ForeWord Reviews

PICTURE BOOKS

Christmas in the Trenches
John McCutcheon
Henri Sorensen, illustrator
Peachtree Publishers
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It's Christmas Eve, 1914, on the Western Front during World War I. British forces are lined up in trenches on one side of a battlefield in occupied France; German forces on the other. "No Man's Land" stretches in between. A silent, sparkling night falls.

Suddenly, says the author, a lone, clear voice is heard, singing a Christmas carol in German. English voices answer with a verse of "God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen." The Germans then begin a familiar tune—"*Stille Nacht*"—and the British soldiers join in: "Silent Night…" One German comes bravely across the enemy line, carrying Christmas peace: "In one hand he held a white truce flag and in the other a Christmas tree shining with candles."

Gradually, the two armies creep towards each other, to share holiday cheer. They exchange chocolates, show photos of their families, make music, and play a moonlit game of soccer. For a few hours, until dawn sends them back to their trenches, they aren't enemy soldiers; they are just human beings, young men far from home trying to make sense of the world.

This "Christmas Truce" actually happened, up and down the Great War fronts. According to McCutcheon, "As many as 100,000 may have participated in the unofficial truces that Christmas." McCutcheon is a renowned folksinger, songwriter, storyteller, and instrumentalist who plays more than a dozen instruments, including banjo, autoharp, and hammered dulcimer. He has released dozens of albums, and his song "Happy Adoption Day" was also rendered as a children's book. He composed *Christmas in the Trenches* originally as a song. After he heard the story, he says, the song came to him whole; he simply wrote it down, an act of spiritual connection as deep and significant as the truce itself.

In this superb book, McCutcheon expands on history, creating a present-day English family whose grandfather, Francis Tolliver, is the song's protagonist. Tolliver tells his grandchildren, in simple, rhythmic prose, the story of his favorite Christmas, when "for just one night, yes, we were all heroes."

The illustrations—full-color oil paintings—portray a cozy Christmas, with flames dancing in the fireplace, the detritus of present-opening under the tree, and grownups chatting in the background; yet the illustrator doesn't shy away from the horrors of Grandpa's memory of war. SØrensen has created art for more than twenty children's books, including *The Yellow Star* and *The Printer*, and has written and illustrated *New Hope* and *Your First Step*.

His pictures do not romanticize Tolliver's recollection of that magical night: the sky is a painful, cold blue, reflected in the snow on the field and punctuated by a bright moon and the crisp light of the candles on the little tree carried across enemy lines; but the soldiers' uniforms are drab, one country's fatigues barely distinguishable from another's. The men's faces are alternately sharply realistic and softened in focus by the reach of memory. SØrensen places a touch of red in each brown-and-grey memory—a scarf, the ribbon on a wreath, the crackle of a fire, the glint of a wooden rifle or a violin. In classical art interpretation, this bit of red can be seen as representing bloodshed. The illustrator subtly reminds readers that this incredible, touching, hopeful story actually takes place within the terrible context of a great war.

In addition to a beautiful tale simply told, this volume offers historical notes and eyewitness accounts (German soldier Kurt Zehmisch wrote in his diary, "The celebration of Love managed to bring mortal enemies together as friends"). Also included are a bibliography, lyrics and music for the original song, and, most wonderfully, a CD with two recordings of the story (one with page-turning prompts for pre-readers, one without) as well as the author singing "Silent Night" and "Christmas in the Trenches."

McCutcheon describes how, during a music festival in Denmark, several old German men came repeatedly to listen, always leaving the arena immediately. The singer finally asked them why they kept coming, listening, and leaving. They responded that they had been in that field in France on that cold night in 1914, and their families had told them they must be crazy. McCutcheon's song proved that the Christmas truce had really happened; that their experience seventy-five years before had been real; and that true peace is possible, even in the trenches of war.