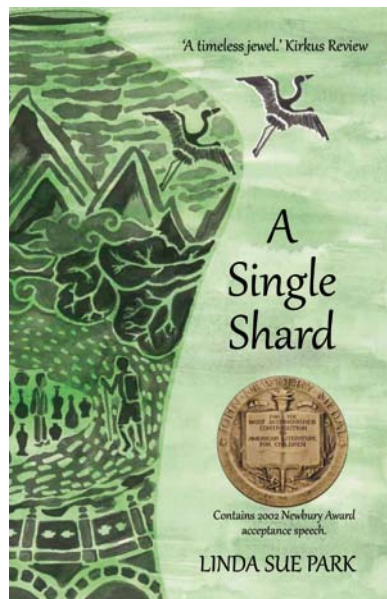


UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND PRESS

# A SINGLE SHARD

## Linda Sue Park



## Teachers' Notes

Written by a practising secondary teacher

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**SYNOPSIS**

Ten-year-old orphan, Tree-ear (named for a mushroom that grows 'without benefit of parent-seed'), spends his days foraging for cast-off rubbish and fallen grains of rice for himself and Crane-man, a lame straw weaver who has cared for him since he was young. As Tree-ear wanders the village he becomes familiar with all the potters but is especially drawn to Min's work, which he believes is the finest. Hidden amongst the leaves of the paulownia tree, Tree-ear watches the master potter at work, taking lumps of clay and shaping them into things of beauty. For Tree-ear each transformation is a miracle. His dream is to someday perform such miracles himself.

But an orphan cannot just walk up to a master potter and ask him to share his craft. When curiosity causes Tree-ear to drop one of Min's prized pieces, Tree-ear must work to pay off the debt, all the while hoping to prove himself worthy of the master's time and teachings. After nine days of unrelenting work, Tree-ear asks the honourable potter if he can stay on, without pay, for the privilege of being near such talent. Sent to the royal court to show the king's emissary some new pottery, Tree-ear makes the long and dangerous journey.

As Tree-ear takes one hill, one valley, one day at a time, he learns what it means to have true strength and devotion.

**THEMES****Relationships:**

- Tree-ear has a trusting and beautiful relationship with Crane-man.
- Crane-man teaches Tree-ear much about philosophy, conduct and dignity.
- Tree-ear develops a special bond with the potter Min's wife.
- The relationship between Min and Tree-ear is one that slowly develops into mutual respect.
- Min and his wife accept Tree-ear into their home and lives.
- The life and death of Crane-man has a profound impact on Tree-ear's life.

**Values – Patience, Honesty, Humility, Courage:**

- Patience is a strong theme in this book. Patience is required in many human endeavours, including the craft of pottery, but also in relationships and one's personal journey.
- Crane-man teaches Tree-ear the importance of honesty and integrity. Although they are constantly in search of food, they never steal.
- Min's work is far superior to that of his peers; he does not boast or compare his work. He strives to make each piece as perfect as possible.
- Tree-ear must build up his courage in order to pursue his dreams and those of his master.
- Crane-man teaches Tree-ear that patience and courage go hand-in-hand.

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**Korea – History and Tradition:**

- Aspects of Korea’s cultural traditions of this period are included, such as protocols and social customs.

**Pottery:**

- The traditional craft of twelfth-century Korean pottery is explored in depth, including the modern-day importance of pottery as national treasures.
- *A Single Shard* incorporates the particular crafting of celadon pottery as an exclusively Korean art form.
- Pottery is the mixing of purely natural materials combined with elements of nature such as blossoms and wildlife.

**WRITING STYLE**

*A Single Shard* is written in third person, past tense. The structure of the narrative immediately draws the reader into a time and place that is unfamiliar, yet still relevant. Its themes of courage, patience and honesty resonate with the audience.

Beautiful imagery and use of figurative language combine with a journey of self-discovery, creating a timeless piece of literature that will appeal to a variety of readers.

**AUTHOR MOTIVATION**

I was inspired to write Tree-ear’s story when I saw the photo of a beautiful twelfth century Korean celadon vase. I was in awe of the juxtaposition of the vase’s effortless beauty and the work and dedication that went into its making. It made me wonder: How hard would someone have to work to gain the skill needed to make something so beautiful? And besides the hours of toil, what else would he or she need? *A Single Shard* is my attempt to explore those questions and I hope the story will guide readers towards answers of their own.

