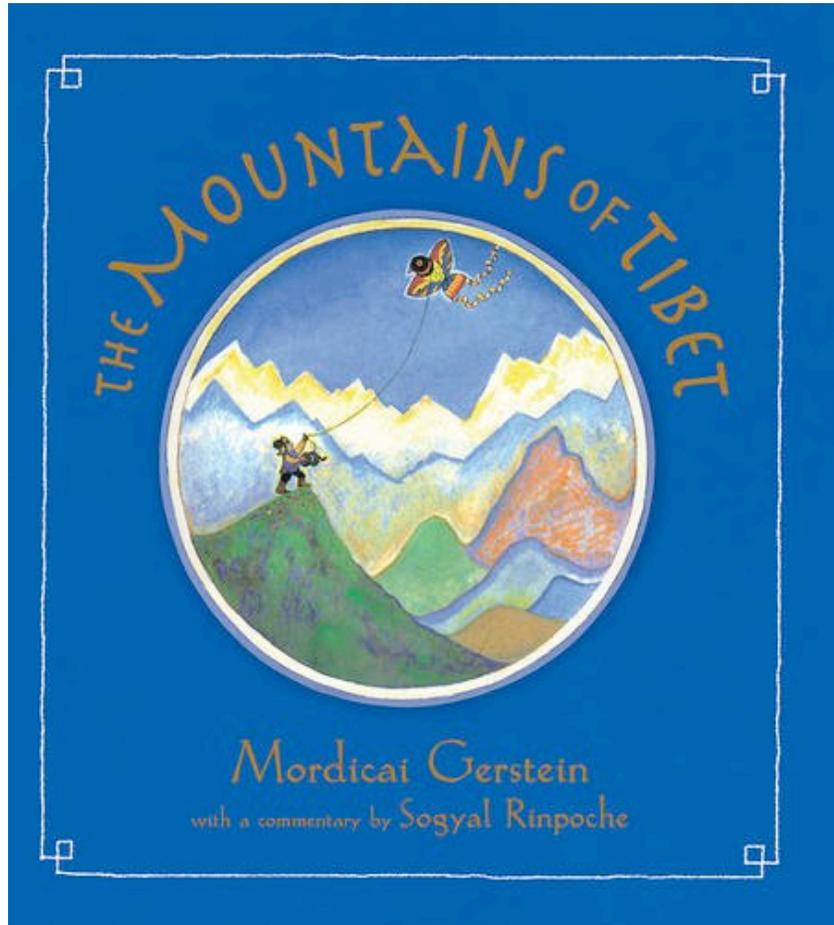


The Mountains of Tibet

by Mordecai Gerstein



A Literature Guide for 3rd Grade
by Caitlin Pow

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Summary

The Mountains of Tibet by Mordecai Gerstein tells the beautiful story of a small boy born in Tibet that dreams of seeing the world. Living in a small valley nestled among giant mountains, the young boy flies kites while planning his trips to other towns, cities, countries, continents and even other worlds hidden up among the stars. He grows up to be a hardworking woodcutter with a family, lives a content life in his small village and dies without ever having left the valley.

After death, he finds himself in a strange place where a voice without a body speaks to him. He is presented with a series of choices by a bodiless voice. These include the choice of becoming a part of the endless universe or living another life, which galaxy he would like to live in, which planet, which continent, which species, which parents, etc. Throughout the entire sequence of choices, we are told that he is making all of these choices without much memory of the life he has just left, as though he was a newborn baby.

After much deliberation at each choice, accompanied by exquisite illustrations by the author, Mordecai Gerstein, that portray the breadth and depth of the options available to him, his decision making comes to an end. The culmination of the story shows us the protagonist reborn as a small girl that loves to fly kites in a small village in the mountains of Tibet.

Rationale

This literature guide was created for the children's picture book *The Mountains of Tibet* by Mordecai Gerstein. This guide is intended to use *The Mountains of Tibet* as a tool for literacy instruction for third graders, although the book could be utilized for a much wider range of ages with appropriate adaptation of the activities. This guide works on building literacy skills in several ways. First, the launching activity works on through activating the children's prior knowledge or schema about other cultures and belief systems. This sets the stage for the introduction of a belief system that some third graders may be unfamiliar with, reincarnation, and will allow children to fit this knowledge in with what they may already know about death, dying and what happens after we die. Secondly, a Mini Lesson is presented which makes explicit the process of distinguishing their own point of view and opinions from those presented in the book, a Common Core Standard for the third grade.

This guide is intended for third grade because it is at this age (8-9 years old) and stage of development that a stronger focus on more mature themes, such as cultural and ethnic diversity, religion and death, becomes appropriate (Wood, p. 139). Death is a common theme for nine year

olds, according to Wood (p. 133), as it is at this age that an awakening to the darker elements of the world develops. Because of this, *The Mountains of Tibet* is an excellent text to present these mature themes in a beautiful and joy-filled way, as well as allow for exposure to the belief system of another culture.

Initiating Activity

This book was one of my favorite books as a child. I would pour over the illustrations and text for hours, fascinated by the idea of reincarnation and smitten with imagining the many lives that I might have lived. I would want to begin the teaching of this book by opening up a discussion with the third graders about what a belief system is. After we brainstorm that a bit and come to some type of consensus that it is when a person or culture has trust or faith that something is true or exists, I would ask what belief systems we, as a class, have prior knowledge of. I would chart this on a large piece of paper titled "What we know about Belief Systems." I would also use explicit language about how we are using our schema, or what we already know, to create this chart.

