

The Best Christmas Pageant Ever Study Guide

The Best Christmas Pageant Ever by Barbara Robinson

(c)2017 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.



Contents

The Best Christmas Pageant Ever Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Chapter 1.....	5
Chapter 2.....	9
Chapters 3 - 4.....	12
Chapters 5 - 6.....	16
Chapter 7.....	20
Characters.....	24
Symbols and Symbolism.....	28
Settings.....	30
Themes and Motifs.....	32
Styles.....	37
Quotes.....	39



Plot Summary

The following version of *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever* was used to create this guide: *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*. Barbara Robinson. New York: Harper Collins Children's Books, 1972.

The Best Christmas Pageant Ever, by Barbara Robinson, is a heartwarming and humorous tale of a town that has its annual Christmas nativity reenactment shaken up when the rowdy Herdman clan high-jacks the play. The narrator introduces the Herdmans as the worst kids in the history of the world and goes on to detail their crimes. They smoke, curse, bully kids at school, steal, and even set fire to an old abandoned toolhouse. The product of an absent father and a mother who would rather work two jobs than parent her children, the six Herdmans take care of themselves.

When the narrator's little brother, Charlie, gets tired of Leroy Herdman stealing his dessert, he mentions that it does not matter because he gets all the snacks he wants at Sunday School. That sets the Herdmans on the trail and they show up at church the next Sunday with eyes wide open. Instead of a one time visit, the Herdmans hear about the upcoming Christmas pageant and decide to stick around and participate.

Meanwhile the pageant's regular director has an accident that puts her in the hospital, so the narrator's mother is drafted to lead the rehearsals. The rowdy Herdman bunch strong-arm their way into the main roles of Mary and Joseph, the three Wise Men and the Angel of the Lord and although they have never heard the Christmas story before, the newcomers are interested in learning everything they can. They see the injustice of how people treated Mary and Joseph by sticking them in a stable, get angry that King Herod wanted to kill baby Jesus and are confused as to why three rich kings would bring jars of oil as a baby gift. They question the standard way of thinking and raise real questions that cause the narrator to consider her own understanding of the nativity story.

Alice Wendleken, a prim and proper girl who has always played the role of Mary, is upset that Imogene Herdman has taken her spot. She makes a record of all the terrible things Imogene says and the incorrect things she does. She is waiting and hoping that the Herdmans will make one big mistake so that she can sound the alarm and get her Mother and others to demand that the Herdmans be removed from the pageant. Her opportunity comes when one of the church women enters the ladies' room during the pageant dress rehearsal and finds it filled with Imogene's cigar smoke. She calls the fire department and chaos breaks out, ending the rehearsal and setting off a firestorm of phone calls to the pastor, complaining about the Herdmans. Rev. Hopkins asks Mother if they should cancel the pageant, but she assures him that the show must go on and that it will be the best one yet.

The pageant begins as usual, but the Herdmans do indeed add their own special flavor to the production. However, the children have been changed by the knowledge of the story and are more subdued than usual. Amidst the candlelight and singing, the three



Herdman Wise Men bring a ham from the food basket given to them by the church and Imogene begins to cry at the beauty and wonder of the scene of which she is a part. Everyone left the church that night talking about how the pageant was somehow different this year and the narrator shares that she knows why - the Herdmans did not portray the Holy Family and the birth of Jesus in a stiff, by the book manner. Instead, they related to the needs of the Family and put their hearts into playing their parts.



Chapter 1

Summary

In Chapter 1, narrator begins by introducing the Herdman kids as the worst in the world. She explains how they lied, stole, swore, smoked cigars, fought with little kids and even burned down Fred Shoemaker's old tool house. The narrator believed it to be an accident. Two fire engines and two police cars were sent to the scene, along with five dozen doughnuts from the diner in town. None of the workers got any of the doughnuts because the Herdmans grabbed them all, even stuffing what they could not eat into their shirts. A fireman asked Claude Herdman if the fire started because the kids were smoking cigars in the tool house. He said they were not smoking, but they were playing with a "Young Einstein" chemistry set (which Leroy had stolen from the hardware store). They had mixed all the powders together, poured lighter fluid on the pile and ignited it to see what would happen. The narrator commented that Claude was mad that the chemistry set was gone and he could not try to make bombs from it. He was not at all sorry that they had stolen something from the store or burned down someone's property. The fire chief gathered all the neighborhood kids who had come to watch the fire and talked to them about the dangers of playing with matches and gasoline. The narrator commented that the only lesson the Herdmans got from the event was that when there was a fire, there would be doughnuts. No one seemed too concerned about the shed burning down since it was run down and many of Mr. Shoemaker's neighbors had wanted him to tear it down anyway. The narrator's father commented that it was the only good thing the Herdman kids ever did and that if they knew it was a good thing, they would not have done it.

The narrator goes on to introduce all six of the Herdman kids - Ralph, Imogene, Leroy, Claude, Ollie and Gladys. They were all skinny and stringy-haired and covered with black and blue marks from where they hit each other. They lived above an old, empty garage. They also had a sign in the front yard that warned people of their cat, which had only one eye and was very mean. The mailman believed it to be a wildcat that the kids brought down from the neighboring hills. The narrator continues to tell of a time when Claude Herdman brought the cat to school for first grade Show-and-Tell. The cat, who had not been fed for two days, burst out of the box and ran wildly all over the classroom. The teacher, Miss Brandel, tried to catch the cat or at least whack it with a broom. The cat and Miss Brandel made a mess of the room, especially as a twenty gallon fish tank broke. Even though he was called to gather his cat, Claude was out in the hall with the other children. The cat calmed down, mostly because he got to eat some of the 65 fish and another student's pet mice, also brought in for sharing. The class was given recess for the rest of the day.

