

El milagro de la primera flor de Nochebuena: Un cuento mexicano sobre la Navidad

Joanne Oppenheim

Fabian Negrin, Illustrator

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Imagine beautiful poinsettias growing like weeds! The author noticed that they grow profusely in Mexico. Where did these flowers come from?

According to Mexican legend, a miracle produced the first poinsettias. In Oppenheim's version, Juanita's father has lost his job. Juanita feels sad because she can't buy Christmas presents. The other children will give gifts to Baby Jesus at the Christmas Eve Midnight Mass, but Juanita refuses to enter the church. A strange experience motivates her to present weeds as a gift to Baby Jesus, but they undergo an astonishing transformation into poinsettias. From this experience, Juanita realizes what the best gift is.

Oppenheim, a former elementary school teacher who writes for and about children, has over fifty books to her credit, including a popular series of guides for parents choosing children's books and toys. She learned about Mexican customs firsthand.

The illustrator, who has provided art for five previous children's books, received his art education in Mexico City. His illustrations beautifully depict life in an old Mexican village. One full-page picture shows Juanita's family sitting on the floor of their small house, eating tortillas with beans; the mother is cooking the tortillas over a fire in the center of the room.

The author encourages readers to identify with Juanita by clearly portraying her feelings. She explains Juanita's refusal to enter the church: "¿CÓmo podrÃ­a entrar en la iglesia sin nada, ni una vela para ponerla en el altar?" ("How could she enter the church with nothing, not even a candle to put on the altar?"-reviewer's translation.)

Juanita's consideration for other people sets a good example. This well-told story will acquaint children ages five to eight with traditional Mexican Christmas customs. The book will be simultaneously published in English. An author's note and a Mexican Christmas carol follow the story.

The weed-like growth of poinsettias in Mexico does not detract from their beauty-the beauty that inspired this charming legend.

NORMA D. KELLAM (November / December 2003)

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