

A Secret Gift: How One Man's Kindness – And a Trove of Letters – Revealed the Hidden History of the Great Depression

By Ted Gup

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Reviewed by:

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A Secret Gift, by Ted Gup, shares the true story of an act of benevolence by one man, Sam Stone, and his wife during the Christmas of 1933. *A Secret Gift* is a historical rendering of a community's survival through the American Depression, as well as a personal memoir revealing Gup's discovery of his family's past. In this review, a brief summary of *A Secret Gift* is provided, followed by themes relevant to students in transition and recommendations for use of this book as part of a first-year or common reader program.

In June of 2008, Gup visits his mother to celebrate her eightieth birthday, and he leaves with an old suitcase filled with old papers. His mother, not aware of what the suitcase holds, assumes that Gup, a historian and writer, would be interested in searching through it. Months later, when Gup finally explores the suitcase's contents, he comes upon a sheaf of tattered letters and bank statements from December of 1933. He also finds a yellowed newspaper article from the *Canton Repository* dated December 18 of that year, which includes a small ad entitled "In Consideration of the White Collar Man!" The ad begins with a brief reflection on the challenge of accepting charity. The ad then continues,

To men or families in such a position the maker of this offer, who will remain unknown until the very end, will be glad if he is given an opportunity to help from 50 to 75 such families so they will be able to spend a merry and joyful Christmas. (p. 8)

The ad is signed by B. Virdot and afterward states, "In writing, please familiarize me with your true circumstances and financial aid will be promptly sent" (p. 8). After putting numerous pieces of information together, Gup comes to realize that B. Virdot is a moniker for his grandfather, Sam Stone.

Gup has never heard the article mentioned and is intrigued with the story. He calls his mother, who confirms that her father, a successful businessman, did in fact place the ad and mail anonymous \$5.00 checks to families in his community who were bent under the poverty of that time. Sam and his wife, Minna, owned a men's clothing store and were well-off by the standards of 1933 in Canton, Ohio. Although they did not have considerable wealth at that time, they owned a business, had enough food to feed their children, and enjoyed small luxuries that the majority in their community could not afford.

In 1933, when they placed the ad, Sam and Minna had experienced the devastation of working hard to support a family and being successful, but then finding themselves in the position of relying on charity. By remaining anonymous, Sam and Minna, or B. Virgot, allowed members of the community, many times people they knew, to share the details of their struggles, yet not face the shame of publicly asking for support. Gup writes that \$5.00 in 1933 would be similar to \$100.00 today. Although this amount of money likely did not change lives of Canton community members in a long-term regard, it gave them a sense of hope that something better laid in their future. Initially, Sam had intended to give \$10 to 75 families, but with the number of letters he received, he decided to give \$5 to 150 families. Asking families to write him with the details of their need allowed not only for Sam to distinguish which families were the neediest, but also provided a private venue in

which people could safely share their struggles with someone.

A Secret Gift shares the intimate stories of many of the 150 families that Sam and Minna Stone helped many years ago. Gup conducted more than 500 interviews, many with descendants of those who wrote letters to Sam Stone in 1933, and he engaged in years of research through death certificates, census records, and other forms of historical data. In addition, *A Secret Gift* also shares Gup's own process of coming to understand better who his grandfather, Sam Stone, was as a historical figure and family member.

Several major themes are interwoven throughout *A Secret Gift* that provide opportunities for rich discussion among students in transition. These themes include developing identity, functioning as a community, recognizing intangible wealth, and giving to others. The first of these four themes, identity, involves both positive and negative elements as Gup delves deeper to learn more about who Sam Stone was and reveals some surprising information. Details of Sam's early life were never shared within the family, but eventually, Gup comes to learn that his grandfather had been born in Romania and not the United States, as Sam led others to believe through much of his life. Having escaped a harsh childhood of persecution in his homeland because of his Jewish faith, Sam came to America, worked diligently to overcome his lack of formal education, changed his name, and reinvented himself. Gup eventually learns, however, that in choosing to leave his past behind, Sam created false documents and fabricated his own history for government officials, thus putting his name and that of his family at risk. Although new and first-year students may be able to connect to the idea of moving on to a new phase of their lives and determining who they are as adults, the theme of identity development in the book is often overshadowed by Sam's choice to pursue this process through illegal means. Furthermore, as Gup states of Sam, "His was an ambition fueled less by what he longed to acquire than by what he hoped to shed" (p. 139). In his transition from Samuel Finkelstein to Samuel J. Stone, Sam is portrayed as escaping his past rather than being more focused on growing into his potential. Although Sam's choices may have been a reflection of the historical context, this element adds an unpleasant weight to the concepts of self-discovery and identity development.

