



# The Testament of Gideon Mack

Resources written by Scottish Book Trust

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## How to use these resources

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First of all, the important thing to say about these activities is that they don’t have to be done in the order they appear here, nor do you need to do them all! Pick and choose, modify as you see fit, and slot into other activities you’re doing around the book. We hope you find them useful, and always welcome feedback at [info@scottishbooktrust.com](mailto:info@scottishbooktrust.com).



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## About the book

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*The Testament of Gideon Mack* is an intriguing story about a faithless minister who struggles to find himself and live life in an authentic way. While the book deals with some complex ideas, the prose is extremely accessible, and the story is full of fascinating characters.

A great feature of the book is the lack of certainty about what actually happens to Gideon. As James Robertson explains in this interview, it turns out that not even the author knows exactly what happened!



[www.scottishbooktrust.com/video/james-robertson-interview-on-the-testament-of-gideon-mack](http://www.scottishbooktrust.com/video/james-robertson-interview-on-the-testament-of-gideon-mack)

This open-endedness makes the novel perfect for discussion, as it invites the reader to draw their own conclusions and never offers a definitive answer.

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## About the author

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James Robertson became a full time writer in the early 1990s, after attaining a Phd in history on the novels of Walter Scott and subsequently working in a variety of roles in the book trade. His first novel, *The Fanatic*, was well received and showed early signs of the success to come with Joseph Knight and *The Testament of Gideon Mack*. James has written two novels since *Gideon Mack*. Many consider *And The Land Lay Still* to be a masterpiece, ambitious in its scope and still ‘eminently readable,’<sup>1</sup> charting the lives of ordinary Scottish people throughout the latter half of the 20th century.

*The Professor of Truth* arrived in 2013. The novel follows the story of Alan Tealing, an English professor who has suffered the greatest of losses as his wife and daughter are killed in a plane crash. Tealing’s life becomes defined by his grief and driven by his determination to find out the truth behind the crash. The novel has been described as being “at once powered by action and mystery, and profoundly invested in the emotional lives of its characters.”<sup>2</sup>

1 Johnstone, Doug, <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/scots-guard-james-robertson-has-dedicated-himself-to-preserving-the-native-culture-and-language-north-of-the-border-2043248.html>, 21 March 2014

2 McGill, Hannah, <http://www.scotsman.com/lifestyle/books/book-review-the-professor-of-truth-james-robertson-1-2951877>, 21 March 2014

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## Pre-reading 1 – Religion, faith and belief

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### Learning objective:

- To identify some possible reasons why religion is important to many people.

Display the following statement on the board:

“If God did not exist, it would be necessary for man to invent him.”

Ask pupils what they think this statement means, exploring the following questions:

- What reasons might there be for suggesting that human beings need God? What does the idea of God offer to people?
- If God was proved not to exist, how do you think human beings would respond?
- Do you agree with the statement?
- Do you think it means that we will always have religion in some form? Can other things provide us with the things that religion does?

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## Pre-reading 2 – The relevance of religion in today’s world

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### Learning objectives:

- to form ideas about whether religion still has a place in today’s world
- To assess whether religion can become relevant again to those who have rejected it

### ACTIVITY 1 - THINK, PAIR AND SHARE

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Ask pupils to think, pair and share their ideas about the following question:

Aside from a belief in God, are there any other possible reasons why someone might like attending church?

### ACTIVITY 2 – WATCHING AND NOTE TAKING

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Show the following video to pupils:



[www.ted.com/talks/alain\\_de\\_botton\\_atheism\\_2\\_0.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/alain_de_botton_atheism_2_0.html). It’s probably unnecessary to show the whole video; it should be enough to watch up until 6:10.

In the video, Alain de Botton suggests that lessons and guidance can be drawn from customs and teachings of religion, even if we don’t believe in divine entities. Reactions to de Botton’s ideas have varied widely, and so the video gives a good opportunity for debate and discussion.

During the video, ask pupils to note down answers to the questions in the worksheet in Appendix 1. You may wish to watch once and then watch again, pausing for pupils to note down their answers or discuss

### **ACTIVITY 3 – PLENARY**

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Revisit the questions asked at the beginning of the lesson. Do pupils still hold to their views? Is it necessary for someone to believe in God in order to attend church and participate in religious customs?

