



# Warm Books *for* Cold Nights

ANITA LEHMANN SORENSON

Come in out of the cold and settle down with some holiday classics and other favorites.

This Christmas, along with reading the Christmas story and the events surrounding Jesus' birth, our family is continuing a tradition of reading Christmas stories collected over the many years since I first heard them growing up. A host of treasured stories fill the basket by the fireplace for nightly reading pleasure.

There are traditional and imaginative narratives of the Nativity story, memories of childhood Christmases long

past, stories that capture the significance of the season, and accounts of Christmas traditions around the world. Here are some of our favorites.

## **The Nativity**

Illustrated by Julie Vivas (Harcourt, 1994)

## **The Nativity**

Illustrated by Juan Wijngaard (Candlewick Press, 1996)

Julie Vivas, whose bright watercolors warmly depict Mary "great with

child" and Joseph's human emotional responses to her status, illustrates one of our perennial favorites, *The Nativity*. Her whimsical characters make the trek to Bethlehem and the pictures carry the story without a need for the accompanying text.

For his version of *The Nativity*, Juan Wijngaard illustrated selected words from





Matthew and Luke in a formal and reverent watercolor style. Each light-filled painting appears in an arched frame, similar to an illuminated manuscript. Your children may be able to visualize the biblical story better in their minds through seeing it through the eyes of accomplished artists.

### A Christmas Memory

Truman Capote, illustrated by Beth Peck (Knopf, 1996)

One favorite book that comes out of the attic every year is *A Christmas Memory*, the classic memoir of Truman Capote's childhood in rural Alabama. It begins in "fruitcake weather" and ends with Christmas Day, recounting the traditions he (Buddy) shared with his elderly cousin, Miss Sook Faulk. She is an eccentric, wise woman and he, a curious and willing pair of ears for her stories. Theirs is an unforgettable and enduring friendship and the story is a holiday gem. (Just try to read it without tears in your eyes at the end.)



### A Child's Christmas in Wales and Five Poems

Read by Dylan Thomas (Harper Audio, 1994)

Another listening treat is Dylan Thomas's masterpiece recording of *A Child's Christmas in Wales*, a distillation of his childhood Christmases in Swansea. (It is also available in print). First recorded in 1952, he recounts the story of a town shut up against the winter cold, with friends and families sharing the holidays in their own inimitable style. Fans of Garrison Keillor's "Prairie Home Companion" will relish the droll goings-on, including snowballing the cats, scaring sleeping uncles by popping



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## RECOMMENDED Theology Books

The books I have chosen are volumes that have been very important to me and to the development of my life and thought. Many more could be added, but these I come back to over and over. —John E. Phelan Jr.



#### Life Together by Dietrich Bonhoeffer

This is a jewel of a book, written while Bonhoeffer operated an underground seminary in Nazi Germany. The Gestapo closed the seminary and Bonhoeffer was later executed for his resistance to Hitler. This volume explores what it means to exist as a Christian community. It explores how the individual relates to and cares for the community as well as how the community extends itself in care of the individual.

It sees the spiritual life not as heroic individualism, but as developed within the sometimes messy relationships of ordinary human life.

"Just as surely," he writes, "as God desires to lead us to a knowledge of genuine Christian fellowship, so surely must we be overwhelmed by a great disillusionment with others, with Christians in general, and, if we are fortunate, with ourselves."

#### Working the Angles by Eugene Peterson

This is the best little book I know on pastoral ministry. Peterson thinks many pastors have forgotten (or never knew) what God called them to in the first place. Ministry, he argues, is about getting people to pay attention to God. Ministry occurs at the angles of three pastoral acts: prayer, reading Scripture, and spiritual direction. Everything the pastor does—leadership, evangelism, preaching, teaching, counseling—must find its ultimate origin in this triangulation of attention and response.

#### Foolishness to the Greeks by Leslie Newbigin

Newbigin was one of the first to note that modernism was losing its grip on culture and that something new and perhaps more challenging was coming. He also recognized that the Constantinian era was over and that churches living out the assumptions of that old order would soon be extinct. This critical little volume reshaped the discussion of mission and evangelism for a whole generation of thinkers.

#### Resident Aliens by Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon

Christians are now a minority culture—resident aliens—and are facing the challenge of being marginalized by the various powers that be. For Hauerwas and Willimon this is not a fate to be mourned but an opportunity to be celebrated. This calls the church to disentangle itself from the culture, and recapture the gospel that was often lost in the rush to find cultural power and acceptance. No one on the right or the left escapes their sharp critique. A bracing and provocative volume.

#### The Rise of Christianity by Rodney Stark

Stark brings a sociologist's questions to the origins of the early church. He suggests the early church succeeded in winning the Roman Empire by offering a better way to live. The church provided in the Christian Scriptures, community, and experience what was sorely lacking in the Greco-Roman culture. The church's response to plagues, the opportunities it offered to women, and its positive presence in the cities, enabled it to flourish in spite of beginning as a despised minority religion. This fascinating book suggests ways the church could be more effective in its mission today.