The Herdmans were always passed from grade to grade, even though they did not usually learn what they were supposed to in each grade level. None of the teachers wanted to keep any of them behind another year, because another younger Herdman would always follow from the next lower grade. The narrator explains that she was



always in the same grade as Imogene Herdman, the second oldest. The best anyone could do was to try to stay out of Imogene's way by being an average kid who did not say or do anything to stand out. Imogene liked to find out what kids weighed when they had their annual check at the nurse's office. One day, Imogene stayed behind and told Miss Hemphill, the nurse, that she better check her to see if she had whatever Ollie had. She began to scratch and talk about red spots and mentioned that they had not seen a doctor. Miss Hemphill ran off to first grade to check on Ollie, while Imogene stayed behind to go through the records and write down the weights of everyone in her class. She used the information to embarrass and blackmail other kids for things she wanted. In exchange for silence on the matter, she got a charm bracelet and a souvenir alligator purse from two girls and ten cents a week from a boy. Somehow Imogene found out that Alice Wendleken, a very proper girl and friend of the narrator, had head lice at summer camp. She smacked Alice's head at recess one day and yelled, "cooties." Even though Alice was cleared by the nurse, everyone called her "Cooties" for the rest of the year. Everyone was afraid that Imogene would find out something about them and that they would be her next target.

The narrator comments that the Herdmans had no secrets because everything bad was right out in the open. Mr. Herdman had left town by jumping on a railroad train and was never heard from again. Mrs. Herdman worked double shifts at the factory to support the family. When Miss Philips, a social worker, tried to get welfare money for the family so that Mrs. Herdman could work only one shift and spend time at home with her children, Mrs. Herdman refused the offer, saying that she like to be at work. Miss Philips told the narrator's mother that it was not about the money, but that she did not want to be home with all the crazy kids. She also said did not blame her. Everyone expected that the kids were well on their way to a life of crime, until they got involved with the church and its annual Christmas pageant.

Analysis

The opening chapter of *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever* is an introduction to the Herdman clan. The author spends the entire chapter providing a history of the kids' wrongdoings and describing their lack of proper behavior. She hits the opening hard by using a hyperbole in her first sentence, describing the Herdmans as the worst kids in the history of the world. While it is certainly true that the children are poorly behaved and break many rules and cause lots of trouble in the town, there really is no way to know or certainly state that these kids are worse than every other child in the entire world. The gross exaggeration however, does make the point that the Herdman children have a reputation for being "bad" kids. Not only does Robinson describe the children's behavior, but also the environment in which they live, perhaps to serve as an explanation for their lack of good conduct. Their parents are mostly absent from their lives, the father because he skipped town and the mother because she chooses to work two jobs rather than parent her unruly brood. Their home is also not cared for as rocks fill the yard and poison ivy grows up the building. Even their pet cat is as mean as can be, rounding out the family's complete picture of wild and untamed. Additionally, even though the children do not learn very well in school and most of the time should not be



passed on to the next grade, they are not dumb. In fact, they are quite clever. For example, Imogene is very good at getting what she wants from people. Her bullying behavior marks one of the story's primary themes. She understands how to rule by creating fear among her classmates. She even knows how to manipulate the adults, getting the school nurse out of the office so that she can look into the records of her classmates and write down their body weights. Nothing of importance gets by Imogene, a trait that comes into play later in the story.

The story is told from the viewpoint of an unnamed narrator who is a classmate of Imogene Herdman and the child of the woman who runs the church Christmas pageant. As a peer of the Herdmans, the narrator is right there with the action as the story unfolds and can tell it with complete accuracy. The narrator is also able to talk about how all the other kids from school and the town feel about the Herdmans because she has lived there herself. The narrator is also not afraid to say exactly what everyone in town thinks, whether she has heard them comment on something or simply by understanding how people think about the Herdmans. She shares comments from the mailman about the wildness of the Herdman's cat and she surmises that none of the teachers hold any of the Herdmans back a grade because they do not want to end up with two of them in class the next year. She also uses humor to share other people's opinions about the Herdmans. Her father comments when they burn down the tool shed, "...it was the only good thing the Herdmans ever did, and if they'd known it was a good thing, they wouldn't have done it at all. They would have set fire to something else...or somebody," (4).

The author also uses this first chapter to establish a sense of community within the small town. Everyone knows everyone and they know what goes on in the community. This is especially important for modern readers to understand as the story was first published in the early 1970s, a time when technology had not reached into every part of daily life. The pace of life is slower and people in the town are more involved with each other. For example, during the fire at the tool shed, the folks at the diner send doughnuts to the site for the fireman (2), something that does not happen today in most places. Everyone is talking about the fire. Ultimately, the Herdman kids do not get in trouble because everyone agrees that the old building needed to come down anyway. In today's culture, the children most likely would have received some kind of punishment.

