

## A Choose to Read Ohio Toolkit

Use this toolkit to plan book discussions, library programs, or classroom activities.

Meet Ohio author Shelley Pearsall as she introduces readers to a world of outsider art and redemption where things are not always what they seem.

Select from a range of discussion questions and extension activities to deepen the experience of reading *The Seventh Most Important Thing*.

Discover additional resources on the real artist James Hampton and his masterpiece, *The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations' Millennium General Assembly*.

# The Seventh Most Important Thing

By Shelley Pearsall



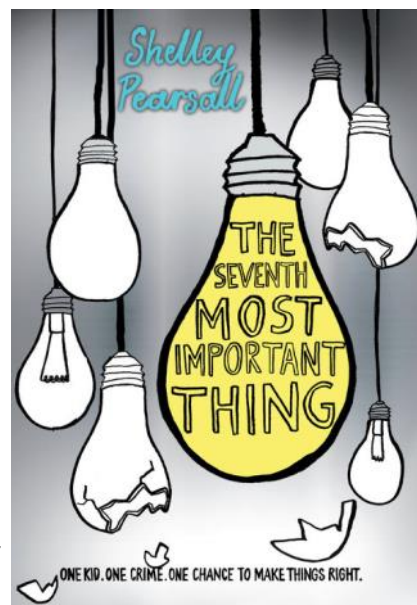
## About the Book

*One kid. One crime. One chance to make things right.*

It was a bitterly cold day when Arthur T. Owens grabbed a brick and hurled it at the trash picker. Arthur had his reasons, and the brick hit the Junk Man in the arm, not the head. But none of that matters to the judge—he is ready to send Arthur to juvie for the foreseeable future. Amazingly, it's the Junk Man himself who offers an alternative: 120 hours of community service...working for him.

Arthur is given a rickety shopping cart and a list of the Seven Most Important Things: glass bottles, foil, cardboard, pieces of wood, lightbulbs, coffee cans, and mirrors. He can't believe it—is he really supposed to rummage through people's trash? But it isn't long before Arthur realizes there's more to the Junk Man than meets the eye, and the "trash" he's collecting is being transformed into something more precious than anyone could imagine...

Inspired by the work of American folk artist James Hampton, award-winning author Shelley Pearsall has crafted an affecting and redemptive novel about discovering what shines within us all, even when life seems full of darkness.



Book jacket image and book description courtesy of Penguin Random House. Used with permission.

## Book Details

***The Seventh Most Important Thing*** by Shelley Pearsall.

Penguin Random House, 2015. ISBN 9780553497281. Ages 10+. 278 pages.

Leveled Reading: AR Points 8.0. ATOS Book Level 5.1. 760 Lexile.

[penguinrandomhouse.com/books/240554/the-seventh-most-important-thing-by-shelley-pearsall](https://penguinrandomhouse.com/books/240554/the-seventh-most-important-thing-by-shelley-pearsall)

Available as an ebook through the Ohio Digital Library: [ohiodigitallibrary.com](https://ohiodigitallibrary.com)

- 2016 ALSC/ALA Notable Children's Book
- 2016 Ohioana Book Award for Middle Grade/Young Adult Literature
- Booklist Top 10 Historical Fiction 2016
- Dorothy Canfield Fisher Award nominee
- Junior Library Guild
- Kids' Indie Next List Pick
- Kirkus Reviews Best Books of 2015
- New York Public Library Top 100



Biographical information  
courtesy Shelley Pearsall.  
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House.

Photo by Tara Carman.

## About the Author

Shelley Pearsall is the author of six books for middle grade and teen readers. Her inspiring and thought-provoking novels are used in classrooms nationwide, and she is a popular school speaker. Prior to becoming a full-time author, Shelley was a teacher in the public schools, as well as working in the education departments of several parks and history museums where she created museum theater programs. She has a B.A. from The College of Wooster and M.Ed. from John Carroll University.

