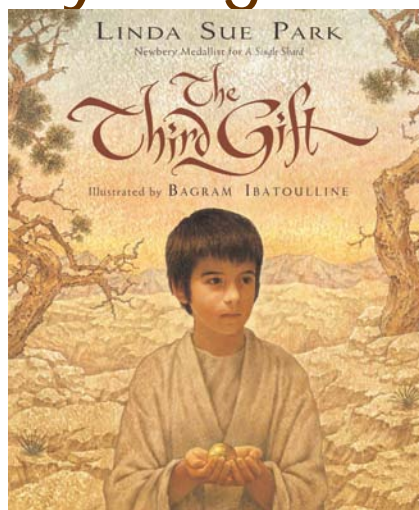


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THE THIRD GIFT

Written by Linda Sue Park
Illustrated by Bagram Ibatoulline



Teachers' Notes

Written by a practising secondary teacher

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SYNOPSIS

Set 2000 years ago, *The Third Gift* begins with a son learning from his father the delicate craft of removing ‘tears’ of valuable sap from trees in the barren landscape of the mid-east. At this time, these tears are used for both medicinal and funerary purposes and are sold at market to trade merchants.

Three travelling magi buy a particularly valuable ‘tear’ that the boy has just harvested. It is one of three important gifts they intend to give to a baby who has just been born.

Written by Newbery Medal winner Linda Sue Park and illustrated by Bagram Ibatoulline with exquisite paintings, *The Third Gift* takes the reader on a truly spiritual journey that is heart warming, innocent and simply beautiful. Including an author’s note, this picture book brings new resonance to the well-known gift list of gold, frankincense and myrrh, providing a unique perspective on a traditional Christmas story and a historical tale of a boy in times past.

THEMES**Father and Son:**

- The boy learns from his father how to harvest the ‘tears’ or pearls of sap.
- The father and son have a close relationship. The father is gentle and patient, the son eager to learn.

History and Tradition:

- Myrrh has been valued throughout history in many parts of the world.
- The way in which myrrh is harvested is a traditional craft passed down through generations.
- Ordinary people can play a role in history’s great events – we are all part of what will one day be history.

Symbolism:

- Trees play an important role in *The Third Gift*. The valuable sap is drawn from a tree; in the Bible Jesus was crucified on a wooden cross also made from a tree.
- The ‘tear’ is described as having a bittersweet scent; baby Jesus being born so that he could die is also a bittersweet concept.

WRITING STYLE

The Third Gift is written in first person, present tense. Given that the story is set over 2000 years ago, this narrative choice allows the reader to feel a sense of connectedness and relevance to the text. The limited dialogue is poignant.

Beautiful imagery and use of figurative language combined with a beautifully structured narrative create a sense of wonder and amazement when the reader discovers what this ‘tear’ is destined to become – a gift for a very special baby.

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AUTHOR MOTIVATION

Myrrh has been valued throughout history in many parts of the world. The Persian, Egyptian, Roman, Chinese and Indian cultures all treasured myrrh. It was used in incense, perfume and embalming oil, as an additive to wine and as a medicinal herb.

This story came about because, as a child, when I heard the Nativity story over and over, I never knew what myrrh was. Nobody else ever asked, so I thought everyone knew but me. Not until I was an adult did I find out what myrrh is and that in ancient times it was primarily used as an embalming oil and funerary incense.

After I completed the manuscript of this story, I learned that the narrator and I are not the only ones to have wondered about a baby gift so imbued with connotations of death. In 1564, the artist Pieter Brueghel the Elder seems to have had similar thoughts. His painting *The Adoration of the Kings*, which hangs in the National Gallery in London, shows the infant Jesus on his mother's lap, surrounded by the magi and other onlookers. One of the magi is presenting a gift to the child, and the curator's label reads in part: 'The tiny, naked Christ Child ... recoils from the gift of myrrh, the spice used to prepare bodies for burial, foreseeing in it his future death.'

As for the young narrator himself, I love thinking about the roles of ordinary people in History's great events. History is happening all around us every day and stories can help remind us that we are as much a part of it as those whose names dominate the headlines.

- Linda Sue Park

STUDY NOTES

- Scan and project the front cover. With a partner, study and discuss the front cover. Where and when may the story be set? What clues is the reader given? What does the title suggest?
- The story begins, 'My father collects tears.' Discuss the effectiveness of this short and seemingly simple sentence as an entry point for the reader. What were your initial thoughts after hearing this sentence? Did the rest of the text on the first page opening change this first impression? Why would the author choose to open with that sentence?
- The text is written in present tense. Why has the author made this choice? How does this help a story that took place over 2000 years ago maintain relevance to today's audiences?
- Examine the structure of the story, taking note of the point at which the reader makes the connection between the 'tear' harvested by the boy and the baby for whom this will be a gift. Graph the story's plot points, showing the building of tension to the climax and the conclusion of the story.
- Why does the author use the word 'myrrh' only later in the text? Why not use this term earlier?
- Read the author's note at the end. Discuss the 'roles of ordinary people in history's great events'. How does *The Third Gift* celebrate this idea?