The community also has a shared opinion about the Herdman family. They view them as trouble and people to avoid. Even the social worker, Miss Philips, falls short of truly helping the family. Even though she tries to get them welfare money, she stops short of actually making a difference. Just like Mrs. Herdman herself, she figures the kids are just wild and that's the way it will be. No one tries to teach the children anything different or instill discipline into their lives, especially the teachers at school. They see the children as something to be survived and moved along into the next grade until the next youngest one comes along. It is everyone's unspoken way of dealing with the family. This sense of community coping is key to the story, since the community's attitude is ultimately shaken up as they watch the Herdman's perform in the Christmas pageant. It is necessary to establish the viewpoint in the beginning in order to show how the townspeople change during the story's main event.



Discussion Question 1

Why do the Herdman kids not get in trouble with the town for starting a fire and burning down a tool shed?

Discussion Question 2

As if the description of the Herdman kids were not terrible enough, what other things about their life does the author describe to create a negative first impression for readers?

Discussion Question 3

Even though the Herdman kids seem to never learn what they are supposed to within each grade level, what evidence is there that the kids are pretty smart and clever?

Vocabulary

vain, terrific, collared, pestered, clonked, hollered, blackmail, pneumonia, penitentiary



Chapter 2

Summary

The narrator begins Chapter 2 by relating how her mother got put in charge of running the annual church Christmas pageant. Until this point, Mother's only job was to make sure that her two children participated in the pageant and that Father attended it. That was not always an easy job, since he always complained that there was nothing new to see and he would prefer to stay home. But this year, Mrs. George Armstrong, who was in charge of the annual event, fell and broke her leg. Mrs. Armstrong was actually in charge of many things at the church. The other women found volunteers for the Ladies' Aid Bazaar and the Women's Society Potluck Supper, so Mother got stuck with the Christmas pageant.

The narrator goes on to explain that the Christmas pageant was very run of the mill and unexciting and that the same people always had the same roles every year. The little kids were angels, the intermediate kids played the shepherds, and the older boys were the Wise Men. Unfortunately for the pastor's son, Elmer Hopkins, none of the boys wanted to be Joseph, so he got stuck with playing that role. But Alice Wendleken loved being Mary every year and even flaunted it in front of the other girls. She was by nature clean and neat and holy-looking, according to the narrator. Everyone tried to sing carols and walked around in bed sheets and bathrobe costumes and portrayed the Christmas story as best they could. For this year, Father suggested that they scrap the pageant and show movies instead, perhaps a neighbors home movies of Yellowstone National Park. Mother said that had nothing to do with Christmas. The pageant was a holiday tradition and she was going to do her best to make it the best one yet.

No one expected that the Herdmans would have anything to do with the Christmas pageant since they never attended church. In fact, one Sunday morning when the young children shared what they liked best about Sunday School, Charlie said that he liked that there were no Herdmans there. Father said that was not a very Christian thought, but Mother agreed that it was very practical, especially since Charlie spent most of the previous year with black-and-blue marks from sitting next to Leroy Herdman. It was Charlie, however, who got the Herdmans to come to church by standing up to Leroy Herdman during lunch one day. For three days Leroy stole Charlie's dessert from his lunchbox. Finally, Charlie said it did not matter to him because he got all the desserts he wanted at church. He went on to describe the free chocolate cake, candy bars, doughnuts, ice cream and Kool aid that was given to the children. Leroy did not believe him at first, but the next Sunday all the Herdmans showed up at church looking for the refreshments. Leroy asked Mr. Grady, the Sunday School Superintendent, where the cake was located and he sent him to the where the church was collecting canned goods to make food packages for the Orphans Home. The collection of canned goods convinced Leroy that maybe they could in fact get some free food here, so the children stayed. They did not sing any hymns or say any prayers, but



Imogene did make a little bit of money, as she pilfered from the collection basket as it went past.

After church, Mr. Grady announced that everyone should plan to stay later the following week as they would be deciding who would play the main roles in the upcoming Christmas pageant. Alice Wendleken commented that she hoped the narrator would be in the angel choir. She really meant that she hoped she would not get to be Mary this year, simply because her mother was running the play. Imogene wanted to know about the pageant. The narrator explained that it was a play about Jesus. Imogene muttered that everything in church was about Jesus. The narrator thought Imogene was not interested, but then stated that she was wrong.

Analysis

Chapter 2 of the story introduces the Christmas pageant itself as the narrator provides information on how it has been run in the past, who usually plays the various parts and how people generally feel about it. The name of the church is never given, perhaps because the author wants readers to connect with the story in a personal manner. Many churches hold annual Christmas pageants and so readers would be able to compare this play with the one in their particular community. As in many places, the pageant is a tradition in the church. Every year, the same program takes place and it is always run by Mrs. George Armstrong, who seems to be the stereotypical caricature of the church lady who is in charge of running many of the church's activities. The kids in various age groups always play certain roles and there are the main roles that get filled by both the girl who loves being in the spotlight and the boy who hates being forced into playing a role year after year. The author's description highlights the fact that although the pageant is a tradition and an expected part of the church's Christmas celebrations, it has become dry and the same old stuff. As the narrator says, "Mrs. Armstrong breaking her leg was the only unexpected thing that ever happened to it," (20). It is here that the author introduces one of the book's themes that although traditions are an important part of life, they become stale if they are allowed to decline into routine events that do not exhibit a true understanding of what is taking place. The pageant has become a "something we have to do" expectation for the narrator, her little brother and her father. The two children wish they did not have to participate and the father wishes he did not have to attend. In fact, when the narrator's mother is placed in charge of the pageant, Father suggests that here is an opportunity to cancel the whole thing and show movies instead, even if it is just home movies of Yellowstone. The idea of acting out the birth of Jesus as a vital part of the church's Christmas celebration is not of importance or meaningful to Father. The pageant has become boring and routine and as such it has lost its meaning.