Finally, although his books are not specifically Christian, I would recommend the work of Wendell Berry, the Kentucky farmer, novelist, and essayist. A good place to start would be his *Recollected Essays* and especially the essay "Discipline and Hope," one of the most powerful critiques of the failings of our culture and society I have ever read. □





## RECOMMENDED Fiction Books

These recommendations for best fiction books come from Wendy Lawton of Hilmar (California) Covenant Church. Wendy made these recommendations with help from CovNet, a Covenant email discussion group.

☐ **Firebird and Fusion Fire** by Kathy Tyers

This is one of the more profound and original science fiction/gospel analogies I've read. These had powerful spiritual applications, and all the action I could have wanted. The author takes the central theme of the gospel and starts from scratch with the details. —Adam Wells



☐ **The Poisonwood Bible** by Barbara Kingsolver

The best novel I read this year. It worked on many levels; it was about a family, about individuals, about culture, about countries. I particularly liked the way the story unfolded over the years. Though I would not want people to think that it is typical of mission work, it captured my imagination and my heart. —Joan Wolford



☐ **The Hobbit** by J.R.R. Tolkien

I liked it because it was well written, it is suspenseful, and it had a lot of action. —Ben Chase, age eleven, and Mom, Jane Chase

☐ **Hart's War** by John Katzenbach

A gripping novel about a Harvard law student who enlists in the Army Air Corps in WWII, is shot down in Europe, and ends up in a POW camp, where he is asked/forced to defend another POW in a trumped-up murder trial. The characters are believable and the story is suspenseful. —Lynn C. Conver

☐ **The Sparrow and Children of God** by Mary Doria Russell

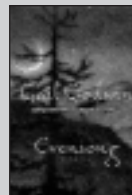
The novels concern the voyage and aftermath of the Vatican sponsored trip to the nearest star with intelligent life. It's not as wacky as it sounds. —Gary Cole

The issues of faith and struggle through human suffering are powerfully explored. —Jim Ahlberg

I read *The Sparrow* shortly after my son died—probably too soon to be able to fully appreciate the writing, but while tender enough to identify with the main character way too closely. This is an outstanding novel. The "science fiction" part is important to the plot, but secondary to the story. —Guy Winter

☐ **Evensong** by Gail Godwin

The book is a sequel to *Father Melancholy's Daughter*, the coming-of-age story of Margaret Gower. (Readers need not have read *Father Melancholy's Daughter* to connect with the now-married Margaret Bonner of *Evensong*.) The story is set in the fictional town of High Balsam, tucked in the Smoky Mountains of North Carolina, where Margaret is pastor of All Saints Church. Godwin's understanding of our spiritual journey, combined with her portrayal of the demands of Margaret's ministry and her marriage create a rare and wonderful story. —Wendy Lawton



☐ **Midnight's Children** by Salman Rushdie

*Midnight's Children* follows the lives of children born at the stroke of midnight on the day of India's independence and uses the course of their lives to symbolically illustrate the course of India's first three decades. Rushdie combines fiction, fantasy, mythology, and history together with pop culture, advertising slogans, and movies.

*Midnight's Children* is a wonderful romp of a book that never lets you stop thinking, wondering, discovering. His vocabulary and syntax are a rich and tumbling stream that's a constant delight to a word junkie like me—I read it with a dictionary next to me. I also kept a notebook close at hand to write down particularly intriguing quotes or turns of phrase. —Sally Johnson ☐

balloons, and calling the fire brigade to put out the New Year's Eve fire in the Prothero house. His prose is magnificent and even my young children show rapt attention to the sights, smells, and sounds of a long ago Christmas.

### One Wintry Night

Ruth Graham Bell, illustrated by Richard Jesse Watson (Baker Book House, 1995)

In *Wintry Night*, a picture book for older readers by Ruth Graham Bell, an injured mountain boy is caught in a snowstorm at Christmas. He is taken in by a woman who lives in a log home built by the boy's grandfather years before. As the boy warms by the fire and



the two get to know each other, the woman begins telling him the Christmas story, from Creation to Resurrection. While the story begins with a bit of awkward contrivance, it unfolds as an ambitious condensed retelling of the story of God's salvation. Richard Jesse Watson's illustrations are spectacularly realistic, drawing the eye to details only hinted at in the text. If you want a book to linger with over the season, this can be read a chapter each night and not just at Christmas.