After this, you can take the idea one step further by asking pupils whether it is necessary to believe in God in order to become a priest or minister. Ask pupils to think, pair and share, coming up with three ideas about what they consider a minister's duties to be. Collate some ideas, and ask your class if they think a minister needs to believe in God to carry out these duties effectively.

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## **Persuasive writing/writing folio**

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After these activities, you could ask pupils to write a short persuasive text appealing to those who do not participate in the community activities of the church. explaining what religion has to offer them. This would need to draw on similar ideas to those expressed by de Botton, but also the wider work of the church. There are some good examples here:

 [www.churchofscotland.org.uk/serve/go\\_for\\_it/stories\\_of\\_change](http://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/serve/go_for_it/stories_of_change)

You could also set a persuasive, discursive or argumentative task for the folio, exploring the relevance of religion in the modern world. This would require active engagement with de Botton's ideas: pupils should explore and/or challenge these.

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## **Character development – the impact of Gideon's childhood**

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### **Learning objectives:**

- To identify all the ways in which Gideon sabotages his own happiness
- To identify possible reasons why he does this

### **ACTIVITY 1 – DISCUSSION**

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We all assume that everyone wants to be happy, but Gideon makes decisions which seemed destined to lead to unhappiness.

Ask your pupils to come up with three things which they think are important for a happy life. This will hopefully help you identify areas such as honesty, strong relationships and an enjoyable career, as well as any other areas which may be relevant in the forthcoming discussions.

After this, ask them to come up with two decisions Gideon makes in his life which seem to make him unhappy (answers will mainly include his decision to become a priest and his decision to marry Jenny). Now, ask them why they think Gideon would deliberately sabotage his own happiness in this way.

After the pupils have suggested and discussed some possible reasons, you can move on to the next activity, where they can investigate how Gideon's childhood may have contributed to his dishonest adult life.

## ACTIVITY 2 – DISCUSSION, NOTE TAKING

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Your pupils may already have begun to identify the influence of Gideon's childhood in the previous activity, so this activity will give you a chance to further explore this idea.

According to Elsie, Gideon's stunted emotions are due to his "terrible childhood which strangled love at every turn". It could certainly be argued that the dishonesty of Gideon's adult life can be traced back to events in his childhood.

Introduce your pupils to the idea of nature vs. nurture using the following resource from TES (you will need to create a free account):



[www.tes.co.uk/teaching-resource/Nature-Nurture-6017924/](http://www.tes.co.uk/teaching-resource/Nature-Nurture-6017924/)

After some discussion of the issues raised, your pupils can investigate the case for the "nurture" argument by looking at the effect of Gideon's childhood.

Ask pupils to complete the table on the next page (there is also a printable copy in Appendix 2), linking Gideon's adult life to factors in his childhood which may have influenced them. If you do the Story Mapping task mentioned earlier in this resource, you could ask pupils to refer to this to remind them of some key scenes from Gideon's childhood.

<b>Gideon's life as an adult</b>	<b>Childhood events which may have influenced this</b>
Gideon's atheism	
Gideon's preference for hard facts	
Generally, Gideon's tendency to do things that don't make him happy, like marrying Jenny and becoming a minister	

Possible answers are given in the table below, for teacher reference:

<b>Gideon's life as an adult</b>	<b>Childhood events which may have influenced this</b>
Gideon's atheism	His encounter with Alan Busby
Gideon's preference for hard facts	Father's insistence on not having fiction in the house, bar Walter Scott's novels
Generally, Gideon's tendency to do things that don't make him happy, like marrying Jenny and becoming a minister	Father's dismissal of 'the pursuit of happiness'  Father's discovery of Gideon watching TV  His mother and father's marriage, which was not based on personal happiness

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## **The different viewpoints of religion in the novel**

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### **HOT SEATING**

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There are many different views held by many different characters in the novel. Perhaps the most polarised are Peter MacMurray and Catherine Craigie, but you can also choose to explore the views of John and Elsie Moffat, Gideon's father, the Devil, Lorna Sprott and of course Gideon himself, through hot seating.

