

Selecting Children's Christmas Books: Some Important Questions to Ask

I recently did a search on a large, online shopping website for “children’s Christmas books”. What resulted was a list of 12,658 said books, but as I started to sift through them I quickly realized just how few actually deserve to be in this category. The vast majority should really be classified as “holiday” books as they have little to do with a Christ-centered, hope and joy-filled Advent and Christmas season. With so many hundreds of choices, how do you find the kinds of Christmas books you want to share with children of all ages...the kinds of stories that become as traditional as a candlelight worship service on Christmas Eve, a favorite holiday movie, hot chocolate by the fire, or family dinner on Christmas Day? Let’s consider some key questions you should ask before you select a Christmas book.

To start, if the book features Biblical text (for example, the birth story from the book of Matthew) which translation is used? Are the words from the King James Version (KJV), the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) the New International Version (NIV) or another translation? This is an important question to ask, as some translations are more reader-friendly for very young children. Also, consider the translation in light of the book’s illustrations. *The First Christmas According to Luke the Evangelist* by James Heine, for example, uses King James text, which is less reader-friendly than other translations, but the beautiful illustrations tell the story all by themselves.

If the book includes a retelling of the birth narrative, does it use the story from Matthew, from Luke, or a combination of the two? Many children’s Christmas books feature the latter. Does the retelling remain true to the original story or are important details added or removed? If the story reveals a particular theology, is it one with which you agree? For example, *The Nativity* by Julie Vivas features wonderful, heartwarming, but highly non-traditional illustrations of the birth story. Instead of a glowing,

composed, and reverent Mary, for example, we see an expectant mother whose back aches. Stories like these can provide wonderful opportunities, particularly with children, to talk about how we imagine the birth of Jesus when we hear the story read.

If you have ever walked into a large bookstore during the holiday season (these days, as early as Halloween) and looked at a display of children's Christmas books you know how important the next question is. Does the story focus on Christ or on Santa Claus? The book is not necessarily bad just because it focuses on Santa Claus but if it does, what is the message? Just as importantly, if it focuses on Christ, what is the message? In a particularly wonderful children's book entitled *Santa's Favorite Story*, by Hisako Aoki and Ivan Gantschev, Santa reminds us why we celebrate Christmas and tells his favorite story, the story of the birth of Jesus.

It is important as well to attend to more basic features of each book you review. For what age group is the story intended? If you are an educator, consider whether or not the story could be used with children of other ages or with adults. Would adaptations be necessary? Also, will the story raise questions for a child? How could you work through these questions? For example, in the beautiful Christmas book, *The Shine Man* by Mary Quattlebaum and Tim Ladwig, the main character passes away at the end of the story. Though some children may not pick up on this detail from the text and the illustrations (it is not explicitly mentioned), others may and it is important for adults to be prepared to talk through questions that might arise.

Be sure to look carefully at the illustrations in any book you are considering. How do they enhance or detract from the story? If there were no words in the book, would a child be able to tell a story based on the illustrations? Will children (or an older audience) be drawn into the story because of the illustrations? Consider, for example, the book *Remember the Manger* by Kimberly Rinehart. This touching book features torn-paper

illustrations, the kind a child might produce in art class. The illustrations are simple but perfectly suited for the touching message found in this book.

A very important and often overlooked consideration is how a particular book treats people of different races, cultures, genders, ethnicities and abilities. The book, *An Angel Just Like Me* by Mary Hoffman, Cornelius Van Wright and Ying-Hwa Hu, is a beautiful example of a story that considers the Christmas season from a different perspective than is traditionally offered. In this book, a little boy wants to know why all of the Christmas angels are white with blond hair. Why can't he find an angel that looks like him for the top of the Christmas tree?

Also, as you are considering new books to add to your collection of Christmas stories take a look through the ones you already have. Do any of them capture Christmas traditions from another culture? Christmas is a wonderful time to remind children of all ages that the birth of Jesus is celebrated in many ways around the world. *The Legend of the Poinsettia* by Tomie DePaola, for example, tells the legendary story of the poinsettia and a beautiful Christmas celebration in Mexico.

Finally, consider how you could use the stories you have selected throughout the year instead of only at Christmas. I recently went through my daughter's books and placed the Christmas stories on the top shelf to ensure I would read them as often in June as I do in December.

Always remember, the story of the birth of Jesus and the message of the Christmas season are for every day of the year!