### Christmas Around the World

Mary D. Lankford, illustrated by Karen Dugan (William Morrow & Company, 1995)

### Las Posadas: An Hispanic Christmas Celebration

Diane Hoyt-Goldsmith, illustrated by Lawrence Migdale (Holiday House, 1999)

Last year, after many unanswered questions about how other people around the world celebrate Christmas, I sought out Mary D. Lankford's *Christmas Around the World*. There are very few good books that help kids understand the Christmas traditions in different cultures. Lankford looks at everything from customs, decorations, foods, and tradi-





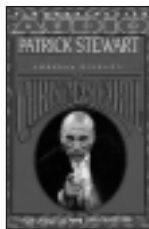
tional celebrations of the holiday in twelve countries.

Living among a largely Hispanic population, we became intrigued by Las Posadas, a nine-night Hispanic celebration begun nearly 400 years ago in Spain, that tells the story of Mary and Joseph's journey into Bethlehem and search for shelter. Diane Hoyt-Goldsmith's photo-essay, *Las Posadas: An Hispanic Christmas Celebration*, provided pictures for the festivals and feasts of this unique cultural holiday event. When your children think of the celebration of Christmas, help them to think beyond the westernized, commercial images to God's wide world and kingdom.

### A Christmas Carol

Performed by Patrick Stewart (AudioWorks/Simon and Schuster Audio, 1991)

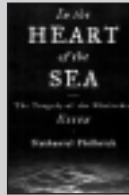
Patrick Stewart, Shakespearian actor (and Captain Picard of *Star Trek*) has done a solo stage adaptation of Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* in New York for years, brilliantly inhabiting the many roles with ease. Having read the classic aloud in our family over the holidays for several years, I was delighted to find both an audio version and new DVD/VHS format of Stewart's performance.



The audio version is pure listening enjoyment: no sound effects or gimmicks, simply a vividly created cast of characters and energetic dramatic skill. The videos are from a made-for-television movie that is a fine work, remarkably true to Dickens's words. □

## RECOMMENDED Non-Fiction Books

Over the past few years, books like *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*, *The Perfect Storm*, *Into Thin Air*, and *A Civil Action* have been as gripping and entertaining as any novel. Here are some of the best nonfiction books of the past year. —Bob Smietana



□ **In the Heart of the Sea: The Tragedy of the Whaleship Essex** by Nathaniel Philbrick

In the real-life episode that inspired *Moby Dick*, the whaleship Essex, fifteen months out of Nantucket, was rammed and sunk by an eighty-ton sperm whale on November 20, 1820. The twenty surviving crewmen were stranded in the middle of the South Pacific, 1,200 miles from Marquesas Islands and 2,000 miles from the coast of Chile. Fearing that they would encounter cannibals in the Marquesas, they decided to sail for South America in three open whale boats. Only three survived.

Based on the firsthand accounts from first-mate Owen Chase, and the ship's cabin boy, Thomas Nickerson, *In the Heart of the Sea* tells how the crew faced starvation, exposure, severe weather, and predators like killer whales and sharks during their ordeal. It also shows that the human flaws—like their inexperienced captain and refusal to work together—caused their demise as much as the physical hardships. A fascinating read.

□ **In a Sunburned Country** by Bill Bryson

Just before setting off for Australia, Bill Bryson decided to do a little research at his local library. He searched the *New York Times Index* to get a sense of how much coverage Australia had gotten in recent years. He was surprised to find that it had gotten very little—less than Barney, balloons, and even the Church of Scientology. "Put in the crudest term," he writes, "Australia was slightly more important to us in 1997 than bananas, but not nearly as important as ice cream."

Bryson's wit, his knack for finding obscure but fascinating stories, and his curiosity make *In a Sunburned Country* a delight. It's a mix of history, humor, and disaster stories—Bryson pays great attention to all the things that can kill you in Australia, such as saltwater crocodiles, deadly snakes like the taipan and the desert death adder, and the box jellyfish, the most poisonous creature in the world. He also gives a sense of the incredible biological diversity, and its breathtaking landscapes.

Reading *In a Sunburned Country* made me want to drop everything and jump on a plane to Sydney as fast as I could.



□ **Empire Express: Building the First Transcontinental Railroad** by David Haward Bain

In May 10, 1869, the Union Pacific Railroad and the Central Pacific Railroad met up in Promontory Point, Utah, completing the first railroad across the United States—which cut travel time from New York to San Francisco from several months to seven days. It also helped bind the United States together. Until the railroad was completed, the fastest way from New York to San Francisco (and then on to Asia) was to sail south to Panama, cross the isthmus there, and sail back up the coast.

*Empire Express* tells how financiers like Thomas "Doc" Durant and Leland Stanford raised millions of dollars (and diverted much of it into their pockets), and engineers like Greenville Dodge and Jack and Dan Casement conquered thousands of miles of mostly unsettled territory and tunneled through or climbed over the Sierra Mountains to build the railroad. It also tells the human cost—from the lives of the Chinese and Irish workers who did the grunt work, to the many Native Americans who were driven from their land by the railroad. □