

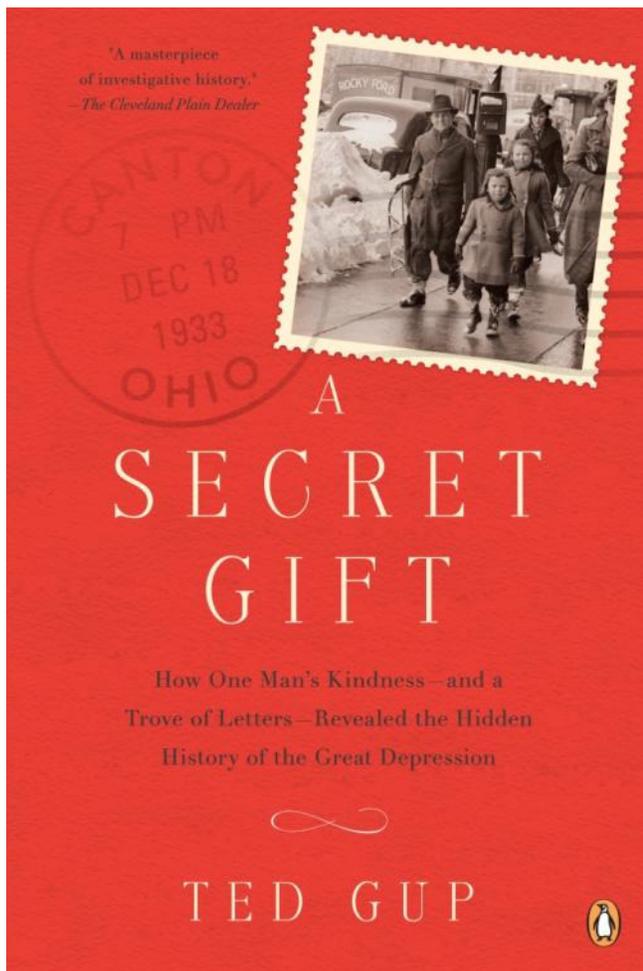


A Secret Gift:

How One Man's Kindness – and a Trove of Letters – Revealed the Hidden History of the Great Depression

by Ted Gup

A Choose to Read Ohio Toolkit



About the Book

Shortly before Christmas 1933 in Depression-scarred Canton, Ohio, a small newspaper ad offered \$10, no strings attached, to 75 families in distress. Interested readers were asked to submit letters describing their hardships to a benefactor calling himself Mr. B. Virdot. The author's grandfather, Sam Stone, was inspired to place this ad under this pseudonym, to assist his fellow Cantonians as they prepared for the cruelest Christmas most of them would ever witness.

Moved by the tales of suffering and expressions of hope contained in the letters, which he discovered in a suitcase 75 years later, Ted Gup initially set out to unveil the lives behind them, searching for records and relatives all over the country who could help him flesh out the family sagas hinted at in those letters. From these sources, Gup has re-created the impact that Mr B. Virdot's gift had on each family. Many people yearned for bread, coal, or other necessities, but many others

received money from B. Virdot for more fanciful items – a toy horse, say, or a set of encyclopedias. As Gup's investigations revealed, all these things had the power to turn people's lives around – even to save them.

But as he uncovered the suffering and triumphs of dozens of strangers, Gup also learned that Sam Stone was far more complex than the lovable-retiree persona he'd always shown his grandson. Gup unearths deeply buried details about Sam's life – from his impoverished, abusive upbringing to felonious efforts to hide his immigrant origins from U.S. officials – that help explain why he felt such a strong affinity to strangers in need. Drawing on his unique find and his award-winning reportorial gifts, Ted Gup solves a singular family mystery even while he pulls away the veil of eight decades that separate us from the hardships that united America during the Depression. In **A Secret Gift**, he weaves these revelations seamlessly into a tapestry of Depression-era America.

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Book Details

A Secret Gift: How One Man's Kindness – and a Trove of Letters – Revealed the Hidden History of the Great Depression by Ted Gup. Penguin Books, 2010. ISBN 9781574202704 (hc.), 9780143120001 (pbk.)