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- How would you describe the character of the boy's father? How do the author and illustrator convey this character to the reader?
- There is limited use of dialogue in *The Third Gift*. Why is this so? Discuss the idea that dialogue is a powerful writing tool when used sparingly.
- Use the second page opening as a stimulus for discussion of time and place; where might this story take place? When might it be set? What clues are we given?
- The trees are described as 'stunted, knotty, spiny', their leaves a 'dull greyish green'. The father has to see 'inside each tree' in order to draw the best resin. Discuss the theme that true beauty is held within.
- Compare *The Third Gift* with the painting mentioned in the author's note, *The Adoration of Kings* by Pieter the Elder. The lyrics of John H. Hopkins Jr's hymn *We Three Kings of Orient Are* could also provide for an interesting comparison.
- Using *The Third Gift* as stimulus, create your own painting or drawing that depicts this significant event in history.
- Create a script that tells the story of *The Third Gift*. Perform this play as part of the class's Christmas celebrations.
- The final two page openings link the boy with the Nativity story in ways that are familiar to many readers. He is wondering about the baby.
 - Write a letter to the boy in the role of one of the magi, explaining to him about their journey and their visit to the baby Jesus.
 - Have children locate a range of Nativity-related images. Select an object, character or idea from these images with which to create a story similar to *The Third Gift*. This could be done as a whole class project, in pairs or individually. This may require research information.
- The illustration of the spice merchant welcoming the boy and his father allows for development of visual literacy skills. Teach students the importance of 'reading the pictures' in conjunction with the text as they provide another layer to the narrative. Use the following as prompts for discussion:
 - Examine the body language of the spice merchant. From his gestures and facial expression, what can we tell about him and his interactions with the boy's father?
 - Describe the three magi sitting on the rug. How has the illustrator depicted their role in this story?
 - What might the boy and his father look like if they were visible in this scene? In small groups, create a freeze frame to share your thoughts.
- Use the illustrations to explore the character traits of the boy and his father. Examine the way in which the illustrator has used angle, body language, facial expression, colour, gestures etc. Discuss the way in which illustrations reveal additional information about characters.

For those wishing to explore the theme of Christianity:

- Jesus was born so that he could die on a cross.
- The 'tear' is myrrh, a resin used for medicinal purposes and also at funerals.
- The 'tear' is bought by magi who take this gift to a baby – Jesus, who has just been born.

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- The prophecy that a saviour would be born is realised in *The Third Gift*; his crucifixion is also alluded to without overwhelming the text.

STUDY NOTES (CHRISTIANITY)

- Using a children's Bible, read Chapter 2 from the Book of Matthew. Compare this account with *The Third Gift*. Discuss the author's decision to provide the story behind the gift of myrrh.
- Myrrh has many purposes, perhaps the most important of which is as a funerary balm and incense. Why did the magi choose this as a gift for the baby Jesus? How does the gift of myrrh fit with the story of Jesus' life?
- The spice merchant says to the father and son, 'I have been waiting for you.' Likewise, for thousands of years, Hebrews awaited the birth of Jesus. Help students to learn how to link ideas and themes together in texts by pointing out such cohesive ties.
- Discuss the symbolism in *The Third Gift* about the death of Jesus. Emphasise the use of terms such as 'tears', 'crying', the 'blood of the tree' and the bittersweet scent of the sap which lead the reader subtly to the reason for Jesus' birth – that he was born to die.
- Trees play an important role in *The Third Gift*. Discuss the role of trees in the story of Jesus. Discussion points could include:
 - Jesus was laid in a manger made from wood.
 - The cross was made from wood.
 - The gift of myrrh came from the trees.
 - Jesus worked with wood as a carpenter.

Why do you think it 'seems as if the tree is crying'? How does this relate to the story of Jesus?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Linda Sue Park, the acclaimed author of more than a dozen books for young readers, received the Newbery Medal for her novel *A Single Shard*. She has worked as a food journalist, a public relations writer and a teacher of English as a second language. She now writes full time and travels widely, including visits to India, Russia and Korea, to promote her books. She lives in Rochester, New York, with her husband. They have two grown children. www.lspark.com

ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

Bagram Ibatoulline was born in Russia and attended the State Academic Institute of Arts in Moscow. He has worked in fine art, graphic art, mural design and textile design, and has illustrated many books for children, including Kate DiCamillo's *The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane*. He lives in Chichester, New York.