The second relevant theme focuses on community development. Gup describes the systems of peer support that evolved through the challenging times of the Great Depression that allowed members of a community to rely on each other in order to survive. Several of the people who received a check from B. Virdot had adopted children from other families whose parents were no longer able to feed additional mouths, or had avoided laying off employees long after businesses started to fail. A spirit of connection among individuals who suffered together illuminates the theme of developing community through shared experience. This theme can be highlighted for new and first-year students meeting one another for the first time and sharing resources in a new environment on campus. Referring to the bartering system that evolved during the Depression when money was a rare commodity, Gup writes, "It was the informal system that evolved, bonding neighbor to neighbor, and creating personal loyalties that long outlasted the Depression" (p. 278). Many student affairs professionals and educators recognize that relationship-building that happens early in a college career can form a strong foundation for a support system that lasts much further into and beyond a student's education. Residence life and housing, in addition to student activities units, may provide positive partnerships in order to explore the theme of community.

The third major theme involves recognizing the value of "intangible wealth" (p. 28), or the gifts in our lives that are not concrete. A primary example that Gup provides is that of interpersonal ties and shared values. Referring to the Richards family, who wrote B. Virdot and received money, Gup says, "To their living children, they didn't leave much in the way of material possessions. But what they hoped to pass along they did. 'I think we got their strength, their determination,' says their daughter Beverly. 'They just never gave up'" (p. 205). During a time when children

failed to attend school because they had no appropriate clothing to wear and they cut cereal boxes to replace the worn-out soles of shoes, personal belongings were limited. College students today are coming to campus increasingly reliant on cell phones, laptops, and other personal belongings often viewed by society as essential for success. Gup provides a reminder, however, that such items should not be taken for granted, nor become the focus in our lives. College is a unique time for students to reflect on who they are and what they possess in terms of the values and belief systems they bring to campus, as shaped by their experiences and people in their lives.

A final theme of the book is the power of giving to others. The impact that a mere \$5.00 had on families in 1933 was immense. Throughout the book, Gup provides letters written to B. Virdot to share personal circumstances and request money, in addition to letters sent in thanks after receiving a check. These letters reveal the deep gratitude and sense of hope that a small gift provided. Gup writes, “Against the billions being doled out, the B. Virdot dollars were dwarfed. . . . It was precisely that, its puniness and its purity, which gave it its transformative power, then and now” (p. 28). Gup shares his belief that Sam gave of himself to others, not for recognition or gratification, but because Sam viewed himself as someone who shared similar human circumstances. The theme of giving throughout the book is a natural tie-in to university-sponsored service-learning opportunities. In addition, partners promoting social justice and intergroup dialogue on campus may serve as additional resources in order to provide meaningful programming for students. Discussion around this theme can engage students in exploring political and social systems of power and privilege surrounding hunger and poverty, such as those experienced by many during the Depression, in addition to action that can be taken today to help alleviate such suffering.

New and first-year students may appreciate themes present in this book; however, the book reads more as a historical rendering of a particular time period. After so many details of individuals’ lives, the text takes on the tedium of suffering through hunger, sickness, and the constant struggle for survival. If this book is used as part of a reading program, the program may wish to partner with counseling services to provide support for students who have experienced personal or financial loss themselves through our country’s recent economic challenges. For some students, emotional issues presented in this book may be similar to struggles in their own lives.

A Secret Gift offers a wealth of information and is a book that I would recommend to a specific audience, such as a learning community focused on history or American Studies. In particular, academic units, including departments of history or sociology, or other resources on campus, such as the library system or campus archives, may benefit from focusing on this book as a means to foster engaging discussion for new and first-year students. As a general student reader, however, this rather heavy and detail-focused historical text may present a challenge for many new and first-year students.

Overall, Gup provides valuable historical insight into a time that, in many ways, is far removed from the lives of most young adults today. Unique perspectives offered through this text include the intimate stories of real-life individuals who lived during the Great Depression. Gup shares details of their everyday routines, relationships, and struggles—and also the small triumphs in their lives. The strength of this text is that Gup makes the stories of the families personal to the reader, while sharing his own path of learning his grandfather’s life journey. Major concerns with this book are that the amount of historical detail may be distracting to a younger audience and that the story is contextualized in a landscape of constant infant mortality, starvation, and need, which are topics that should be presented with the appropriate support resources and discussion venues in place. In short, Gup offers an impressive literary work, which, given a specific audience, may serve as a good choice for a first-year or common reader program.