

BEST CHRISTMAS STORY EVER

If you and your children haven't met the Herdman's yet, Christmas is the ideal time to become aquatinted - with the "worst kids in the history of the world". The Herdman's, six scary, skinny kids who effortlessly terrorize every student at Woodrow Wilson Elementary School, are a frightening figment of author, Barbara Robinson's, imagination. Frightening and hilariously funny.

In Robinson's book, The Best Christmas Pageant Ever, the Herdman's decide to volunteer for the key roles in the church Christmas pageant:

Imogene (who plays Mary) smiled -the Herdman smile, we called it, sly and sneaky-and there they sat, the closest thing to criminals that we knew about, and they were going to represent the best and the most beautiful. No wonder everybody was so worked up.

When Gladys Herdman volunteered for Angel of the Lord status, all the shepherds resigned, because as one kid dared to admit,

"Gladys hits too hard".

"Why Gladys isn't going to hit anybody" Mother said. "The Angel just visits the shepherds in the fields and tells them Jesus is born."

"And hits 'em," said the kid."

"Of course he was right. You could just picture Gladys whamming shepherds left and right. . . ."

With shouting angels, terrified shepherds, a cigar-smoking Mary and a Joseph threatening to set fire to the Inn, the Christmas pageant seemed destined for disaster. In this entertaining and thoughtful Christmas story, you'll find no mention of Santa Claus or flying reindeers, and yet your children will sit entranced, listening to the mystery and wonder of the birth of Jesus, as only the Herdman's can envision it.

The only gifts given in the book are those presented to the Christ Child, by the Three Kings. Not the usual precious oils and resins of gold, frankincense and myrrh, but a canned ham. Because as the Herdman's explain it, "What kind of a cheap king hands out oil for a present?"

As the Herdman's stumbled and bumbled their way through rehearsal after rehearsal, my own children giggled and chuckled. And when the Angel of the Lord (Gladys Herdman) hollered, "Hey! Unto you a child is born!" - they laughed right out loud.

This wasn't our first visit with the Herdman's. We had discovered the boisterous brood in the The Best School Year Ever, only a few months earlier and decided to save The Best Christmas Pageant Ever, for a cold December night.

And for four evenings, we happily set aside Santa and stockings and shopping and wrapping and discovered the true meaning of Christmas. My children registered shock when they discovered Jesus' manger was nothing but a large wooden feeding trough for animals. And the mystery of the "swaddling clothes" was revealed by Imogene Herdman herself: "You mean they tied him up and put him in a feedbox?"

But as Imogene gradually "caught onto the idea of God, and the wonder of Christmas," my children seemed to also. And on page 79, when my own tears blurred the print and fell onto the page, so did I. But Robinson's intent is not to sadden the reader. Her true purpose became apparent when I read the last sentence of the book. Our laughter rang out as loud and clear as a Christmas sleigh bell.

Share this wonderful story with your children. I guarantee you'll not only experience the true spirit of the season, but once you meet the Herdman's, your own children will suddenly seem as heavenly as angels