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Activity Guide

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The Dollhouse Murders

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ABOUT THE STORY

Amy is upset because she has to take care of her sister, Louann, who goes to a special school for exceptional children. When Aunt Claire comes to town to close up her grandparents' house, Amy seizes the opportunity to get away from her family and goes to stay with Aunt Claire. Something is strange about the big old country house, though. There's a dollhouse in the attic that looks exactly like the real house, and somehow the dolls, who look like Claire, Amy's father, and their grandparents, move when no one is watching. Amy finds out that her great-grandparents were murdered, and the murder seems to be linked with the dollhouse. One stormy night, when Louann is staying at the house too, both girls see the dolls move. They confront Claire, who admits that she has always felt responsible for the murders; she believes her fiancé killed her grandparents. The dolls leave a clue, though, and the threesome find out who really did the deed, releasing Claire from her guilt and bringing Amy and Louann closer together.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Betty Ren Wright has written more than thirty picture books, and her novels for older children focus on a combination of mystery and family connections. *The Dollhouse Murders* won the Mark Twain Award and the Texas Bluebonnet Award. Ms. Wright lives in Kenosha, Wisconsin.

INTRODUCING THE STORY

Ask children if they have a sibling who sometimes annoys them so much they want to get away from him or her. Discuss why brothers and sisters can be so difficult to cope with, and explore how the children would feel if they actually did leave home to escape the responsibility of a sibling. Explain that this novel is about a girl whose difficulty in coping with her sister forces her to leave home.

READING ACTIVITIES

Comprehension/Thinking Skills

- "How does Louann embarrass Amy?"
- "What is special about the dollhouse?"
- "What happened to Amy's great-grandparents?"
- "Why does Claire feel guilty about the murders?"
- "What secret do the dolls reveal?"
- "In what way does Kathy help Amy see Louann in a different light?" (Make inferences)
- "Did the ending surprise you? Explain." (Respond)
- "How do Amy's feelings about Louann change? What effect does the change have? (Compare and contrast; cause and effect)

Vocabulary

Have children look up definitions for the words below. Then write each word on a slip of paper. Children can choose a word and can act it out, and the rest of the group can try to guess which word is being acted.

exasperated	shrill	fantastic	impudent
plaintive	efficient	miserable	impersonal
gorgeous	insensitive	timid	incredible

CROSS-CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

Art: Build a Dollhouse

Have the group work together to create a dollhouse of their own. Some children can create the framework of the house out of cardboard boxes or wood. Others can make furniture, curtains, rugs, and other items. If any children have dolls of an appropriate size for the house, they can bring them in. Display the dollhouse in the classroom.

Language Arts: Report a Mystery

Have children write a news story telling what really happened the night of the murder. Remind them to answer the five news questions: *Who? What? When? Where?* and *How?*

Language Arts: Write a Mystery

Have children work in small groups to write a mystery story of their own. Encourage them to outline the plot before they begin to write. Their outline should include a description of characters and setting and a list of events showing the plot complications, climax, and resolution. When their outlines are completed, they can flesh out the story. Volunteers can read their mysteries aloud to the group.

INTERNET ACTIVITY

Before you send children to do research using any of the keywords listed below, you may wish to try them yourself to be sure the sites are suitable.

Find Out About Dollhouses

Students can view and write descriptions of real dollhouses by visiting the Website of the Delaware Toy and Miniature Museum at <http://thomes.net/toys/>.