After we complete the chart, I would let the students know that I will be reading them of my favorite childhood books and tell them a short anecdote about how much I loved it when I was a third grader. I would let them know that the story is about the belief system of Tibet and that the theme is what happens when we die in this particular belief system. Here, I would be sure to use the word reincarnation and ask if anyone has heard it before. After hearing responses of what it is (or what they think it might be), I would explain that it is part of many belief systems and has to do with what happens with us after we die. **Assessment** during this segment would be informal, with the teacher simply taking note of what different children have in terms of prior knowledge, if they seem open to the idea of other beliefs, how they participate in discussion with others, etc.

After going through the details of reincarnation, I think it would be good to have a metaphor that you are comfortable with ready for use to further explain reincarnation to children that are very unfamiliar with it. This may be the life cycle of a butterfly or an oak tree, or any other readily relatable example that the teacher feels would be appropriate for their class. After I felt that the class was at a decent point of understanding the concept of reincarnation, I would begin the book and read the first eight pages, up until the point where the man is told that he will have the opportunity to choose his next life.

Mini Lesson - Distinguishing Point of View & Opinion

Common Core Standard - CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.3.6 Distinguish their own point of view from that of the author of a text.

The premise of the text *The Mountains of Tibet* is that the man is able to have agency and choice when deciding how he will live his next life. Although in the book he chose to come back to Earth as a small girl, hypothetically he could have chosen to come back on Mars or in Canada or as a beetle. This situation serves as a perfect chance to conduct a Mini Lesson for third graders on distinguishing their opinion or point of view from that of the author. Mordecai Gerstein chose to write about a man and a specific set of choices, but perhaps I wouldn't have made the same choices. My point of view may be such that I would have chosen to come back in a different part of the world, or perhaps I would have chosen not to come back at all and instead I would have thought that becoming a part of the endless universe was a better choice. Learning to distinguish one's own point of view from those of others in a respectful manner is an important skill both while reading and in day-to-day life.

The Mini Lesson will begin by saying, "I'm going to stop here in the text for a moment. I want to share with you, third graders, a situation that happened to me the other day..." Here, I would tell an anecdote about a time when I was with someone I loved or respected and they had an opinion or made a choice I didn't agree with. I would then elaborate on how I disagreed and would have done something differently, but that ultimately it was their point of view/opinion/decision and that it is important to distinguish your own point of view while respecting others'. It is important to model explicit "thinking out loud" with phrases such as, "I then realized that I had a different point of view..." or "I disagreed, but I realized that we each have our own, individual opinion." It should be fairly simple for instructors to come up with a true scenario that fits this model - I think it would be much more effective tool if it was a plausible, real life vignette.

Activity - Art & Pairshare

Once the Mini Lesson was completed, I would say, "Third graders, now that we're thinking about different points of view and how different people make different choices, I have a question for you. If you could choose to have a different form - a dog, a butterfly or a dinosaur, for example - what would it be? Why?" Once they had a moment to think about this, each child they would be presented with art supplies to creatively represent their chosen form. Once the children had had sufficient time to draw or paint their ideas, they would break up into pairs and share their choice of form and their artwork with each other. Allow at least ten minutes for this. If children seem to be finishing rapidly, provide additional questions for them to utilize with each other. Examples are: "Why did you choose this?" "Had you thought about being something different before?" etc. Encourage them to wonder why they had different choices with language such as "I wonder why Jack and Bella have chosen different animals? Perhaps they have had different experiences in their life that made one partial to cats and one partial to elephants! Third graders, can you ask your partner if they can think of experiences in their life that have influenced their decision? How are they different than your decision?" Once they have had sufficient time to chat with each other, bring it back to a whole-class discussion and ask a few children to share what was said, what was learned, etc. Once a few children have shared, I would ask children to take out their notebooks and write a short paragraph about "What you've learned about the point of view of others and how it may be different than your own." **Assessment** for this Mini Lesson and Activity would be both formal and informal - the paragraphs written at the end of the activity should be collected by the instructor and read, looking for signs of comprehension such as acknowledging that their point of view was different than the authors' or their partners, understanding of how experience may or may not shape point of view, etc. Informal assessment could take the form of observing their artwork, listening in on their pair-shares and taking note of the thoughts that were shared when the students returned to the large group.

External Related Activities

A wonderful follow-up activity for third graders could be a trip to a Buddhist or Hindu temple to observe a belief system in action that incorporates reincarnation. A chance to speak with folks about their beliefs would be an excellent opportunity for the students and could lead to a myriad of creative writing or art activities afterwards about their experience. Similarly, if there is a student or family in the school community that believes in reincarnation as part of their spiritual practice, they could be invited in to give a short presentation and talk about their experiences. Afterwards, a good activity could be to have the third graders go home and interview a parent, relative or adult family friend about their belief system or a similar related topic. This could easily lead to many in-class activities, such as sharing the stories, writing a biography, oral history projects, etc.

Works Cited:

Gerstein, Mordecai. 1987. *The Mountains of Tibet*. Mexico.

Wood, Chip. 1994. *Children in the Classroom Ages 4-12*. Pittsfield, MA: Eagle Printing.