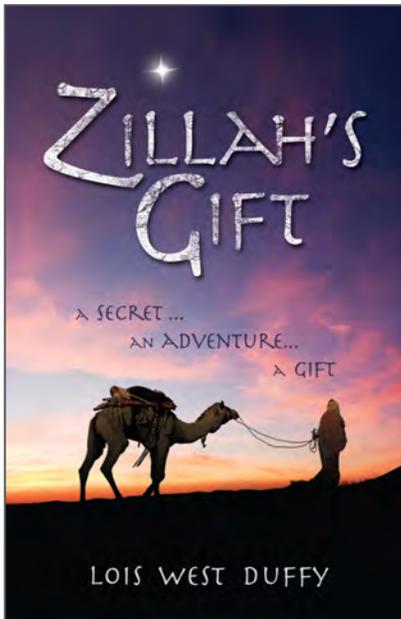




'Zillah's Gift' is Christmas tale of adventure, faith

By Carey Vosler

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This Christmas, you can experience the birth of Jesus through the eyes of an adventurous young girl.

"Zillah's Gift" by Lois West Duffy (Beaver's Pond Press, 2009, 120 pp.) is a story of adventure, courage and faith focused on an orphan living in ancient Persia and working at her cruel aunt and uncle's caravanserai — an inn for overnight travelers.

Zillah was born with a large purple birthmark on the side

of her face that many believe is a sign the girl is cursed. It prompts her cousins and caravanserai visitors to constantly torment her.

Zillah's gift for numbers, taught to her by her late father, also makes her stand out. She is the only one in the caravanserai skilled enough with numbers to keep track of how much money the visitors owe. She was forced into the job when her father died.

Her father also taught her how to collect scented oil from the trees hidden in the desert. Desert bandits killed Zillah's father in an attempt to learn the source of the precious oil. She is the only one who knows where to collect it, and the bandits are after her next.

In this fast-paced story, Zillah is swept away from the caravanserai by a mysterious camel drive led by the three Magi, attacked by the desert bandits while trying to cross a rapid-flowing river, and spends a dark and lonely night in a cave.

All this happens in Zillah's curious pursuit of an enormous brilliant star that fills the night sky — the star that ultimately leads to Bethlehem and the baby Jesus.

Zillah is a fearless girl and a positive role model for any young reader.



Lois West Duffy

Making stories come alive

"When I studied the Bible growing up, I always came alive when there was a girl in the story," said author Lois West Duffy, who lives in Afton and is a former journalist and press secretary to U.S. Sen. Dave Durenberger. "If there are more female role models in the Bible stories, it helps girls identify with them more."

West Duffy said she included the birthmark to put an extra burden on Zillah.

"I wanted her to feel different," said West Duffy. "I wanted her to deal with a problem that people could identify with — not fitting in."

West Duffy plans to write more stories about girls involved in Bible stories. She has been considering a story about the Passover, and another about the women who find the stone rolled away from the cave after Jesus' resurrection. She has also had requests to write a sequel to the "Zillah" story to tie up some loose ends.

"I'm sure her aunt and uncle had a hard time running the caravanserai after Zillah left," West Duffy said with a laugh.

Cultivating wonder

"Zillah's Gift" is a quick and exciting read.

"I believe people should come to Jesus with curiosity and wonder, the way that Zillah did," West Duffy said.

Not only does Zillah come to Jesus with curiosity and wonder, but also with courage and independence. She abandons the only home she's ever known, stands up for herself against a king's nephew, and bites a bandit who tries to kidnap her.

"Zillah represents the part of me that's always trying to challenge the rules and wanting an adventure," West Duffy said.

She hopes the book encourages people to think more about the story of Jesus and what it meant to the world.

"It might help people recognize that there are miracles in the world that they don't see happening," she said.