



Poetry for Christmas

Article Author:

[Jack Ousbey](#) [1]

[101](#) [2]

Article Category:

Other Articles

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Jack Ousbey makes a selection.

Winter nights, the school nativity play, carol singing, mince pies, hanging up stockings ... for children Christmas is a time of magic. Jack Ousbey selects poetry that will enhance their wonder and enjoyment.

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Poems for Christmas

Compiled by Jill Bennett, ill. Ian Beck, Scholastic,

0 590 54062 9, £8.99; 0 590 55332 1, £3.99 pbk

In the main, the poems in Jill Bennett's collection are about the delightful expectations and experiences of very young children at Christmas time - mixing puddings, keeping secrets, singing carols, listening to the Christmas story, and the long, long wait from Christmas Eve to the opening of presents. There are a couple of surprises: Richard Edwards' wish to be a pilot fetching a snow-cloud from the Arctic then tying it to a tree:

?So snow would fall on Christmas Day

On all my friends and me.?

and Adrian Mitchell's ?Mrs Christmas? who turns out to be a soccer-playing cat with kittens in a cardboard box.

Children in nursery and infant schools will enjoy these poems and the simple, but distinctive, pictures provided by Ian Beck.

Bring in the Holly

Charles Causley, ill. Lisa Kopper, Frances Lincoln, 0 7112 0668 6, £8.99

There are some poets writing for children whose work is of such quality that adults, too, find their poems engaging and challenging. Charles Causley's work in **Bring in the Holly** is a perfect example, containing 12 poems, including five written especially for this collection.

Causley captures in a line or two the mysterious stillness of a winter's night:

?Thick was the snow on field and hedge

And vanished was the river-sedge,

Here Winter skilfully had wound

A shining scarf without a sound.?

and, as well as the Christmas story itself, presents celebratory songs, carols and ballads, and explores Christmas rituals both at home and abroad. The rich, tuneful texts are lit up by the variety and colours of Lisa Kopper's illustrations.

Christmas Poetry

Selected by Robert Hull, ill. Annabel Spenceley, Wayland, 0 7502 0171 1, £8.50; 0 7502 0936 4, £4.99 pbk

'The robin would be a good Christmas poet if he could talk,' says Robert Hull in his introduction, although there is a lovely Ursula Fanthorpe poem featured in this collection, where the robin does indeed speak:

'I'm the true token

Of Christ the Child-King:

I nest in man's stable,

I eat at man's table,

Through all his dark winters

I sing.?

Amongst the 22 poems included are rhymes and riddles - and some fun entries - as well as more traditional Christmas fare, leaving the reader anxious for more. Perhaps the full-page colour photographs, redolent of boxed Christmas card collections, could have been sacrificed in favour of extra text. Nevertheless, junior age children will enjoy this handsome collection.

The Puffin Book of Christmas Poems

Compiled by Wes Magee, ill. Jill Bennett, Puffin, 0 14 032922 6, £4.99 pbk

Snow begins to fall at the beginning of this book and then it is time for carol singing; sheep, bears and cats venture out in the winter wind. Christmas week approaches with its shopping and last minute preparations; there are birds to be fed, snowmen to be built and skates to be polished. After this, it's time for decorating trees, hanging up stockings and the problems of getting to sleep on Christmas Eve. Finally, the great day arrives with presents and parties, toys and noise, uncles, aunts and entertainment.

This wide-ranging collection has been compiled by Wes Magee, a poet who has had years of close contact with young children and knows how to cater for their needs as well as their enthusiasms. Modestly, though attractively, illustrated with black and white line drawings, this is an excellent buy for all junior and middle school children.

Poems for Christmas

Selected by Neil Philip, ill. John Lawrence, Hodder, 0 340 65326 4, £9.99

In this wonderful collection of Christmas poems there are some which particularly touch the heart and stir the imagination. Ted Hughes' 'Christmas Card'; Patrick Kavanagh's 'My Father Played the Melodeon'; Pasternak's 'Now Is Falling'; 'Carol of the Brown King' by Langston Hughes; and Kipling's 'Eddi's Service'. Add to these some jewels by Causley and Coatsworth, by Mandlestam and Millay, by Blake and Mackay Brown and you begin to get the measure of this collection.

Then there are John Lawrence's marvellous, mysterious, medieval style woodcuts. They enhance the text perfectly, sometimes in miniature, sometimes full page. The combination of poem and picture is seen at its best in 'Christmas with King Arthur':

'The most renowned knights acknowledging Christ,

The loveliest ladies to live in all time,

And the comeliest King ever to keep court.

For this goodly gathering was in its golden age

Far famed.'

The designer, Emma Bradford and the co-ordinator, Elizabeth Wilkie, must take credit for helping to produce a book which is, in every sense, 'a goodly gathering'.

Jack Ousbey has taught in primary and secondary schools and a college of education and he was an inspector. He now writes, reviews, runs in-service events and works as a consultant for Ragdoll Children's TV Company.

Page Number:

24

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Links:

[1] <http://www.w.booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/jack-ousbey>

[2] <http://www.w.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/101>