Ask pupils to pair up, and ask one pupil to take the role of a character, and the other of an interviewer. Ask each pair to come up with questions for the character about their religious views, and also the reasons behind some of the things they do in the novel.

You can record these interviews as a revision resource for all pupils.

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## Consolidating the learning

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Show pupils the following interview with Keith Gray, where Keith speaks about recommending the book to others:



[www.scottishbooktrust.com/video/keith-gray-interview-on-the-testament-of-gideon-mack](http://www.scottishbooktrust.com/video/keith-gray-interview-on-the-testament-of-gideon-mack)

Ask them to imagine that they are recommending the book to others via Twitter, where their recommendations are limited to 140 characters. Ask them to compose recommendations based on one of the following:

- Character;
- Themes and ideas;
- Relevance in today's world.

You can of course add to this list!

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## Writing folio/expressive writing

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Gideon is a contradictory character: a minister who does not believe in God. This is a familiar feature of great writing: for example, in Road Dahl's *Lamb to the Slaughter*, meek housewife Mary Maloney becomes an unrepentant murderer, and in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Mr. Kurtz has two identities, that of an eloquent, upstanding citizen in Europe and a savage tyrant in Africa.

Ask your pupils to come up with their own ideas for contradictory characters: for example, a bullying headmaster with a sensitive, caring side, or a policeman who constantly breaks the law. You could then base a writing task for their folio around this idea: perhaps a character with two sides faces a situation where one side must win out, or faces a desperate struggle to keep one side a secret. Perhaps one side is only revealed at the end of the story!

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## Some key quotes

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“I reckon even the most convinced atheist must get a bit nervous when the time comes.” (Amelia Wishaw).

“If I could be so false-faced when it came to a vote on the future of my country, why should the fact that I didn’t believe in God debar me from the ministry? Not only might faith be unnecessary in a modern minister, it might even not be desirable. There was so much talk about how churches needed to connect with people who had lost their faith or never had any: perhaps what the Kirk needed was an influx of faithless ministers.” (Gideon)

“...if faith was essential, I would find out. I would be found out.” (Gideon)

“...charity for the sake of charity is not enough. It must come from faith.” (Peter MacMurray)

“They unchain the swings, turn the churches into casinos and mock anybody who still believes in him. He’s a very easy target. And who does he get left with? Fanatics and maniacs of every faith and every persuasion, who want to kill the heretics and blow themselves to pieces in his name.” (The Devil)

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# Appendix 1

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## **ALAIN DE BOTTON – A NEW VISION OF RELIGION FOR THE 21ST CENTURY**

As you watch this video, in which Alain de Botton explains how religion might work in modern society, you should note down answers to the questions at the bottom of this sheet.

As you watch, you may find the following definitions helpful:

**Secular** – not believing in religion, not taking guidance from religious messages.

**Doctrine** – the beliefs held by a religion.

**Didactic learning** – learning which is intended to give us instructions that we should follow exactly as instructed.

**Liberal** – in the context of this video, to be liberal means to have a strong belief in free thinking, rather than simply believing what you are told without question.

**Sermon** – a talk about a religious subject, intended to give guidance or instruction in how to live life

### **QUESTIONS**

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- What do you think Alain de Botton means when he says, “It’s too easy to dismiss *the whole* of religion?” (0:53)
- What do you think he means by “stealing from religion”? (02:29)
- What do you think he means by saying that “the secular world is full of holes”? (02:48)
- Do you agree that we are “in severe need of assistance” in understanding how to live our lives? (5:00)
- “Didactic learning” essentially means learning which is intended to give us instructions that we should follow. Do you agree that this type of learning is beneficial to us? (05:13)?

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## Appendix 2

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Look at the table below. In the left hand column, you will find character traits which Gideon displays as an adult. It is possible that these character traits have been influenced by certain events in Gideon's childhood.

In the right hand column, write down some events from Gideon's childhood which may have influenced his behaviour and beliefs as an adult.

<b>Gideon's life as an adult</b>	<b>Childhood events which may have influenced this</b>
Gideon's atheism	
Gideon's preference for hard facts	
Generally, Gideon's tendency to do things that don't make him happy, like marrying Jenny and becoming a minister	

