When her hill country cousin, Woodrow Prater, comes to live with her grandparents next door, Gypsy thinks she'll find out the truth about the disappearance of Woodrow's mother, but before that can happen she has to face a painful secret of her own.

THEMES
- secrets, family, friendship, appearance, forgiveness

I. PRE-TEACHING

A. Have the class define and discuss these terms:
- ignition, traipsing, speculation, humdrum, honky-tonk, insinuation, convergence, rift, admonitions, bewildermed, mesmerized, impulsive, wistfully, fury, ample, newfangled, swashbuckling, addled, spelunking, dissected, compulsion, manipulate, delirious, hallucinations, inevitable, fiabbergasted, tremor, dimensions, disgruntled, commenced, exasperated, sensitive, agitated, impulsive, typhoid, debutantes, crinolines, delectables, scandalized, festering, dialect, nonchalantly, remorse, depression, disfigurement, elated, frazzle, clarity, eerie, lucid

B. Before beginning the story, discuss with the class the following questions:
1. Is there anyone at school who is teased for looking different? How does he or she handle it? What would you do?
2. Do you have any cousins close to your own age? What do you and your cousins like to do together? What's fun about having cousins?
3. How important is it to be good looking or pretty?
4. Have you ever had to keep a secret deep inside? How did you feel when you could finally let it out?

II. PRESENTATION

A. Understanding the Story:
1. Begin with Chapters 1-7: What is the mystery about Aunt Belle? What troubled Aunt Belle as she was growing up? How does Gypsy treat her stepfather? How did Aunt Belle meet and marry Woodrow's father? What does Woodrow really want? What does Gypsy really want? What does Woodrow say his mother really wanted? Where does Woodrow say she went?
2. Advance to Chapters 8-16: How does Woodrow handle the questions at school? When they go see the movie Rear Window what happens to Gypsy? Why does Woodrow bring Blind Benny to visit Gypsy? What does Blind Benny tell Gypsy? Why won't Mama cut Gypsy's hair? What do Gypsy and Woodrow quarrel about? What does Porter think happened to Aunt Belle?

B. For Discussion:
1. Discuss the quotation from Saint-Exupery's The Little Prince at the beginning. How does it relate to the story?
2. Describe Gypsy's recurring nightmare. What does it symbolize? Why has she buried the memory of how her father died?
3. What does Woodrow mean when he writes that Blind Benny is the only person who can see with perfect clarity?
4. Why does Woodrow make up the story about his mother's disappearance? Why does he finally confess the truth?
5. What does Gypsy mean when she talks about her father's and Woodrow's mother's pain being "bigger than their love."
6. In what ways do Gypsy and Aunt Belle feel invisible?
7. One of the themes of the story is being between "two worlds." In what ways is this idea explored in the story?

III. EXTENDING THE LESSON

Give wide leeway in working with partners, groups, the whole class, or alone.

INTERDISCIPLINARY CONNECTIONS:

A. Language Arts:
1. Have students answer the question Woodrow poses: "If you could live one day over, what would it be?" Encourage them to save their essays and revisit them in a few years to see if the day they would choose has changed. Have them read aloud the third act of Thornton Wilder's Our Town when Emily returns to Earth for one day. How does she react to the day she chooses?
2. Have students learn to tell jokes or stories as well as Gypsy and Woodrow do. You might hold a storytelling session, perhaps of ghost stories or humorous stories, in class.

3. Have students read Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* and compare it with *Belle Prater's Boy*.

4. Have students listen to some of the sayings about appearances in the story, such as "Pretty is as pretty does" and "appearances can be deceiving." They might add some of their own. Then have them discuss what these sayings mean and if they are true or not.

B. Art and Music:

1. Have students select background music that might be appropriate to some of the scenes. Bluegrass or country western would be appropriate, as would *Appalachian Spring* by Aaron Copland. For when Blind Benny makes his rounds, students might find songs sung with a fine voice, such as "Red River Valley."

2. Have students make a bulletin board about the story. They could cover the board with green to represent the hills, show the houses and businesses in the small town, like the barbershop, the newspaper office, the school and the places Gypsy and Woodrow go with Blind Benny and Dawg, such as the railroad tracks. They might add scenes from Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window* and comic strip characters like Joe Palooka, L'il Abner, and Prince Valiant.

3. Someone made up a folk song about the disappearance of Belle Prater. Have students write new verses to this song and set it to a popular folk song or in the style of a country western song.

4. Have students draw a map of Coal Station's two streets and mark where the events take place.

C. Social Studies:

1. Have students find Virginia on a map and learn about this state. What kind of mining is done? Another group might learn about the Appalachians. What mountain ranges do they include? How high are they? What states do they cover?

2. Have students study the time period of the fifties. What television shows did people watch? What were some popular movies? What music was popular? Who were some comic strip characters? What was going on in the news?

3. Have students learn about some of the people mentioned in the story like Harry Truman and President Eisenhower. What might the discussion between Porter and Doctor Dot have been when they talked about Eisenhower?

4. Grandpa cites Eleanor Roosevelt as an example of someone who wasn't good looking on the outside, but was on the inside. Have students find out more about Eleanor Roosevelt and how she felt about her looks. Have them find her saying about feeling inferior and then all she accomplished, especially after the death of her husband.

D. Science and Math:

1. Have students learn about the causes of someone being cross-eyed. How can this condition be fixed?

2. Granny is hard of hearing. Have students find out why elderly people often lose their hearing.

3. Woodrow tells a story about someone going spelunking. Have students find out more about cave exploration. Why is it called "spelunking"? What equipment is needed? What caves and caverns have been discovered? How are caves formed? How are stalactites and stalagmites formed?

4. Gypsy gets a bad case of the measles and has to stay in the dark to protect her eyes. Have students find out more about measles. What causes it? How can it affect the eyes? Why don't we have more cases these days?

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