Shelley's first book, ***Trouble Don't Last*** (2002) received the Scott O'Dell Award for Historical Fiction, and was an inaugural Choose to Read Ohio selection. ***All of the Above*** and ***The Seventh Most Important Thing*** are ALA Notable Books. All six of Shelley's books have appeared on numerous state reading award lists.

As an author, Shelley is committed to bringing history to life for readers in engaging and compelling ways. Since childhood, she has written stories with diverse characters and voices because she believes in the possibilities of books to build bridges and start conversations. Frequently, her novels feature themes of personal courage and overcoming adversity in unexpected and surprising ways.

Today, Shelley lives in the beautiful Cuyahoga Valley National Park in Ohio with her British husband, Mike, and their shelter cat named Charlie. When Shelley isn't writing or visiting schools, Shelley and Mike love to travel the world in search of new stories and adventures.

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## Author Resources

Shelley Pearsall's official website

[shelleypearsall.com](http://shelleypearsall.com)

Author page on Penguin Random House website

[penguinrandomhouse.com/authors/23480/shelley-pearsall](http://penguinrandomhouse.com/authors/23480/shelley-pearsall)

Shelley Pearsall discusses her book and shares writing advice on Brightly (video)

[youtu.be/SVd-5qw4GCw](https://youtu.be/SVd-5qw4GCw)

For publicity and speaking engagement inquiries:

[shelleypearsall.com/author-programs](http://shelleypearsall.com/author-programs)

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## Talk About It!

Topics to share when discussing ***The Seventh Most Important Thing*** with young readers.

**Spoiler warning! Some discussion questions refer to key elements in the book. Do not read if you do not want to find out what happens.**

- Common reactions to the loss of a loved one are denial, anger, bargaining (thoughts about what could have been done to prevent the loss), depression, and acceptance. Learn more at [medlineplus.gov/ency/article/001530.htm](https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/001530.htm). Did Arthur illustrate these stages?
- When Shelley Pearsall describes Squeak and juvenile detention (a.k.a. "juvie"), she uses humor. How is humor used to lighten what is a serious story?

**"Mr. Hampton  
had wanted  
him to find  
seven things  
to complete  
the project.  
The building  
blocks, he'd  
called them.  
But Arthur  
had also  
suspected  
they were  
the building  
blocks of his  
redemption  
too."**

## Go Further!

*Ideas for extending the experience of reading **The Seventh Most Important Thing**.*

**Educators:** Every CTRO book may be used to support Ohio's English Language Arts reading, writing, and speaking and listening standards. Other Learning Standards, such as Social Studies: Geography: Human Systems (Grade 5) also apply. Discussion questions and educational activities for **The Seventh Most Important Thing** align with Learning Standards for Grades 5-8.

**Librarians, parents, and others:** These activities are also for library programs, family activities, and other projects. Learning Standards define what students should know and be able to do at each grade. For more information, see the Ohio Department of Education website, [education.ohio.gov](http://education.ohio.gov). From the Topics dropdown menu, click on "Learning in Ohio".

Collect discarded objects to create your own masterpiece sculpture. Create a unifying theme for all the objects. Critically select each object with the thought of how it will work within the entire piece. Find ways to transform objects, giving them new meaning and life. Let your imagination go wild, experiment, and have fun! When complete, answer the following:

- How do the artwork's elements produce certain visual effects and create meaning?
- How was experimentation used to create a new work of art?
- Why were certain objects included while others were not? Give specific examples.

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**The Seventh Most Important Thing** is set in Washington D.C. between 1963 and 1964. Research news events in the United States during that time period, using resources available to students through INFOhio ([infohio.org](http://infohio.org)) and to all Ohio residents through Ohio Web Library ([ohioweblibrary.org](http://ohioweblibrary.org)).

- Do events in the early 1960's mirror those of today?
- Do you believe the time period, a period before the Internet and mass mobile phone usage, played a role in how the characters acted?
- How might the story and characters be different if the plot took place today?
- Do you believe our society today is more or less forgiving than in the 1960s?