In telling the story, the author uses humor and gives a witty voice to her narrator which provides a contrast to the flavor of the droll pageant. Without the use of humor the story would consist of terribly ill behaved children, a boring Christmas pageant in which all the kids were forced to participate and a bossy church lady. But the narrator's insightful and often witty comments lighten the text providing necessary comic relief. For example, the



opening scene of chapter 2 almost plays out like a stand-up comedian's joke. Father and Mother go back and forth about Father attending the pageant. Mother tries to get him interested in attending but Father simply wants to stay home in his bathrobe. The punchline is finally delivered as Mother says that there is indeed something new this year. "'What?'... 'Charlie is wearing your bathrobe,'" (18).

Robinson also uses several descriptive phrases in the text which add interest and provide an additional layer of meaning to the story. She writes about all the kids looking forward to "Sunday as a real day of rest," (21). According to church tradition based on the fourth commandment's instruction to keep the Sabbath holy, most Christian followers choose to not do any work or engage in business on a Sunday. They often refer to it as a "day of rest." But for the kids in the community, Sundays mean something more. It is a day where they do not have to encounter the Herdmans because the Herdmans never come to church. Charlie says it best when he shares publicly what he likes best about Sunday school, "What I like best about Sunday school, he said, is that there aren't any Herdmans here," (23). A second phrase she uses is the idiom, "eyes peeled," to emphasize the concentration with which the Herdmans scan the room for dessert treats. Their eyelids are held wide open and they are extremely attentive to their surroundings. The idiom clearly communicates their actions in just two small words. Finally, Robinson uses a third descriptive phrase to create a visual image of Imogene's thieving actions in church. The narrator relates, "I saw Imogene snake a handful of coins out of the collection basket," (25). Immediately the image of a sneaky snake working its way slowly upward into a basket enters the reader's mind and it becomes easy to visualize crafty Imogene trying to get away with stealing the church's offering money, hoping that no one will see her. The word picture is more powerful and memorable than simply saying that she stole the money.

Discussion Question 1

Why might the Christmas pageant be the same from year to year with nothing new ever happening or different?

Discussion Question 2

Why are the Herdmans always interested in stealing food?

Discussion Question 3

Why does the narrator suggest that Imogene seems interested in the idea of a play or pageant?

Vocabulary

privet, casting, congregation, sentiment, hymn, rehearsal



Chapters 3 - 4

Summary

In Chapters 3 - 4, the pageant truly gets underway. From her hospital bed, Mrs. Armstrong called Mother every day to give her instructions on how to run things. She said the same people always got the main parts but that it was important for everyone to have a chance. She always called during dinner time, not wanting to interrupt, but doing it anyway, much to Father's disappointment. She went on and on about how to select the proper Mary, a kind, cheerful and unselfish girl, a proper Joseph as Jesus' father and so on through the cast list. Finally, Mother was able to get off the phone with Mrs. Armstrong by telling her she needed to see who was at the door. It turned out to be Father, half jokingly and half seriously asking for a meal.

When Sunday came, everyone gathered for the first pageant meeting. Mother told the children about the rehearsal times and days and assigned roles to those who would be angels, shepherds and members of the choir. Then she started filling the main roles. She described the character of Mary and asked for volunteers from the among the older girls to play her. Everyone was surprised that Alice Wendleken did not raise her hand. Imogene Herdman did raise her hand. She also declared that Ralph Herdman wanted to be Joseph. Mother could not believe that the Herdmans wanted to be in the pageant. She asked for another volunteer to play Joseph, but no one raised their hand, especially not Elmer Hopkins, the minister's son, who after many years in the role, was glad that he finally would not have to play the part. She asked for volunteers for the three Wise Men, but again the only volunteers were Leroy, Claude and Ollie Herdman. Finally, only the Angel of the Lord role was left and that went to Gladys Herdman. Then, all the young shepherd boys became fearful and tried to quit the pageant, because they thought that in her role Gladys would hit them. Mother said that was ridiculous and that no one was quitting the play. After the meeting, Mother asked Alice why she didn't volunteer and she said she did not know why, but the narrator reveals that Imogene threatened Alice with all sorts of bad things, the worst being sticking a pussy willow into her ear where it might sprout.

Alice said that the narrator's mother should kick the Herdmans out of the pageant before something bad happened. One of the church ladies suggested that Herdmans hand out programs instead, but Mother said they did not use programs. Many of the townspeople and church members had complaints about non-church attenders taking over the play, Father said they better lock up the Ladies' Aid Society's silver service and Mother wished she was in the hospital with Mrs. Armstrong. After Mrs. Armstrong heard the news and accepted full blame since she was not there to supervise, Mother got very angry. She vowed to make this year's pageant the very best one ever, even with the Herdmans. Reverend Hopkins also told everyone to stop complaining and reminded them that Jesus welcomed all the children, even the Herdmans.



