



Illustrating Christmas

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Jan Pie?kowski, a Catholic, and **Jane Ray**, an atheist, each describe their approach to the Christmas story.

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'The Story Of Christmas'

Jane Ray, Orchard, 185213 280 9, £8.99 (published 1991).

I've no Christian faith, indeed I have many arguments with the established Christian Church, and would describe myself as an atheist. In rejecting that religion I'd turned my back on much of its imagery, poetry and history. I have been amazed, awed and excited, by the richness of other cultural traditions (Indian, Chinese, African, Islamic - perhaps because I have no personal involvement with them) and until recently rather embarrassed by my own.

Now I'm sufficiently far away from the painful point at which I realised that I simply did not believe in a god, I can take a more dispassionate view of the faith of my culture and acknowledge its influence on my artistic development. I became aware that there was something hypocritical in revering the customs of other cultures whilst pouring scorn on my own.

Researching the story of Christmas caused many pleasant childhood memories to surface. I have always found Christmas both moving and comforting which was deeply confusing at a time when I was turning away from religion and developing a political awareness that rejected the rampant consumerism so prevalent at that season. Now I have children it makes perfect sense to have times of celebration - be they Diwali, Hannukah or Christmas - as essential focal points in the year. Human beings the world over need to acknowledge birth, death and marriage and this need, in my view, is what actually gives rise to religion, to mythology and legend in the first place. All cultures have their own creation stories, their visions of the apocalypse and their yearning for redemption. I find this universality both comforting and encouraging.

My Story of Christmas sketchbook began to fill up with memories of ancient churches visited on childhood holidays, of stone effigies, stained glass, carved misericords, brasses and gargoyles. I realised I'd long been using these images in my work without understanding where they were coming from. Brought up in a musical household I had a wealth of musical influences to draw upon, both religious and secular - Benjamin Britten's **A Ceremony of Carols**, wassails and mumming songs, medieval carols and, of course, Handel's **Messiah**. I looked up the Mystery Plays, and tracked down half-forgotten legends of Christmas, of the hay blossoming as the Christ child was lain in it, and of the cattle kneeling at the stroke of midnight on Christmas Eve. I remembered, too, that however angry religion makes me, the school nativity play always reduces me to tears!

I was pregnant with my second daughter all the time I was working on the book and wanted to show the intensity, anxiety and pleasure of that state. I didn't want to portray Mary simply as a necessary vessel for the production of the saviour but as a character in her own right - bewildered, excited and joyful. In my portrayal of the Annunciation, she is on an equal level with Gabriel, not prostrate with awe. She directs the packing of the mule and leads the way home again. She is vulnerable on the long journey and clearly in labour on their arrival. She is shown suckling her newborn child, slightly awkward maybe, but intent on him and his needs. I based that picture on drawings of a friend and her new baby, as well as using memories of my own first experience.

I make extensive use of symbolism in the book, a device that fascinates me. I love to be able to look again and again at a picture and each time to find a new clue. In my picture of the three wise men approaching Herod, I tried to indicate their wisdom and knowledge by constructing their flowing robes from a collage of old maps, scraps of text in different languages, and astrological signs. Herod, his face a mask, sits enthroned in a barred room with cracking walls, spying eyes; his animals, a dog and a hawk, chained and captive.

Throughout the book I used bright watercolours, inks and collage, a lacquer to burnish, age and intensify the paintings, and a wonderful gold ink to give richness and texture. So, although I was slightly ambivalent when I first started to work on this project, I became totally involved. I handed it to Orchard Books two days before Ellie was born and dedicated it to her.

I hope people will enjoy the book, the beauty of the language on which it's based and my illustrations. It would give me great pleasure to think they might return to it again and again, and find something afresh, whatever their beliefs.

Jane Ray's **Noah's Ark** is also published by Orchard, 185213 206 X at £7.95. Her latest book for them is **The Story of the Creation**, 185213 2817 at £8.99.