<http://www.us.penguin.com/nf/Book/BookDisplay/0,,9780143120001,00.html>

<http://www.asecretgiftbook.com/>

Also available as an eBook and as an audiobook. Check with your local library!



About the Author

A Canton native, Ted Gup holds a B.A. from Brandeis University and a law degree from Case Western Reserve University. He has been an investigative journalist, and was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize for his work for the *Washington Post* and *Time Magazine*. He taught journalism at Case Western Reserve in Cleveland prior to becoming Chair of the Journalism Department at Emerson College in Boston.

A Secret Gift tells the story of Gup's grandfather and the people of his hometown, Canton, during the 1930s. **A Secret Gift** won the Ohioana Book Award for Nonfiction in 2011. Gup is also the author of two previous books. **Nation of Secrets: The Threat to Democracy and the American Way of Life** (Doubleday, 2007) won the Goldsmith Book Prize from Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government.

The Book of Honor: The Secret Lives and Deaths of CIA Operatives (Doubleday, 2000) won the 2000 Investigative Reporters and Editors Award.

Author photo courtesy of Penguin Books, credit Susan Symones, Infinity Portrait Design 2010.



<http://library.ohio.gov/ctro>

Author Resources:

A Secret Gift: About the Author

<http://www.asecretgiftbook.com/about-the-author/>

Author Page on Penguin website

<http://www.us.penguin.com/nf/Author/AuthorPage/0,,1000076553,00.html>

Writers Talk: Ohioana Award Winners

<http://www.ohiochannel.org/medialibrary/Media.aspx?fileid=132705>

Video interview with Ted Gup and fellow 2011 Ohioana Award winners Tricia Springstubb and David Young, from The Ohio Channel.

Ted Gup on "The Gift"

<http://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/Ted-Gup-on-The-Gift.html>

Interview with Ted Gup from Smithsonian Media.

"How I Found the Spirit of Christmas" (Interview with Ted Gup)

http://www.aarp.org/entertainment/books/info-11-2010/a_cure_for_depression.html

Interview with Ted Gup from the *AARP Bulletin*.

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Talk About It!

Questions for discussion of **A Secret Gift**.

Do you believe the pact of secrecy demonstrated in the book would be honored (or even believed) in today's society had Mr. B. Virdot's letter been placed in a local newspaper during the recent so-termed Great Recession?

Was there any particular person or family whose circumstances or letter touched you? If so, who, and more importantly, why?

Why were some people able to transcend their circumstances while others did not? Was it luck? Timing? Skill? Connections? Can you identify any common characteristics of the families described in **A Secret Gift** who survived the Depression intact, or of those who did not fare well?

In the stories of Rachel DeHoof ("Gumption") and Edith Saunders ("So Little for Women"), Gup considers the situations of particular women and speaks of circumstances particular to women. How was the experience of the Depression different for women than for men? Are these differences also true of our current-day economic downturn? How are different groups of people impacted disproportionately by economic realities?

How did our society move from not talking about personal hardships to airing every detail of hardships on national television? What encouraged society to change? To what degree do people in current American society still practice a stubborn individualism and value privacy and personal responsibility as did the letter-writers of 1933?

Do you view yourself as someone who would have reached out to Mr. B. Virdot? Why or why not?

\$5.00 in 1933 is roughly equivalent to \$100.00 today. If your circumstances were similar to those of the letter-writers, how would you use a gift of \$100.00?

In both the letter-writers' stories and the history of Sam Stone, what does **A Secret Gift** say about pride, independence, and stoicism? Law and crime? Generosity?

Gup writes that Sam Stone "knew how even the smallest of gestures of kindness could make an otherwise brutal landscape habitable". Which of the many kindnesses recorded in **A Secret Gift** are most striking and memorable to you? What "gestures of kindness" have you experienced or witnessed that have been similarly powerful?

Why does the author think his grandfather's death while crossing a bridge was appropriate or fitting?

Some discussion questions courtesy of Wadsworth Public Library's Novel Ideas book discussion program (http://www.wadsworthlibrary.com/main/novel_ideas.cfm). Used with permission.



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Explore More!

Additional ideas and resources to use with **A Secret Gift**.

