

One of the joys of being a children's book author (and a teacher by profession) with a wife who is a teacher librarian, is that I am able to drop in to her school on a regular basis to read to the children. One of my favourite classes to read to is Kindergarten. Reading to little ones daily is one of the things I miss about not being a fulltime classroom teacher.

This year I have visited them quite a few times, simply to have the thrill of reading aloud and getting their reactions to the books. I love the fun of making the characters' voices (if the text says "he screams", I will scream!), of making the sounds to accompany the text, of "reading" the pictures with the children... In the past few weeks I have spent a few afternoons there, reading Christmas stories. Since it's a Catholic school, it is very easy and appropriate to share the religious significance of Christmas with the children through books. Some books focus on the traditional story of the birth of Jesus; some are told from the viewpoint of the animals in the manger; others celebrate the more secular Christmas images—the reindeer, the present laden sack; Santa Claus; snow...

In some Australian Christmas books Santa Claus appears not in a red thickly lined suit, but in board shorts and sun hats (there is definitely no snow Downunder at Christmas time!). He drives a car, instead of a sleigh, pulled not by reindeer but by kangaroos. I like to expose children to both traditional and non-traditional Christmas books.

In addition to reading the stories aloud, I talked to the students. I asked for their impressions, opinions, perceptions, interpretations. We talked about the illustrations and the words used in the books. This year they talked much about presents. Not just receiving presents, but giving mums and dads presents. I really loved it when, inspired by the books we read, the children started talking about their own experiences and plans:

"We go to church the night before Santa comes."

"I'm giving a present to my mum."

"We light candles."

"I'm getting my dad a present."

"I'm making my own present and it's a secret, but I can tell you." (It's a wonderful privilege to be let in on their secrets!)

Now the school year has ended in Australia. The classrooms are all packed, along with the Christmas decorations. The children are home on holidays—and busy, I imagine, making those secret presents. And it's a nice, comforting thought to know that, through books, they will continue to learn about the joys of Christmas in all its widely different interpretations—and when it comes to helping spread the joy of reading these and other books, they know they can count on me!

This article first appeared in the papertigers blog (<http://www.papertigers.org/wordpress/chris-chengs-commitment-to-literacy-during-the-holidays-and-beyond/>) Friday, December 18th, 2009