As part of my research, I visited two pottery studios. One was at a university, where I met Po-Wen Liu, a gifted potter whose special interest is celadon. Eventually he served as the expert reader for the book. I also went to the Genesee Country Museum, a recreated nineteenth-century village, to see one of their ‘living displays’, a potter who uses an old-fashioned kick-style potter’s wheel. And, of course, I tried my hand at making a vase on a wheel. I produced something that looked like an alien baby....

This research gave me insight into potters’ art – and a great appreciation of their skill.  
- Linda Sue Park

**STUDY NOTES**

- In the first sentence of Chapter 1, the theme of hunger and food is introduced. Discuss how and why this theme is threaded throughout the text.

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- Although they are hungry, Tree-ear and Crane-man never steal food. Even when the farmer loses rice onto the road through a hole in his *jiggeh*, Tree-ear awaits permission to scrape it from the ground. Why is this? Discuss the morals and values that Crane-man has taught Tree-ear.
- The theme of patience is also prevalent throughout *A Single Shard*. In the first chapter, for instance, the farmer is too impatient to wait for a more secure *jiggeh* to be made to carry his rice. He is also too impatient to gather the rice scattered on the road. Later, Kang is not patient enough to drain his clay as many times as Min, resulting in inferior pottery. Discuss the role that patience plays in this story.
- Linda Sue Park uses beautiful figurative language. Take time to further explore her writing style, discussing with students the purpose and effect of using figurative language. Below are some examples:
  - p.21 – ‘pillow of fluid’.
  - p.23 – ‘demons of sickness...scheming to enter your body through such a door’.
  - p.25 – ‘He felt like a beast with two heads, one ashamed, the other resentful’.
  - p.45 – ‘You are like the ears of a scrawny little tree, noticed by none but hearing all’.
  - p.65 – ‘pulled the string of village life taut’.

As you are reading, reflect on the novel through journal entries. Take note of any vocabulary that is new or that you find appealing; compile a list of figurative language that Linda Sue Park uses. (While some examples are listed above, encourage students to discover others for themselves.)

- How did you feel when Tree-ear ate all of his lunch without thinking of Crane-man? Did it occur to you that he might have spared some for Crane-man? Shortly afterwards, Tree-ear is filled with remorse for having been so greedy and thoughtless. Encourage readers to think about what they are reading and speculate on the outcomes of small episodes like this in fiction.
- Re-read p.52. Tree-ear describes pottery and the sense of wonder and sensory delight that each piece gives. Discuss this description and its importance to the novel.
- Discuss the significance of names in *A Single Shard*. Why are Tree-ear and Crane-man named so? Does knowing the origin of their names make them easier to relate to? Discuss the importance of Tree-ear’s new name, given to him by the potter and his wife.
- Tree-ear is disturbed by a ‘question-demon’ surrounding Kang’s new idea to inlay work and use different techniques to create colour in his pottery. Discuss Crane-man’s philosophy that, ‘once a man has revealed his ideas to others, it is no longer his alone. It belongs to the world’. (p.64) Do you agree? Why? When might the use of others’ ideas become problematic?
- Tree-ear tells the story of a deer in the forest. Revisit this story on p.75 and the moral held within – that we don’t often notice what is right in front of our eyes. How does this analogy flow throughout the novel?
- What does Crane-man mean when he says, ‘the same wind that blows one door shut often blows another open’? (p.97)

