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CLARION REVIEW ★★★★★ JUVENILE NONFICTION

Remembering a Child's Best Christmas

"Pawpaw" Paul H. Story, Sr.
AuthorHouse
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It's late November 1945 in Ramer, Alabama, and the author is eleven years old, living in a two-room wooden shack with his parents and sisters. The Rural Electrification Administration has not yet run electricity to this area, so the home is heated with an "old potbellied stove" and lit with kerosene lanterns. Paul's father (whom the boy inexplicably calls by his first name, "Thrower") has called a family meeting to propose a special component for the family's Christmas.

This charming memoir tells the story of that holiday, with plenty of sensory detail and sensitive emotion, and without treacle or manipulative heartstring-tugging. "Papaw" has a natural gift for storytelling, unfolding his story gradually, pulling the reader along through the narrative, following tangents that circumscribe the intimate setting of family lore and also the larger context of the rural World War II South (which was only peripherally relevant to this young boy shouldering manly responsibilities), and always winding back to his family's special Christmas plan.

Thrower explains that his friend Bud, who runs the auto garage in town, has agreed to loan the family a car battery and a taillight bulb during the holiday so they could have an electric light on their Christmas tree. Paul's mother "could hardly contain her excitement. She always had a child-like enthusiasm about her, but tonight there was a special gleam in her eyes." The children catch on to their parents' exhilaration and throw themselves into holiday preparations.

"Pawpaw" Story describes the simplicity of his childhood in language that is equally simple and hearty. In addition to attending school, he was responsible for helping his parents with chores and hunting for meat for the family table, and this year it was up to him to select and cut the Christmas tree, with the help of Big Jim, the family dog. They searched all day in the cold winter sleet to find the perfect tree to support the wondrous light.

For the author and his family, Christmas was "…really about a certain feeling that our mother brought to the season. It was about cooking, enjoying family, and being out of school. It was about the way the air felt and how the trees looked; the pine trees were a lot more visible in the winter when the other trees lost their leaves. It was about how the dog wanted to come inside out of the cold and lie close to the old wood stove."

Although the pencil illustrations are nice, they are very dark in reproduction, and the choice of the Black Adder font is unfortunate, but this is nevertheless a sweet little book. With some judicious editing and improved design and layout, the book could take its rightful place alongside such classics as Laura Ingalls Wilder's stories and "A Christmas Memory" by Truman Capote.

KAREN MCCARTHY (October 11, 2011)

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