

THE BEST CHRISTMAS PAGEANT EVER

STUDY GUIDE



by Barbara Robinson

directed by Greta Lambert

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SchoolFest student matinees and the accompanying materials fulfill the following standard objectives:

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.1 Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.2 Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.3 Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.5 Analyze the structure of texts, including how specific sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text (e.g., a section, chapter, scene, or stanza) relate to each other and the whole.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.6 Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.7 Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.2 Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.RL.9-10.3 Analyze how complex characters (e.g., those with multiple or conflicting motivations) develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme.

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS *cont.*

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.RL.11-12.1-3 Analyze the impact of the author's choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama (e.g., where a story is set, how the action is ordered, how the characters are introduced and developed).

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.RL.11-12.7 Analyze multiple interpretations of a story, drama, or poem (e.g., recorded or live production of a play or recorded novel or poetry); evaluating how each version interprets the source text. (Include at least one play by Shakespeare and one play by an American dramatist)

NATIONAL CORE ARTS STANDARDS

TH.Re7.1 Perceive and analyze artistic work.

TH.Re8.1 Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work.

TH.Re9.1 Apply criteria to evaluate artistic work.

TH.Cn10.1 Synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to make art.

TH.Cn11.1 Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural, and historical context to deepen understanding.

PLOT

A community church must scramble to pull their annual Christmas pageant together when their usual director is laid up with a broken leg. To make matters worse, the rowdiest kids in town decide they'll take the starring roles. Will the whole show crash and burn, or will it really be the best Christmas pageant ever?

CHARACTERS

THE BRADLEYS

Bob Bradley: father of Bradley children, assists backstage

Grace Bradley: mother of Bradley children, director of Christmas pageant

Beth Bradley: oldest Bradley child, plays an angel

Charlie Bradley: youngest Bradley child, plays a shepherd

THE HERDMANS

Ralph Herdman: oldest Herdman brother, plays Joseph

Imogene Herdman: oldest Herdman sister, plays Mary

Leroy Herdman: middle Herdman brother, plays a Wise Man

Claude Herdman: middle Herdman brother, plays a Wise Man

Ollie Herdman: youngest Herdman brother, plays a Wise Man

Gladys Herdman: youngest Herdman sister, plays the Angel of the Lord

SETTING

The Best Christmas Pageant Ever takes place in a small town. The action shifts between the Bradleys' house, the community church, and a hospital room.



The nativity scene as traditionally portrayed in Christmas pageants

THE MOTHERS

Mrs. Armstrong: usual director of Christmas pageant, on bedrest for a broken leg

Mrs. Slocum

Mrs. Clark

Mrs. Clausing

Mrs. McCarthy

THE CHILDREN

Alice Wendleken: friend of Beth, usually plays Mary

Maxine: plays the narrator

Elmer Hopkins: Reverend Hopkins' son, usually plays Joseph

Angel Choir Members

Baby Angels

Shepherds

ABOUT BARBARA ROBINSON AND THE ASF FELLOWSHIP COMPANY

ABOUT BARBARA ROBINSON

Barbara Robinson was born in Portsmouth, Ohio, on October 24, 1927. When she was in fourth grade, she began writing as a hobby. She received her B.A. degree from Allegheny College in Meadville, Pennsylvania in 1948. Mrs. Robinson is the author of fifty short stories, which have appeared in magazines like *McCall's*, *Ladies' Home Journal*, and *Redbook*. She is also the author of five children's books. "Each book that I have written for boys and girls is also a book I have written for myself," Mrs. Robinson says. "If I don't find the story exciting or interesting or funny, if I don't enjoy the characters or care what happens to them, I don't think boys and girls will either." She especially enjoys writing about the adventures of America's past, and also enjoys doing the research for that type of book. She doesn't outline her books, which for her is an advantage. "Since I don't plan my books in outline form," Mrs. Robinson explains, "I am often in the position of the reader, asking, 'What's going to happen next?'" Mrs. Robinson has written both a play and a film script for *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*. In 1983, it was made into a movie for ABC. She has won the Georgia Children's Book Award, Young Hoosier Award, and was named Pennsylvania's Writer of the Year for *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*.

