



TEACHING THE CULTURE OF LIFE:

The Giver

A Culture of Life Studies book review

Note to parents

In Chapter 5, as Jonas goes through puberty, he has a dream about nudity.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

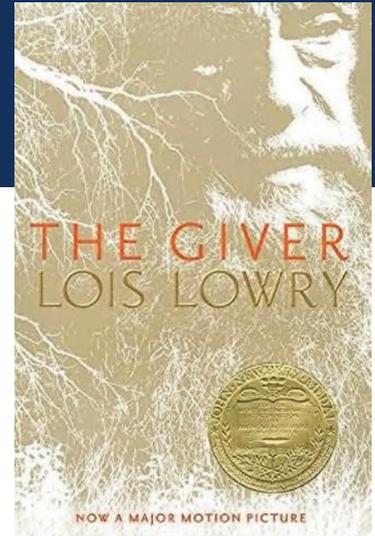
Lois Lowry is best known for *The Giver* and for *Number the Stars*, both of which won a Newbery Medal. Lowry has written over 30 highly acclaimed books for children. Readers might also enjoy the other books in the *Giver Quartet*: *Gathering Blue*, *Messenger*, and *Son*.

STORY SUMMARY

Jonas lives in an almost perfect society where every citizen is a productive, contributing member. One member of the community holds all of the memories from the past—good memories such as sunshine and snow, and bad memories such as war and famine. This person is known as The Receiver of Memory.

Jonas feels apprehensive as he awaits the Ceremony of Twelve where he will be given an assignment in the community that he will keep for the rest of his life. To his surprise, he is selected as The Receiver of Memory, a position which hasn't been filled in many years. Jonas' role as The Receiver is to give wisdom and advice to the Committee and elders as they make decisions for the community. In order to advise well, Jonas will draw from his experience of the memories of the past—memories like pain, famine, and war—so that the society can keep these things from ever happening again. As part of his training, Jonas visits The Giver, the former Receiver of Memory, everyday to receive memories. For instance, instead of explaining to Jonas what snow is, The Giver passes on the memory of snow and sledding in a way that Jonas can experience the memory as if he were really there. These memories awaken feelings in Jonas. For the first time, he feels truly happy or sad. Through the memories, Jonas learns that his community kills innocent children and the elderly in order to keep the community safe and prosperous.

Jonas is the first person to react to the injustices of his community. With The Giver, he concocts a plan to give his memories to the rest of his community, so that they, like Jonas, can at last see the injustices being done in their midst. Rescuing the baby Gabe, Jonas takes his father's bicycle and leaves the confines of the society to start a new future.



The Giver
by Lois Lowry (1993)
GENRE: Fantasy, Dystopia
LENGTH: 180 pages
Recommended for ages
11 and up



LIFE THEME: SILENCE IN THE FACE OF INJUSTICE

The Giver raises many social questions about the meaning of family, the beauty of being uniquely created by God, how a community should function, and whether ignorance is really bliss. Most prominently, however, *The Giver* shows what will happen in a society where the strong no longer protect the weak because they assume the weak are no longer useful members of the community.

Through his training with The Giver, Jonas slowly comes to realize that his community has chosen to live in peaceful ignorance of the past, blocking out feelings, loving relationships, the unique talents of each person, and appreciation for the individual. Eventually Jonas discovers that his society prospers only by the deliberate killing of sickly children and aging adults. The peace and happiness of the society rest on the fact that the community disposes of its weakest members instead of protecting and nurturing them. What is even more disturbing to Jonas is that his own father is one of the perpetrators and that the members of the community do not understand that what they are doing is wrong. People are valued, but only those who are still able to contribute to society in some way. When a set of twins is born, Jonas' father "Releases" the smaller twin, believing that he will not be as useful to society because he is weaker than his twin brother. Father recognizes that Release kills the baby, but he does not fully understand his own role as a murderer. The Committee also Releases, or euthanizes, the elderly when they have grown too old to make a contribution to the community.