Everyone was very excited for the first rehearsal because they could not wait to see what the Herdmans would do. The Herdmans were ten minutes late and banged into people as they slid into their seats. As Mother began to separate everyone into groups of shepherds and guests at the inn, the Herdmans had questions. They did not know about shepherds or why Mary and Joseph stayed at an inn, or even what an inn was. Imogene asked Mother to start at the beginning and explain the story of what was taking place. So Mother began to tell the Herdmans the Christmas story. The narrator could not believe that they had never heard the story, but Alice said it was completely believable as they never went to church before Charlie told them they could get free snacks there. Alice did not like it that the story talked about Mary being pregnant and said she was going to tell her Mother that they were talking about this in church. Imogene was very interested in the story and wanted to hear everything.

It was unusual for the Herdmans to listen to anyone, but they listened intently and asked questions when they did not understand something. They also got upset that there was no room for Mary and Joseph in the inn and that Child Welfare was not present to check on poor baby Jesus tied up in rags and laid in a feed box. Gladys jumped up when the Angel of the Lord appeared in the story and acted out the scene as if it was a reenactment of something out of a comic book. The Herdman boys learned that the Wise Men were kings that came to worship the new King, Jesus, and brought him expensive gifts. But the Herdmans did not think the gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh were very good. They also learned about King Herod who wanted to have baby Jesus killed and were mad at the three Wise Men for listening to him in the first place. They were mad too that Herod was not going to be in the Christmas pageant because they wanted a chance to beat him up. The rehearsal ended with the Herdmans still arguing over details of the story.

Analysis

With the Herdmans now interested in the pageant, the selection of cast members takes place the following Sunday. This is again an example of a primary theme in the story as the Herdmans bully their way into the main roles. Until now, Alice Wendleken has always played Mary and she hoped to continue to do so. But here comes Imogene and she wants the role. So in typical Herdman style, she uses fear and intimidation to get what she wants. When it comes time for volunteers, Alice surprisingly does not raise her hand and neither does anyone else, except Imogene. Later, the narrator reveals that Imogene has threatened Alice with all kinds of horrible possibilities, the worst being stuffing a pussy willow bud down her ear, where it might sprout.

Apparently, the Herdmans did their work ahead of time and threatened other kids too as no one volunteered for any of the main roles. There is even fear for being near the Herdmans. Once Gladys is assigned to be the Angel of the Lord who brings the good news to the shepherds, none of the young shepherd boys want to participate for fear of being smacked around by Gladys. What follows is a humorous dialogue with kids trying to get out of being shepherds and Mother trying to keep everyone calm and in the play. She assures everyone that Gladys is not going to hit anybody. "What an idea! The Angel



just visits the shepherds in the field and tells them Jesus is born,"..."And hits 'em, " said the kid," (37).

The roughness continues as the Herdmans arrive at the first rehearsal ten minutes late, "sliding into the room like a bunch of outlaws about to shoot up a saloon, " (43) and Charlie gets knocked on the head by Leroy. But despite all the bullying and subsequent complaining by church members and even other townspeople who have heard the news about the Herdmans in the Christmas play, the roles stay fixed. Mrs. Armstrong decides that the whole thing is really her fault because she was not present to oversee things properly. This is an example of adult bullying. Mother is so tired of Mrs. Armstrong thinking that she is the only one who can properly run anything in the church that she becomes angry and vows to make the pageant the best one yet. "That woman! She must be surprised that the sun is still coming up every morning without her to supervise the sunrise...I just mean that Helen Armstrong is not the only woman alive who can run a Christmas pageant," (41). Thankfully, Rev. Hopkins steps in as well. The community at this point has become very "unchristian" in its response to the Herdmans. Instead of being glad that they have come to church, they simply continue to view them as unruly. They want to remove them from the roles and keep them where they cannot do any harm, handing out programs. But as the pastor reminds everyone, "that when Jesus said "Suffer the little children to come unto me" Jesus meant all the little children, including Herdmans," (42).

As the pageant rehearsals begin, the Herdmans learn exactly what the play is about and hear the Christmas story for the first time. The other kids have heard this same story for years and could tell it well themselves, even if they do not fully understand what it all means. For example, as Mother begins the story and reads that Joseph and Mary, who was "great with child," Ralph yells out loud the interpretation - Mary was pregnant! The little kids all wonder what that means and Alice Wendleken becomes upset because she thinks that it is inappropriate to talk about such things in church. In taking on her mother's prim and proper attitude, she is missing some of the value of the story. Mary had to be pregnant and give birth to Jesus or there would be no story. In fact, most of the kids and the people who watch the pageant miss out on the wonder of the story. The performance has become just that, a show about a story from the Bible. It is done every year and there is never anything new. It has become commonplace. This is the heart of one of the author's theme's for the story; the Christmas celebration has become timeworn, and it has lost its meaning for the participants.

