

Picture Books

Pennsylvania Dutch Night Before Christmas

Chet Williamson

James Rice, illustrator

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As explained in the author's note, in Pennsylvania Dutch country, a crotchety old gentleman known as the Belsnickel plays the role of Santa Claus. Although the Belsnickel is skinny and dressed in black, he still sits in judgment over children's behavior giving them treats if they're good and threatening to spank them with his switches if not, "(though there is no recorded occurrence of this ever happening)."

Clement C. Moore's *The Night Before Christmas* is used as the basis for this tale and comparisons are many. The Belsnickel arrives in a plow pulled by cows. Although readers are told the Belsnickel usually enters a home through the front door, in this parody the cows are made to climb up on the farmhouse roof. Once up high, the roof collapses and the Belsnickel falls to the bed below. Of course everyone is now awake to greet him and after a show of grumpiness he hands out gifts to the three waiting children.

What makes this story fun is the German accent (Pennsylvania Dutch dialect) that's built into the text. For instance, instead of was, it says, "vas" and instead of just, "chust." The story's humor is largely due to being thus forced to speak and listen differently. As in the original poem the verse here is rhyming. Rather than striving for grace and flow this poem has a clunky, irreverent, old world style. "And when ve looked up through the hole in the ceiling, It vas chust a little bit vorried ve're feeling."

The illustrations are created with a scratchy pen and ink line with drab watercolor backgrounds. The Belsnickel comes across as a friendly guy, despite his reputation, while the droopy-eyed cows are sure to produce some giggles. Unfortunately, the monochromatic pajama clad family, with their frozen poses and mouths agape, are less animated than the cows while the cat is chust unnaturally large. This book would best be appreciated as a supplement to Moore's original poem or alongside one of Jim Rice's many other take-offs of *The Night Before*

Christmas.

Martha Topol