Once Jonas learns what Release really means, he realizes he cannot stay in the community any longer. If he stays, his adopted brother Gabe will die and the infanticide and euthanasia will continue. By passing through the boundary surrounding the community, Jonas not only saves Gabe's life, he also transfers the memories of The Giver to the rest of the community. Jonas isn't afraid to speak up for the weak, like Gabe, and put an end to the rampant infanticide and euthanasia in the community, even though it means that they will now know the meaning of suffering.

The Giver is an old man who holds many memories for the community. He knows that his community needs his wisdom in times of confusion and pain, but he merely provides counsel and does nothing more to help the community. The Giver understands the truth behind Release, but does not have the courage to do anything to stop the killing, even though it grieves him. He has the power to choose to protect the innocent, but instead he does nothing, perpetuating the cycle of euthanasia and infanticide.

The Giver's attitude toward the injustice in his community is like the attitude of people who know abortion is wrong, but stand silently by doing nothing.

HOW CAN I APPLY THIS TO MY LIFE?

In our society today, we are often faced with situations where we can choose to speak up against injustice or remain silent. Whether it's gossip, a news report, an act of bullying or teasing, or responding to a disrespectful comment about another person, we know that we should step in and stop the cruelty. By remaining silent like The Giver, we can keep our self-image, our popularity, and our friends—but by this silence we contribute to the injustice. We cannot keep silent in a society where our unborn and elderly brothers and sisters are targeted through abortion and euthanasia and expect them to be all right by themselves. Even if the knowledge of injustice is painful, not proclaiming the truth about the dignity of the human person and allowing people to remain in ignorance does not help conquer injustice. Like Jonas, we have to be prepared to leave everything we love behind in order to expose the lies and proclaim the truth. The Giver shows us that our world needs young people like Jonas to stand up for the truth so that justice can prevail. One person can make quite a difference, but one person alone cannot save our society. It takes everyone to participate and to stand up for the weak.



There are many ways to stand up for the weak and make a difference in your community. Volunteer at a pregnancy resource center. Visit the elderly in a nursing home to reassure them that they are not forgotten. Respectfully correct someone when he makes a derogatory remark about another person. Write letters to your congressmen urging them to take concrete steps toward protecting the innocent. Encourage your friends and family to take these steps with you.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Jonas and Father both see the need to protect and nurture the vulnerable. Father volunteers to take Gabe home for extra nurturing, almost unheard of in the community. What does Father do for Gabe that is technically against the rules?

Father makes a point of using Gabe's name because he feels it might help Gabe thrive. The Nurturers usually call "newchildren" by their numbers until the December ceremony. By using Gabe's name, Father helps the family see Gabe as a person.

What does Jonas do to nurture Gabe?

Jonas gives Gabe some pleasant memories to help him fall asleep. Later, Jonas hopes that these memories will help Gabe have courage and hope on their journey.

Who are the vulnerable in our society today? What should we do to nurture and protect them?

Answers will vary. Some answers may include the preborn, the elderly, or the sick. Discuss the different ways to defend and give voice to those who have none.

2. The community places a great emphasis on correct language (which some members, like Asher, never seem to get right). For example, Jonas doesn't live in a house or a home, he lives in a dwelling. What words does the community use to describe death?

The community uses euphemisms for death, such as "Release" for euthanasia or infanticide, "Loss" for accidental death, and "Elsewhere" to indicate that someone has died.

How does language hide the evil that the community is doing to its citizens?

By using abstract words to describe death, the community hides the truth about what is really going on in the society.

What language do people use today to disguise abortion and euthanasia as good for society?

Pro-abortion advocates will sometimes refer to the preborn child as a "product of conception" or "tissue," but never a baby or child. These euphemisms make the child sound more like a commodity and less like a person deserving of care. Sometimes people describe euthanasia as "death with dignity" or "mercy killing." In both cases, language hides the fact that innocent people are being murdered, with or without their consent.

3. How does Jonas come to realize the beauty of the individual?

Through memories from *The Giver*, Jonas learns what it means to be an individual, but this finally sinks in when he sacrifices himself for Gabe. In the end, Jonas cares less about his own survival and more about preserving Gabe's life. He understands that Gabe represents the future and that Gabe might help change the world. Jonas sees the individual value of each person's unrepeatable talents and abilities as he escapes with Gabe.