However, for the Herdmans, the story is brand new. As such, they approach the pageant with passion and fresh understanding. Of course, it is all done with the Herdman flair that does not fit in naturally with traditional church approaches. When Gladys hears about the Angel of the Lord announcing to the shepherds that Jesus has been born, she stands up and yells, "Shazam!...Out of the black of night with horrible vengeance, the Mighty Marvo--," (51). Her interpretation of the Angel's coming is that it was like a superhero from one of her comic books bursting onto the scene. Mother is at first confused, but then realizes that Gladys is right. Out of nowhere, in the middle of the night, a strange entity appears with something important to do. The general church crowd is used to seeing everything a certain way, but Gladys has been able to take



what was in the Bible story and understand it on a common level and one that made sense to her.

This section, especially Chapter 4 where the rehearsal begins in earnest, is filled with humor and dialogue between the Herdman kids and Mother. Mother is explaining the Christmas story, and the Herdman have tons of questions. They also see things very differently than most of the kids who come to the church. Because their life is very different, so is their perspective. Unlike the other children, who seemingly have stable homes and parents who are active in their lives, the Herdmans struggle to get by on their own. They understand what it is to be poor and to be at the mercy of their situation. Imogene is incensed that Mary and Joseph had to sleep in the stable and that they put the baby in a manger. They asked about "wadded-up clothes," (swaddling clothes) (50), and got upset over the whole thing. "You mean they tied him up and put him in a feed box? she said. Where was the Child Welfare?" (50). For the reader familiar with the Bible's Christmas account, the Herdmans' questions and viewpoints are both funny and refreshing.

Discussion Question 1

How does Rev. Hopkins get people to stop complaining about the Herdmans being in the pageant?

Discussion Question 2

Is it surprising that the Herdmans had never heard the Bible's Christmas story before the first rehearsal? Explain.

Discussion Question 3

Alice Wendleken has very specific ideas about what is appropriate to talk about in church. Is she simply jealous because she is not playing Mary, or is she correct? Explain.

Vocabulary

fresh, sympathize, sacrilegious, traction, saloon, snitching, espoused, truant, manger, swaddling, bureau, vengeance, frankincense, myrrh, hollered, ancestor



Chapters 5 - 6

Summary

Returning home following the first rehearsal, Mother began to tell Father about the evening. She asked Father what he would think of the Christmas story if he had never heard it before. Father said he would not have liked it that Mary had to sleep in a barn. Mother agreed that she had never really thought before now about how unkind it seemed. The Christmas story always seemed so nice and peaceful with sweet smelling hay and gentle animals, but it was still a barn where a pregnant woman had to give birth. She was impressed that the Herdmans were incensed about the situation and commented that they had some good instincts. Father pointed out that their main goal seemed to be to burn Herod alive. Mother answered that at least they picked the right villain. Then the family all wondered what did happen to Herod. No one knew.

The Herdmans wanted to know what happened to Herod too. In school the next day Imogene asked the narrator how to get a book out of the library. The narrator explained that she would need to sign her name to a card so that they would know who had taken out what books. The Herdmans went to the library to learn about what happened to Herod. The librarian said that after thirty-eight years as a librarian she could retire, since she had now heard everything. Back in rehearsal, the Herdmans wanted to rewrite the play in order to put an end to Kind Herod. They were mad that he died in bed of old age, having been a terrible person who killed lots of people during his reign. The Herdmans did not like that they could not finish him off on stage. But, rather than quitting the play, they continued to rehearse and do what they were supposed to do.

The Herdmans did not quit, but there was one person who wished they would. Alice Wendleken kept a close eye on them and wrote down everything they did wrong on a little pad of paper. They drank the communion grape juice, stole crayons from the Sunday school room, took pennies from the Happy Birthday bank and smoked cigars in the ladies room. The narrator commented that Imogene and the others simply did not know any better since they had never been to church before. Imogene did not know that Mary was supposed to be a gentle, quiet person. Instead, her representation of Mary was a loud, extremely protective mother, beating away anyone would get near the baby Jesus, especially Ralph, who was portraying Joseph, and the Wise Men. Then the Herdmans started arguing about what would happen if the Wise Men did decide to go back to Herod and squeal about Jesus' location. Ralph said the baby would be murdered. Mother had to calm everyone down and Alice complained that they were talking about murdering Jesus. However, the narrator considered what would have happened and what that would have meant - not having Jesus anymore. Alice reminded the narrator that she was available to step in as Mary in case she was needed and commented that if she were playing Mary they would be able to get a "live" baby to play Jesus. Several mothers in the church had babies that could be used, but they had all withdrawn their offers once they heard that Imogene was going to be Mary. Imogene



said she could get a baby from one of the carts outside the A&P supermarket, but Mother said they would just use a baby doll.

The dress rehearsal for the pageant took place the night before the church's pot-luck supper and some of the church ladies were also in the building baking desserts for the meal. The children arrived, half of them without their costumes. Alice was all dressed up with her hair curled and Vaseline on her eye-lids to make them shine under the lights. There were many interruptions with children coming in at the wrong places, Imogene insisting on speaking instead of just standing quietly, and a discussion about the large gold-hooped earrings she was wearing. There was also a discussion about why an angel got to name baby Jesus instead of Mary. Imogene said she would have named the baby Bill, a comment which Alice wrote down on her notepad. Suddenly, there was a loud crash in the back of the church. Mrs. Hopkins had poked her head in to watch the rehearsal and dropped a large tray of silverware.

