

STUDY GUIDE



presented by
**theatre
for young
america**



Written by Barbara Robinson



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The Christmas Pageant Ever

THE AUTHOR OF THE BOOK AND PLAY

THE BEST CHRISTMAS PAGEANT by Barbara Robinson is a best-selling and award-winning novel written in 1972. She made the book into a play in 1983. Mrs. Robinson has written two more books about the Herdman family. In 1994 she wrote THE BEST SCHOOL YEAR EVER about the Herdmans. In 2006 she wrote one more sequel about the Herdman gang—THE BEST HALLOWEEN EVER. She has also written many stories for many well-known magazines. One other book called MY BROTHER LEWIS MEASURES WORMS contains ten of her comic stories. Barbara Robinson died in 2013 at the age of 85.



THE STORY

THE BEST CHRISTMAS PAGEANT EVER is a play about a family of wild kids called the Herdmans. They don't behave like the rest of the children do. They smoke, cuss, and beat up the other children. They certainly don't belong in a church Christmas pageant. In fact, they have never even heard the Christmas story, but they show up at the church one day because of the rumor that there are plenty of snacks for kids who show up for Sunday school. They decide to perform in the pageant. Imogene volunteers to be Mary, Ralph as Joseph, and little Gladys as the Angel of the Lord. The regular cast of the pageant are terrorized, and Beth's mother, the new director of the pageant, doesn't know how to handle the new children. In the end, however everyone learns a lot about the real meaning of Christmas, and the

production truly is The Beat Christmas Pageant Ever.

BACKGROUND of the PAGEANT STORY

Regardless of your personal beliefs or religion, The Best Christmas Pageant Ever is a great story to read or watch at Christmas time—or anytime. Maybe some students have not been to a Christmas pageant. To celebrate Christmas, some churches will stage a pageant in which they reenact the story of the birth of Jesus Christ. This is what is being done in the play. Not all students will know the Bible story of Christ's birth. The Herdmans didn't. Here is a simple synopsis to help the audience understand the humor of the Herdman's interpretation of the Christmas pageant:

Long ago the government decided that they should count everyone that lived in that area of the world. Joseph the carpenter, had to take Mary to his town, Bethlehem to register. It took them a long time to get there. (No cars back then.) Mary was going to have a baby!

When they got to Bethlehem all the hotels were full and they had no place to stay. Finally, someone offered them a small barn or stable as a place to stay. They tried to get comfortable on the straw to sleep. Then a wonderful thing happened. Mary gave birth to the baby and it was Baby Jesus! Some believed he was god's son and would save the world! The baby boy fell asleep in Mary's arms and she wrapped him in cloths and laid him in a manger on some clean straw.

Some shepherds near Bethlehem were out at night in their fields watching over their sheep so a big animal did not come and eat them. Suddenly there was a bright light. When they opened their eyes

there was an angel standing in the air above them with her arms held wide open. The angel spoke to them. "Do not be afraid. I'm here to bring you good news for all people. A baby was born in Bethlehem who will save the world." After they told this to the shepherds, the angels floated away. The shepherds ran as fast as they could to the manger.

Meanwhile word was passing around the countryside that Jesus had been born. Three wise men had been told by evil King Herod to look out for the baby Jesus. When they told Herod that they had seen a bright strange star in the sky, Herod made plans to get to the baby and kill him.. The wise men followed the star until they got to the spot where it hung in the sky-- right over the stable. There they went in and bowed and gave gifts to the baby Jesus—gold, frankincense, and myrrh. These were gifts to give to a King, not to give to a baby. All were excited and happy at the birth of the baby Jesus, whom Christians believed would someday be the Savior of the world.

THE THEME

Although the play has characters enact the Christmas pageant, the THEME is about the spirit of Christmas: a spirit of giving and caring about each other. This is important no matter which religion or faith a person is a part of.

Have the students discuss a time when they gave away something that was important to them. How did that make them feel?

Relate to the class about a time when you did not like someone at first, but then, later, you came to like them.