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- Tree-ear ponders, ‘why was it that pride and foolishness were so often close companions?’ (p.102) Discuss this question. What does Tree-ear mean by this? Give examples from the novel or from your personal experience to help explain Tree-ear’s thoughts.
- Crane-man gives some important advice about people to Tree-ear on the eve of his journey to Songdo. (p.107) Are Crane-man’s words of wisdom relevant today? Discuss.
- On p.117 Crane-man tells the story of the *Rock of the Falling Flowers*. He tells Tree-ear that leaping into death is not the only way to show true courage. How does Tree-ear show true courage throughout the novel?
- How does Crane-man’s death affect Tree-ear? Discuss both his feelings of grief as well as those of hope associated with the passing of such a wonderful man.
- Tree-ear says that there are ‘some things that cannot be moulded into words’. (p.139) Discuss this statement. Give examples to help explain what Tree-ear means. These examples could come from your own life.
- Crane-man shares his wisdom with Tree-ear when he encourages him to take on challenges ‘one hill, one valley’ at a time. What does Crane-man mean by this? How can this advice be used in your everyday life?
- Crane-man and Tree-ear skim stones for fun. Tree-ear says the stones are like birds flying across the water. When Crane-man dies, Tree-ear throws rocks into the river that sink. Draw links between these two images, discussing the symbolism inherent in these scenes.
- Min closes his eyes in order to feel properly the texture of the clay. Often when we shut down one of our senses, the other senses become more heightened. Experiment with this idea using hearing without sight, touch, without sight etc. Discuss whether or not concentration may be improved by using this technique.
- Tree-ear is very observant, knowing without talking to villagers, for example, when someone is getting married, when someone has become a father etc. (p.45) He ‘reads between the lines’ which is what readers must do also. Discuss the importance of being an observant reader. What elements of the story, for example, reappear later?
- Min takes a long time to create pieces that are expensive to buy. With this in mind, discuss the notion that ‘you get what you pay for’. Why would Min’s work be perfect for a royal commission?
- What role does Min’s wife play in *A Single Shard*? How is her character important to the story and development of Tree-ear’s character?
- How does Tree-ear help Min and his wife?
- Both Tree-ear and Crane-man allow their fear of foxes to inhibit them. Later, on p.115, Tree-ear comes to the realisation that ‘*we are afraid of the things we do not know – just because we do not know them*’. Discuss Tree-ear’s idea. Write a reflection about a time that one of your fears inhibited you. How did you overcome such fears?
- There are many fan-made book trailers of *A Single Shard* available on YouTube. View some of these:
  - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yRVIV0xMjV8&feature=related>.
  - [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9QjGvDPZ\\_q&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9QjGvDPZ_q&feature=related).

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Using Photostory, PowerPoint or MovieMaker, create your own book trailer for *A Single Shard*.

- View and discuss the following interview on YouTube with Linda Sue Park about the importance of writing down stories that are told to us by our forbearers – <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HZquh6iRtUo>. Suggest students ask their parents or grandparents to tell them a story from their younger days or a folktale from their ancestral homeland, if relevant. Ask students to create a story using this as a basis.
- After completing the novel, re-read the first chapter. What clues has the author used in Chapter 1 that lead the reader to the novel's conclusion? Are there parts of this chapter that are used later in the narrative? Discuss the value in re-reading the first chapter of a book, having completed the whole text.
- Compare a map of twelfth-century Korea with a modern day map of Korea. Locate the villages, towns and cities that Tree-ear visits. Examine these maps in light of Linda Sue Park's author's note.
- Discuss the importance and purpose to readers of author's notes.
- Examine carefully the front cover. What elements of the story are represented in the vase? Why is the crane flying from the vase?
- Linda Sue Park has researched the craft of Korean pottery during this period in order to create a realistic and historically accurate story. Teach students research skills in order to locate a range of information about the 'Thousand Cranes Vase'. Include effective search term techniques. Cross-reference sources to check for consistency.
- Locate an image of the 'Thousand Cranes Vase' – Korean National Treasure No 68. Explore the work of the vase with reference to the afterword on p.148.
- Using clay, create your own piece that reflects an element of *A Single Shard*. Write a short reflection that explains how your clay creation represents the story.
- Urns and pottery have been used by many civilisations throughout history. They often tell stories or reflect a culture in ways that other historical sources can't. Find images of a range of such urns/vases on the Internet and suggest students find out more about the stories behind the artefacts. Apart from other Korean pieces, examples may include those found in Ancient Greece, Rome, Egypt, China, India and Japan.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Linda Sue Park is the acclaimed author of more than a dozen books for young readers who received the Newbery Medal for her novel *A Single Shard*. She has worked as a food journalist, a public relations writer and a teacher of English as a second language. She now writes full-time and travels widely, including visits to India, Russia and Korea, to meet readers and promote reading. She lives in Rochester, New York, with her husband. They have two grown children. [www.lspark.com](http://www.lspark.com).