of his stories, both real and imagined. The only trouble comes from Buzz, who is jealous of Woodrow's fame. While Woodrow struggles with the belief that his mother will contact him at some point, Gypsy is finding it hard to accept her stepfather, Porter Dotson. To further her difficulties, she continues to have nightmares about an animal with no face and finds her beautiful long hair a serious chore. She wonders if anyone sees her beneath her long mane.

The story climaxes when Gypsy must face the reality that her daddy killed himself after becoming scarred in a terrible fire, and Woodrow admits his mother ran away to escape her unbearable life. Gypsy is so overcome with anger at what her daddy did, she cuts off all her beautiful hair. Woodrow then comes to terms with the fact that his mother is never coming back. In the end, both children realize Amos's and Belle's pain was greater than their love for their children, and they are able to get on with their lives.

### Open-Ended Questions

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

#### Initial Understanding

Gypsy feels "invisible" beneath her beautiful long hair. She wonders if anyone truly sees her and wants desperately to cut it off. Have you ever felt like Gypsy? Is there some physical feature you'd like to change? Why?

*Possible student responses include the following: their nose is too big; their hair color is not blond enough; they would like to be smaller or taller. They may have various reasons they want to change: to play sports better, to look older, to appear more attractive, etc.*

#### Literary Analysis

Woodrow tells Gypsy that his mother was reading a poem over and over again before she disappeared. Re-read that poem in Chapter One. What do you think the poem means?

*The poem seems to be saying that people have choices in life and, rather than "sleeping" or not enjoying the life they have, they can make another choice.*

#### Inferential Comprehension

Gypsy and Woodrow are twelve-year-old cousins who have each suffered the loss of a loved one. The similarity ends there. What differences do these two have?

*Woodrow wears hand-me-down clothes; Gypsy is dressed in new things. Woodrow tends to be fanciful in thought; Gypsy is more logical. Woodrow has crossed eyes; Gypsy's nickname is "Beauty."*

#### Constructing Meaning

Why does Woodrow adopt the belief concerning "the place in the air where two worlds touch"?

*Like Gypsy, Woodrow does not want to face the real reason for his mother's disappearance. Rather than believe that she ran off to escape her life (which included him), it is easier to accept the notion that she simply went to another dimension.*

### Teachable Skills

**Recognizing Setting** The story takes place in the Appalachian hills of western Virginia in the early 1950s. Have students work in small groups to draw two large comparison maps of the area. What was this region like in the 1950s? What is it like today? Have the librarian pull resources for the students to use (old and current almanacs, state maps, etc.). The Internet may also be a useful resource for this project. The maps might include such comparison categories as populations, cities, the capital, mineral resources, per capita incomes, literacy rates, climate, etc. Have students use illustrations and keys to

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explain their comparisons.

**Understanding Literary Features** A constant message throughout the story pertains to beauty. Belle was not as beautiful as her sister, Love. Gypsy hates her beautiful long hair and feels it makes her invisible. Amos ended his own life because he couldn't cope with his disfigurement. Woodrow would give anything to have an operation that would fix his crossed eyes. Have students write an essay entitled, "Beauty." Explain to them that their assignment is to write 200-300 words on what they feel "beauty" really is. Give them as much freedom as possible and tell them there is no right or wrong definition.

**Understanding Characterization** Belle Prater was not as beautiful as her sister, Love. She obviously lived most of her life in her sister's shadow. It wasn't until she fell in love with Amos Leemaster that she seemed to shine. Love Dotson was really the "belle" of the family. Amos took one look at her and there were "fireworks." Have students write two diary entries, one for each woman. The entries should cover how each woman regards her physical appearance, or how each woman feels about the other's physical appearance.

**Understanding the Author's Craft** The author wrote this story from the first person perspective. The story is told through the eyes of Gypsy. Have students choose one scene from the book and rewrite it or retell it from another character's point of view.