OTHER DISCUSSION AND JOURNALING IDEAS

What was the funniest part of the play? Was it when Charlie didn't want to be in the pageant? Was it when Mother had to jump in and direct the pageant? Was it when they thought the church was on fire? Was it the pageant itself? Express on paper or in a talk what made you laugh?

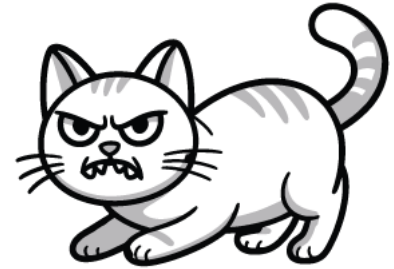
- Should the Herdmans have been allowed to do the pageant? Why or why not?
- If you were Beth's mother, Mrs. Bradey, how would you have handled Helen Armstrong?
- Have the Herdmans' lives changed at the end of the play? Why do you think that?
- Do you think the same mother will run next year's pageant? Why or why not?
- Create and write or tell a new adventure for the Herdman kids. What happens in your story?
- If you were the Herdmans' teacher, what could you do or say to help them make friends and stop bullying people?

ART ACTIVITIES



What if the Herdmans' made their own Christmas card? What would it look like? Design a Herdman style greeting card for the holidays.

Create an attack cat sign for the Herdmans's yard. Draw a picture of the Herdman's cat on it.



CREATIVE DRAMATICS

- Using the actor's tools of your voice, body, and imagination act out some of the different situations from the book and play. Here are a few ideas:
- Enact Be Beth's mother talking with Mrs. Armstrong about how the awful Herdmans are behaving at play rehearsal.
- Enact the cast and the people at church when they smell smoke and assume the church is on fire. Then show how they would act when they find out it is the Herdmans in the bathroom smoking cigars.
- Choose two things that the Herdmans could do to make them "absolutely the worst kids in the history of the world." Then act out the Herdman's doing those to things.
- Pretend to be Imogene Herdman. Retell another student at school about what happened the night of the pageant. Be sure to use the character Imogene's way of speaking and standing.
- Encourage the students think of other scenes from the play they would like to dramatize. They could "improvise" or make up the story as they remember it.

THE MUSIC IN THE PRODUCTION

Christmas Carols are often sung as a way of setting the mood and beautifying Christmas pageants. Christmas Carols are traditional songs about the Christmas season. You may want to listen to or sing some of the music used in the play. Here are some of the selections: Deck the Halls, Away In a Manger, Silent Night, We Three Kings of Orient Are, O Little Town of Bethlehem, and Angels We Have Heard on High. For the scene changes the play director uses music from THE MANNHEIM STEAMROLLER CHRISTMAS compact disk. It might be fun to listen to this recording before or after seeing the play.



INSTANT COSTUMING

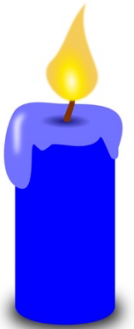
For the Christmas Pageant the characters have to create their own costumes from things they bring from home. Have your students each bring a sheet from home and see how they can fold it or arrange it to make it become a shepherd's cloak, Joseph's robe, or an angel's gown. You can also add some belts or scarves to create the various costumes like they did in the production you saw of *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*. Then have your students use their imaginations and their sheet to create other characters not from the play. See if they can drape the sheet like a Roman toga or a super hero's cape or....



SCIENCE

If your group has a special interest in STEM activities, you could measure out the ingredients and follow the instructions you find on the Internet for Mrs. McCarthy's Applesauce cake. Don't let it burn like Mrs. McCarthy did!

Another STEM activity connected to the play is a making a fire extinguisher using 2 spoonfuls of baking soda, a half a cup of vinegar, and a ziplock bag. Zip the bag shut and gently shake. The gas that the students have made is known as carbon dioxide. They have made a miniature fire extinguisher. Now have them test it by lighting a small candle. Pour the carbon dioxide mixture over the candle and watch what happens carefully. The flame goes out when it comes in to contact with the carbon dioxide gas. That is how the fire extinguishers would work at the church in the play. When you come to Theatre for Young America, we will use a fog machine that heats up mineral oil to make a vapor of fog for the fire.



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