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EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
Charleston, Illinois

news

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Local

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

CHARLESTON, IL--"Children should be exposed to the Christmas lore of all nationalities and cultures and whatever makes it lovely should belong to everyone."

That's the opinion of Dr. Merrilie Mather, Professor of English at Eastern Illinois University.

Her further opinion is that the best understanding of Christmas comes from literature and that "the copyright date on books is meaningless because the message is timeless."

Or, in other words, the older books are still fine for children at Christmas time. And Dr. Mather knows about children's literature. Her career as a teacher and her personal interest in the area are inseparably intertwined.

Speaking of copyright, the date on "The Christ Child" is 1931, but that's the year the book was "made" by award-winning artists Maud and Miska Petersham. Authors are Matthew and Luke. The text of the book is taken directly from the Bible.

Dr. Mather said the husband-wife Petershams have superbly illustrated the work. "The Christ Child" is divided into Prophecy, The Babe, the Shepherds, In The Temple, The Wise Men, The Flight Into Egypt, and The Child.

The Petershams have rendered more than 40 pictures, many of them in full color, to accompany the text.

Somewhat along a more liberal line is "The Child Jesus" by Florence Fitch with art by Leonard Weisgard. The text, Dr. Mather recalls, "is close to the Bible but not in the exact words as is 'The Christ Child'."

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Typical illustrations show Jesus in the carpenter shop with Joseph, with his mother as she ground wheat into flour, and with his elders as they picked grapes (Jesus always left some for the foxes).

A full page, full color picture shows Mary and Jesus:

"When Mary sat at the doorstep, spinning or sewing, they talked of many things that a little boy wants to know."

"The Fox at the Manger" by Pamela Travers, author of "Mary Poppins," is also recommended. The book branches off from "The Carol of the Friendly Beasts" and describes what the wild creatures gave. The artwork is based on old wood cuts.

Copyrighted in 1962, the book "is based on fact and fancy and the characters are fictitious, but only in the sense that people in fairy tales are fictitious. In the land that lies east of the sun and west of the moon they perhaps may be true." Photographs of the wood cuts came from the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Another recommendation by Dr. Mather is the copy of the noted Christmas poem, "The Visit of St. Nicholas," ('Twas The Night Before Christmas) illustrated by Grandma Moses. (Author Clement Moore was also a Professor of Literature.)

She strongly urges that children be exposed to Christmas traditions of other nations and cites "Noel for Jeanne-Marie," (French) and "Christmas in Noisy Village," (Swedish).

Despite the impact of television on children, many books with Christmas themes are still being published, Dr. Mather notes.

She's not putting down television and a "for instance" is "The Littlest Angel." It's just that she believes the real understanding of Christmas for kids can be found in books, and Christmas should be a part of their heritage.

Dr. Mather, who has been at Eastern since 1951, once worked at the Boston public library. That experience gives her license to believe community library personnel will be happy to assist parents with Christmas books for the children.