A Secret Gift Website

<http://www.asecretgiftbook.com>

The official companion website features digitized images of dozens of the letters received by Mr. B. Virdot, along with a list of names of all the letter writers, a biography of Ted Gup, information about his previous books, a 4-minute video book trailer introducing **A Secret Gift**, and a collection of reader-contributed Depression stories.

“Hard Times, a Helping Hand” by Ted Gup

<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/22/opinion/22gup.html>

This op-ed essay from the December 22, 2008 New York Times introduced the story of B. Virdot and Gup's discovery of the letters and cancelled checks from December, 1933.

“Kindness of a Stranger That Still Resonates” by Christopher Maag

<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/08/us/08canton.html>

An article from the November 8, 2010 New York Times that covers a reunion for families of B. Virdot's recipients that took place at Canton's Palace Theater. This event is also described in the Postscript to the paperback edition of **A Secret Gift**.

“A Secret Gift Club” by Dr. Kevin Cordi, Ph.D.

<http://www.ohioana.org/quarterly%5Cfall2011%5Cfall11-18.pdf>

One fitting way to extend the experience of reading **A Secret Gift**, particularly with a group, is to plan an activity that honors kindness and generosity. A group might take on a charitable or service project. Or, like students in Dr. Cordi's Applied Story Telling course, they might collect and share stories of kindness. The students practiced gift giving and receiving by encouraging their peers to submit stories anonymously to “Secret Gift Boxes”. Read about the results in this article from the Summer/Fall 2011 *Ohioana Quarterly*.

Science of Generosity

<http://generosityresearch.nd.edu/>

An initiative of the University of Notre Dame, Science of Generosity explores the essential human virtue of generosity in its many forms. The initiative's website aims “to foster sustained general reflection on the value our society places on generosity, voluntary financial giving, altruism, informal helping, relational self-giving and other generosity-related practices.”

The Sound of Ideas: Remembering the Great Depression

<http://www.ideastream.org/soi/entry/16230>

Ideastream is a Cleveland-area public broadcasting and educational organization. In early 2009, its radio show, “The Sound of Ideas,” aired a segment on the Great Depression in light of current economic realities. Guests included Ted Gup and David Goldberg. Listen to the audio stream or download the MP3 file.



<http://library.ohio.gov/ctro>

Library of Congress: The Great Depression

<http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/themes/great-depression/>

The Library of Congress offers an extensive collection of presentations, exhibitions, bibliographies, webcasts, digitized primary sources, articles, and other online materials to support learning about the Great Depression.

Ohio History Central: Great Depression

http://www.ohiohistorycentral.org/w/Great_Depression

Learn about the impact of the Great Depression on Ohioans, and explore hundreds of related historical topics on this website curated by the Ohio Historical Society.

Canton Stark County Convention & Visitors' Bureau

<http://www.visitcantonstark.com/>

In the Epilogue to *A Secret Gift*, Gup discusses how Canton has changed in the eighty years since the Depression. This site will help you plan a trip to Canton to explore its history and participate in its current arts, entertainment, and sports opportunities.

William McKinley Presidential Library and Museum

<http://www.mckinleymuseum.org/>

The Keller Gallery at the William McKinley Presidential Library and Museum features an exhibition on *A Secret Gift* from November 15, 2013 – February 2, 2014. According to the Museum's website, "To celebrate the 80th anniversary of Sam Stone's anonymous Christmas gifts to 150 local families in 1933, this exhibition will highlight many of the stories shared in Ted Gup's book *A Secret Gift*. The exhibit will feature some of the original letters, thank you notes, and canceled checks, as well as related artifacts, including the desk Sam Stone and his wife Minna used to write the checks."

About Choose to Read Ohio

Choose to Read Ohio, a project of the State Library of Ohio and the Ohioana Library Association, encourages public libraries, schools, families, and others to build a community of readers and an appreciation of Ohio authors and literature. CTRO is adaptable for use in classrooms, libraries, bookstores, by book discussion groups, families, and other community groups.

Explore Choose to Read Ohio resources & toolkits: <http://library.ohio.gov/ctro>.

This toolkit created May 2013.