*More on the next page!*

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## Talk About It! (continued)

- What are the seven most important things and how do they work together?
- What connections can be drawn between Arthur and the discarded objects James Hampton collects?
- After being consulted by James Hampton, Judge Warner hands down an unconventional sentence. Is Arthur's sentence of collecting junk on behalf of James really his repayment to society? Why or why not?
- How are appearances disputed within the story? Beyond James, in what ways do appearances contrast the actions of Officer Billie, Groovy Jim, Squeak, and Judge Warner?
- How does redemption play into Arthur's transformation from an angry, grieving son?
- In Guam, James took broken objects and transformed them by creating his first piece. How does art play a role in saving both Arthur and James?
- Symbolism plays a significant role in *The Throne of the Third Heaven*. Describe the significance of the wings, stars, crowns and lightbulbs in the artwork.
- James Hampton's favorite bible verse states, "Where there is no vision, the people perish." What is the verse's significance in the story?
- How is Arthur able to move past the death of James without violence?

## Go Further! (continued)

Serious behavioral and mental health issues of anger and depression can lead to violence and drug abuse. At the time of writing, Ohio Revised Code 3313.60 states that health education in public schools for seventh and eighth grades must include the harmful effects and legal restrictions of drug abuse, but the code does not address behavioral or mental health.

- Do you believe public schools adequately address behavioral and mental health?
- Do you believe there are more resources today for someone like Arthur to seek help?
- Do you believe a thirteen-year-old today would use a brick as a weapon?
- Do you think our society today is more, less or the same regarding violence?

## Explore More!

*Additional ideas and resources to use with **The Seventh Most Important Thing**.*

### Brightly Family Book Club: *The Seventh Most Important Thing*

[readbrightly.com/family-book-club-the-seventh-most-important-thing/](http://readbrightly.com/family-book-club-the-seventh-most-important-thing/)

Discover book club ideas, snacks, and discussion materials as well as additional games and activities with Brightly, a literature resource started in partnership with Penguin Random House.

### View artwork by Elijah Pierce at the Columbus State Community College Library

[library.csc.edu/c.php?g=126555&p=828340](http://library.csc.edu/c.php?g=126555&p=828340)

Like James Hampton, Elijah Pierce was not formally trained, used religious motifs in many of his carvings, and was for many years an unknown artist. Unlike Hampton, Pierce became a celebrated artist late in his life.

### View artwork by artist Aminah Robinson at the Columbus Museum of Art

[columbusmuseum.org/embark-collection/pages/PRT32175/?sid=15&x=8814](http://columbusmuseum.org/embark-collection/pages/PRT32175/?sid=15&x=8814)

Aminah Brenda Lynn Robinson used found materials to create beautiful tapestries of everyday life. As with James Hampton's art, certain materials were central to her body of work. Learn how fiber arts and buttons played a critical role in many of her pieces.

### Learn more about the real James Hampton

[americanart.si.edu/collections/search/artist/?id=2052](http://americanart.si.edu/collections/search/artist/?id=2052)

From the Smithsonian American Art Museum, explore what little biographical information is known about Hampton, and view high-resolution images of *The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations' Millennium General Assembly* and accompanying crowns.



*Image of The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations' Millennium General Assembly courtesy of the Smithsonian American Art Museum. Used with permission per [americanart.si.edu/collections/rights](http://americanart.si.edu/collections/rights).*

### Teen grieving and the Dougy Center

[dougy.org/grief-resources/help-for-teens](http://dougy.org/grief-resources/help-for-teens)

The Dougy Center offers children and adolescents help with the loss of a loved one. Peers and professionals provide advice through affirmations and videos.

Choose to Read Ohio, a project of the State Library of Ohio, the Ohioana Library Association, and the Ohio Center for the Book, encourages public libraries, schools, families, and others to build a community of readers and an appreciation of Ohio authors, illustrators, 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: [library.ohio.gov/ctro](http://library.ohio.gov/ctro).

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