Bio provided by Teacher Created Resources, Inc.



Barbara Robinson, author of
The Best Christmas Pageant Ever

ABOUT THE FELLOWSHIP COMPANY

Every year, eight young actors spend a season training at ASF. Through rehearsals and workshops, they learn skills in areas like text work, voice, and stage combat to prepare them for work in professional theatres. Many of the characters you will see in *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever* are played by this season's Acting Fellowship Company. In addition, the Acting Fellows will play leading roles in *And Then They Came For Me*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and *The Cat in the Hat* and understudy in our larger mainstage productions. This fall, the Acting Fellows will take *A Midsummer Night's Dream* on tour to middle and high schools all over Alabama.

ADAPTING THE BEST CHRISTMAS PAGEANT EVER FROM PAGE TO STAGE

The Best Christmas Pageant Ever began as a children's chapter book written by Barbara Robinson. Mrs. Robinson has since adapted the story into a television movie and the play you'll see at the theatre. Many books are adapted into plays as audiences love to see familiar stories reimaged for the stage, but the adaption process is often a balancing act of what to keep, cut, and reimagine.

One of the most common tactics used to bring a book to life onstage is changing narration to action. Narration is a device frequently used in books to advance the plot or express the inner thoughts of a character. In a play, however, long narrated speeches are generally boring for audiences to watch. The playwright must instead find ways to show the audience what is happening using the characters' actions. For example, in the book we are told "...the only thing left was the Christmas pageant. And Mother got stuck with that," but in the play it is revealed that Mother (Grace Bradley) is going to direct the Christmas pageant through a series of phone calls played out on stage.

Stories from chapter books must also be significantly shortened to fit into a one or two act play. The playwright has to decide what is essential to the plot, and what can be cut and reworked in order to save time. Entire scenes in a book can become one line anecdotes in the play. This can be seen in one of the opening lines of this production. In reference to the Herdmans, Beth tells the audience "They...set fire to Fred Shoemaker's old broken-down tool house." In contrast, the book contains an entire elaborate story about the Herdman boys setting fire to the tool house using a stolen chemistry set.

The final steps in bringing a story from a book to the stage are completed by the director. When someone reads a book, much is left open to that reader's own interpretation. They cannot physically see the characters or action of the story, so they must imagine what it looks like themselves. In a play, however, it is a director's job to present their personal interpretation. They must work with their actors and designers to present a fully realized story for the audience to watch. So although the book is the same for everybody who reads it, each production of the play will be completely different.

Adaptation can be a long and difficult process at times, but through the hard work of playwrights and authors, audiences everywhere can see their favorite stories brought to life.



Cover of *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever* chapter book

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

PRE-SHOW QUESTIONS

1. *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever* centers around a pageant, or play. Have you ever seen or been in a play before? What do you think the rehearsal process for a play is like?
2. This play focuses on Christmas, a holiday celebrated by many people. What holidays are important to you? Why are those holidays important?

POST-SHOW QUESTIONS

1. Do you think the Herdmans will come to church again after the pageant? Do you think their experience with the pageant will change their behavior at school or their relationship to the community?
2. Much of the play focuses on the change in behavior the Herdmans experience from participating in the pageant. But what do the other children and community members learn from the Herdmans? How is the nativity story changed through the perspective of the Herdmans? What do we have to gain from looking at a tradition or routine a new way?

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

1. **At Your Desk:** Pick a character from the play. Imagine they have just come home from the pageant. Write a journal or diary entry from that character's perspective post-show. How did they feel about the performance? Did they learn anything new about their friends or peers? Has their opinion of the Christmas pageant changed? Will they behave any differently after the experience?
2. **On Your Feet:** It's almost time for this year's Christmas pageant, and you've been placed in charge of marketing! Split into groups to create a commercial for the performance. How will this year's pageant build upon the changes made last year? What exciting new elements are you adding to attract community members who might not normally come to the church? When you are finished planning and rehearsing, take turns performing your commercials for your classmates. Are there any similarities between the commercials? What about them is different?