With all the disruptions, Mother decided to take a five minute break so the little angels could use the bathroom. Fifteen minutes later, Mrs. McCarthy went into the ladies room and saw smoke, so she called the fire department. Trucks raced up onto the front lawn and men pulled hoses into the building. Outside, children climbed all over the fire trucks, neighbors came to see what was happening and Rev. Hopkins ran over from the parsonage in his bathrobe. Everyone was outside, so the ladies forgot about the applesauce cake in the ovens and by the time they went back in, the cakes had burned. This last big commotion was the final straw for Mrs. Wendleken who reviewed Alice's list and called everyone she knew to complain about the Herdmans. Finally, Rev. Hopkins came to see Mother. By the time everyone called him, the facts were so twisted he could not make sense of any of it. He asked Mother if they should cancel the pageant. Mother insisted, absolutely not. She said this was going to be the best one yet. Rev. Hopkins was afraid that no one would come to see it, but the narrator states that he was wrong.

Analysis

This section of the book is perhaps the funniest part yet, almost reading like a stand-up comedy routine. The Herdmans' interpretations of aspects of the Christmas story and the narrator's comments on the Herdmans actions are outright funny. For example, when Imogene asks the narrator how to go about getting books out the library, the narrator tells her that you have to sign your name to a card so they know who has the books. "She looked at me for a minute, with her eyes all squinched up. 'Do you have to sign your own name?' " (57). And after a long routine about who named baby Jesus and Gladys yells that "Unto you a child is born!, Imogene shouts back, "Unto me!...Not them, me! I'm the one who had the baby!" (71). Even trying to decide who or what they are going to use for the baby Jesus is comical. After all the young mothers withdrew their offers of using their babies, Mother considers using a foster baby from one of the church ladies. "'I've got a darling little boy right now,' Bernice told Mother. 'He's three months old, and so good I hardly know he's in the house. He'd be wonderful. Of course, he's Chinese. Does that matter?' " (65). Other funny descriptions include Imogene smacking



everybody away from seeing the baby Jesus, imagining Gladys piercing Imogene's ears with an ice pick, and the pastor running around the front lawn of the church in his woolly bathrobe.

Despite all the humor, there are bits of heartwarming revelations as the narrator discovers new truths about the Bible story she thought she knew well. When the Leroy talks about the Wise Men possibly returning to Herod and letting him know where Jesus was, they all wonder what would have happened. Ralph is convinced, mostly due to their library research on the man, that Herod would have killed the baby. This is a new consideration for the narrator who says, "I thought about it later though and I decided that if Herod, a king, set out to murder Jesus, a carpenter's baby son, he would surely find some way to do it. So when Leroy said, 'What if we went back and told on the baby?' it gave you something to think about. No Jesus....ever," (64). The narrator is also beginning to understand the difference between acting out a part and acting like the person who one represents in a play. Alice has portrayed Mary for several years, and she wanted to do it again. She looks the part as it is often depicted; Mary is a sweet, quiet, holy-looking girl. But, the similarity ends with the outer appearance. Alice does not have the kind heart and true goodness of the Mary of the Bible story. Alice is very proud and spends her time at rehearsals being jealous and keeping a record of all the bad things that the Herdmans do. "Alice wrote all these things down, and how many times each thing happened. I don't know why, unless it made her feel good to see, in black and white, just how awful they were," (61). She sees herself as superior and the only possible, credible choice to play Mary. She has no compassion for the Herdmans and their situation in life and does not understand the purpose of church. In contrast, the narrator and her Mother are patient with the Herdmans, realizing that they don't know any other way of behaving and explaining to them to proper way to do things. They are fulfilling the command of "suffer the little children to come to me."

This section also clearly focuses on another of Robinson's themes in the book. Mother has a great deal of fortitude and sticks it out with running the pageant with a cast full of Herdmans. She does not give in to peer pressure or the status quo. She is continually patient with the all the children's' questions and works with them. She realizes that they actually make a few good points and she too considers the Christmas story from a new perspective. In so doing, she also sees that the Herdman children have some basic positive instincts and they have the ability to know right from wrong. She is impressed that in the discussion over King Herod, they knew that Herod's behavior was wrong and can understand that they are angry with him. Despite all the negative community gossip, Mother has the situation well in hand. She is angry that everyone has twisted all the facts about the rehearsal and the false alarm with the fire. By now, she is used to some of the Herdmans antics and she wonders what the big fuss was all about. When she asks Mrs. McCarthy why she called the fire department after seeing smoke in the ladies room, she said, "You just got excited. Didn't you know it was cigar smoke?" (74). Mother has learned to expect certain things from the Herdmans and work around them. When Rev. Hopkins visits and questions whether they should cancel the pageant, Mother does not cave to the pressure. The pageant will go on.



Discussion Question 1

What is the difference in attitude toward the Herdmans between Alice and the narrator? Give examples to support your answer.

Discussion Question 2

For the first time, the narrator considers more deeply some of the details of the Christmas story. How do these thoughts affect her?

Discussion Question 3

Alice wants to be Mary in the pageant. Is there another reason that she is keeping a list of wrongs against Imogene?