`Christmas'

Jan Pienkowski, Heinemann, 0 434 95649 X, £7.95; mini version, 0 434 95693 7, £3.99; Puffin, 014 050646 2, £4.99 pbk (published 1984).

The King James version is unarguably the greatest translation of the Bible into English and I felt that no retelling could equal it for the beauty of its language and narrative force. So when I started to plan a book of the Christmas story, there was never any doubt which text it would be, even though I am a Catholic. The only difficulty was in convincing my publishers that a book like this could be a commercial success.

From first to last, it took three years, a long time for a 32-page picture book. The Christmas story is told in the New Testament by Matthew and by Luke and each account reflects the character of the writer. It took a degree of nerve to plunder these sacred texts and weave them together into what I hoped would emerge as one seamless narrative, with a beginning, a middle and an end. But I decided this had to be the way to do it because, although the two storytellers are very different, the familiar words which are the essence of Christmas for the English-speaking world, come almost equally from both. There were times when a choice had to be made and, because I wanted the book to be accessible to young readers, brevity was vital. So the text itself took a lot of thought and it had to be first, before I could begin to weld the pictures into it.

Just as the original scholars used language familiar to ordinary people, so I felt the pictures needed familiar settings. What could match the archaic words, known to children from so many well-loved carols and nativity plays?

I set the pictures in the country which is every child's heritage - the land of legend.

King Herod's castle is fit for a villain. Fully of gloomy dungeons and bristling with armed men, it looms menacingly over the little town where we discover Mary in her back garden, doing her washing and hanging it up as the Archangel Gabriel appears with the great news. Maybe this picture was based on an old Polish country saying that the sun shines when the Virgin hangs up her washing: maybe the apple tree is an echo of the garden of Eden.

The silhouettes in the pictures allow children's imaginations free rein to identify with the characters, whatever their ethnic background. They can dress the three kings in the richest colours and paint the houses of the crowded street to match the town they know.

The pictures are married to the text by illuminated capital letters and gold foliage, a traditional embellishment for the Gospel words. The plants are chosen to help tell the story: the holly and the ivy form a rustic bridge to carry the running deer to the lowly cattle shed, standing among the trees of a winter forest. This is not the Palestine of 1AD but the northern landscape of so many Christmas carols.

The wise men are portrayed as the three kings of fable, forming an innocent link between the scheming King Herod and the child in the manger. They visit both in turn and deliver their precious gifts of gold, and frankincense, and myrrh as Joseph and Mary are working to make a shelter for the baby. In tropical moonlight, we see them embark on their voyage home, together with their menagerie of pack animals.

Christmas was printed in an appropriately exotic location. Only Singapore could provide a book decorated with gold 'bronzing' and I enjoyed going out there and working with the printers to get it right.

The drama of the story was challenging as well as rewarding: the most difficult scene was perhaps Herod's cruel horsemen galloping through autumnal brambles in pursuit of the innocent babies of Bethlehem, while the Holy Family make their escape under cover of darkness, lit by forked lightning. Perhaps this too was an echo of a childhood memory, when my own family departed from my native Warsaw with Nazi bombs and shells falling all around.

As the rainbow follows the storm, we find the child in his father's workshop surrounded by the carpenter's tools we can recognise and holding the nails which we can also relate to coming events.

When the book was finished, anxieties surfaced. Dreading to be thought heretical, I sent a copy to the Pope, with an accompanying letter, in Polish, drawing His Holiness' attention, for good measure, to the reference to his home city in the picture showing 'no room at the inn'. After a nerve-racking wait, I had back a letter, also in Polish, signed by an Italian Cardinal, conveying the papal blessing on my future creative work. Heartened by this, I tackled Easter.

Jan Pienkowski's **Easter** is also published by Heinemann, 0 434 95659 7, at £8.95; mini version, 0 434 96053 5, £3.99.

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