



Wild Winter: Christmas, Clues and Crooks

C. A. Hartnell

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Friends work together to help each other out in this Christmas-centered middle grade story.

In C. A. Hartnell's chapter book *Wild Winter*, a rambunctious duo solves a mystery and prepares for a holiday pageant.

Carol Ann and her best friend Pete are eleven years old, in the same class, and celebrating the Christmas season in the 1950s. Together, they conceptualize a Christmas pageant. They plan to write and put on a play in order to raise money for needy people in their town. As plans for their pageant progress, they sell baked goods and tickets, and before the pageant begins, they have time to go Christmas shopping, see Christmas lights, and attend parties.

In the midst of all of this, the two friends start taking notes about mysterious things happening around them. Money goes missing and their stage is vandalized. Their new friend Adam is suspected of being at fault. Carol Ann and Pete are determined to figure out who is responsible and clear Adam's name.

Rich with 1950's lingo and mentions of how important God is, *Wild Winter* is a clean, family friendly story full of information about the world in that era. It is also packed with Christmas references, and it includes a glossary of terms and an activity book that add to its content.

Carol Ann and Pete are thoughtful, upstanding leads who generally want the best for everyone. They maintain a positive attitude throughout the book, even when they are faced with stolen money and mean-spirited siblings. They continually encourage each other to keep working toward their goals.

There's no central story to hold the book together, though. The performance and the mystery are through-lines, and both conclude in satisfying ways: Carol Ann and Pete's play is a success, and they figure out who was behind the stealing and the vandalizing. The buildup to these reveals is uneven, though, and the book's stakes never feel high. Any drama that is introduced—as when one of the actors shows up with a broken arm—is accompanied by a quick fix: roles in the play switch to accommodate the boy with the broken bone.

Though events are richly described and full of cultural markers, not every scene advances the story. In one scene, Carol Ann and Pete are at a party getting ready to leave for another party; in the next scene, they are back at home, without the story ever presenting a clear picture of either party. There's no real sense of cause-and-effect to bring the book's scenes together.

Wild Winter is a middle grade holiday story that focuses on good clean fun, providing an insider's look at the 1950's.

REBECCA MONTERUSSO (May 3, 2019)

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