Why is being unique important?

We are all created in the image and likeness of God, yet we are all unique, gifted, and unrepeatable individuals. Our uniqueness is a testament to the awesome power of God and the love that He has for us.



4. Do you think any of the citizens suspect that practices, like Release, are wrong?

Jonas' father seems disturbed by the prospect of releasing Gabe, but performs Release with ease when he is called to do so. Like Father, the other citizens don't fully understand the consequences of their actions because they lack the moral education of the memories held by The Giver.

Is ignorance really peaceful? Will ignorance really keep the society functioning properly?

At first, the ignorance of the community helps keep society relatively peaceful. Jonas grows up in an organized, safe, and comfortable community of people who all seem to look out for one another. At first glance, the community thrives on not knowing or understanding how the Committee deals with the natural processes of birth and death. The Committee uses terms like Release instead of death, which keep the rest of the community complacent in their ignorance of the Committee-mandated euthanasia. But a society founded on injustices can only function for so long.

Does the practice of abortion and euthanasia in the community really keep it peaceful?

The community eliminates members who do not meet certain standards, building society on a framework of selfishness and thirst for control. The peaceful exterior of the community is just a facade. On the inside, the community lacks love, kindness, and compassion, while its members are confused, hurt, and disturbed.

What do you think is preventing the citizens from speaking out?

Like The Giver himself, citizens lack the courage to speak up. They are afraid of standing out or making trouble for their own community. They are confused and do not understand the injustices going on in their own community because they lack the memories and experience of The Giver.

5. How does the Committee regulate the family?

In Jonas' society, each family unit is allowed only two children, one male and one female. The Committee stringently regulates family size. If a family chooses to add a second child, it must make an application to the elders and the Committee, who may then provide a child at the end of the year.

What does The Giver show the Committee that makes its members afraid to let the population grow?

The Giver shows the Committee members a memory of hunger, which convinces them not to allow the community to grow in size. By controlling the family, the Committee controls the population of the community, ostensibly to prevent hunger and famine.

What problems does Jonas' society have because the ruling authority determines the definition of the family?

Once the function of the family in society is no longer for the procreation and care of children, children lose their value and become a commodity. When a child dies, the society easily replaces him. If a child is sickly, the society kills that child instead of caring for him. In Jonas' community, citizens only value members of the community as long as they contribute to society in some way (or will contribute in the future). Everyone else is expendable.

CATHOLIC CONNECTIONS

Read the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* paragraphs 2207–2212 on the role of the family in society.

What does the Church teach about the family?

The family is the basic and original building block of society. Family life prepares children for living in society. Through communal family life, children learn the basic tenets of morality and behavior that allow them to function in society. Society has a duty to protect and defend the family for the benefits of its citizens.



How does Jonas' family fit into the Church's definition of a family? Does Jonas' family function like a real family?

In Jonas' family, the parents are responsible for teaching morality to the children in their charge. Jonas' family maintains the traditional family structure of father, mother, and children. However, when Jonas finds out that his family does not love him or understand what love is, he realizes that his family is missing something. By leaving out familial love, Jonas' family's structure crumbles.

How does Jonas' society respect the family unit? What is wrong in Jonas' society?

Jonas' society realizes that children need both a father and a mother so they can be properly prepared as future citizens. The society, however, misses out on the love that exists between family members which binds them all together. Fathers and mothers are chosen by the society and given children to nurture instead of having the freedom to procreate and participate in God's divine plan for humanity. The society supports the family, but only so that the family can be completely controlled.

“JUST FOR FUN” BONUS ACTIVITIES FOR FURTHER LEARNING AND EXPLORATION

High school students may enjoy reading Ursula LeGuin's short story "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas," which tells the story of an idyllic society that holds a terrible secret. Similar to *The Giver*, the story tells about citizens who must decide if they will walk away into unknown suffering, or stay in the community, silent to its injustices.