Vocabulary

disgraceful, instinct, squinched, communion, squeal, ridiculous, milling



Chapter 7

Summary

On pageant night, the narrator's family did not get supper because Mother forgot to fix it, but Father said he was used to it by now. Mother was worried that the whole thing would be a disaster since they never really got to run through the whole play. She expected the Herdmans and shepherds to fight and for Mary to run off with the baby Jesus. Everyone filed into their places and the pageant began on time. The choir began to sing carols while the candles were lit and then everyone waited for Mary and Joseph to enter. But they did not enter right away. Alice said she knew that they would not show up, but Ralph and Imogene were there, just standing in the doorway, looking scared and lost and not quite sure what to do. The narrator commented that it looked very authentic to her, the way the real Mary and Joseph would have looked. The two entered the scene and Imogene gave baby Jesus two thumps on the back before she laid him in the manger. Alice said you should not burp Jesus, like he had colic. But again, the narrator thought that it might be a real possibility that he was colicky.

Next, the shepherds filed in, and Gladys came to announce that Jesus was born. She yelled so loudly that the shepherds were scared, mostly of Gladys. The narrator thought that made it look more authentic, too. There were more carols and then the Wise Men entered, bearing their gift - a Christmas ham. They did not bring the usual jars of bath salts that represented the gold, frankincense, and myrrh. The Herdman boys had brought the ham as a gift from their own food basket received from the church charitable works committee. The shepherds were supposed to confer among themselves and then leave by another way, but instead the Herdman boys stayed and watched the scene. By this time, the narrator was feeling very good about the pageant. Usually, she was ready to leave. But, this year she thought the whole thing was better and more realistic and that the Herdmans had made it better by doing what came naturally. Then suddenly, she noticed Imogene crying, tears rolling down her face, taking in the wonder of Christmas.

When the pageant ended, everyone stayed around, talking about how it seemed different, even though they could not figure out why. Mrs. Wendleken commented that Mary had a black eye and that was different. Imogene's eye was only swollen because she walked into the choir-robe cabinet. The narrator believed Imogene suddenly caught on to the wonder of Christmas and the idea of God and that was why she was crying and walking into furniture. They handed out candy canes and little New Testaments to everyone and the Sunday school gave Mother a poinsettia plant. The family put the costumes away, folded up the collapsible manger and snuffed out the candles. Mother had the Herdman's ham in her arms and said that the children would not take it back. They also did not accept any candy canes, or the little Bibles. Imogene did ask for a set of Bible-story pictures and she took out a picture of Mary and said that it looked exactly right. The narrator commented that she thought Imogene had an image of Mary being all pure and holy looking and wanted to think of her as doing nothing but giving birth to



Jesus on Christmas. But, the narrator had her own new idea of what Mary looked like. She wanted to always think of Mary looking more like Imogene, nervous and bewildered and very protective of her baby. And the Wise Men would always seem more like the Herdman boys bearing ham. The family left the church with a new appreciation for Christmas.

Analysis

The final chapter of the story takes place on the night of the pageant itself and shows the reader the end result of Mother's hard work and the changes that have taken place in several of the characters. Throughout the book, the Herdmans have been learning about the Christmas story and experiencing being in a church for the first time in their lives. The pageant has even inspired them to go into the community library for the first time. Although they ended up at the church because they were searching for free snacks, they found quite a bit more.

Initially, they encountered Mother, who was patient and fair, answering their questions and teaching them. Somehow, the meaning of Christmas snuck up on them too. As Imogene and Ralph are about to enter the pageant scene, they are transformed. Instead of pushing and shoving their way onto the stage as they usually do, they enter calmly, looking out of place and unsure of themselves. With a congregation of people looking at them and candlelight everywhere, they are suddenly in a world to which they are not accustomed. The narrator feels that their hesitation makes them look authentic, much as Mary and Joseph must have looked and felt; visitors to a strange town with no one to welcome them.

What is truly moving and genuine is the gift that the Herdman Wise Men bring to baby Jesus. Instead of walking in with the stage prop bath-salt jars, the Herdmans bring an actual gift. They sacrifice something of themselves to give to Jesus, showing that they understand in some way what Jesus is all about. Jesus' spent his life telling people to love each other and to put other people first. The Herdmans were always putting themselves first and taking things from people. As the narrator says, "...they had never before in their lives given anything away except lumps on the head," (84). The three Wise Men are also taken in with the wonder of the whole scene and they do not want to leave it. They are supposed to walk out using a different doorway, but they simply stay because they want to be a part of this beautiful experience.

Imogene perhaps has the biggest transformation. Throughout the entire story she is portrayed as rough and mean. She smokes cigars, bullies her classmates and takes whatever she wants, running over people without any consideration. But suddenly, participation in the pageant has softened her heart and she begins to cry. She has learned about the Holy Family and can identify with them as people who need financial help and protection from real danger. As a family, the Herdman children have not had protection or provision from a father, or seemingly much tenderness from their mother. They struggle financially and their futures are uncertain as they struggle with education and even hope for their future. Somehow Imogene sees her rescue in baby Jesus and



the Christmas story and her hard exterior cracks. "Christmas just came over her all at once, like a case of chills and fever. And so she was crying..." (88). The change in Imogene brings that something special to the pageant that makes it "the best."

Perhaps more subtle than Imogene's transformation is the narrator's deepened understanding of the meaning of the nativity. The Herdmans' many questions have made the narrator consider aspects of the story in new ways as well. It suddenly makes sense to her that Jesus was a real person, so of course he would need to be burped. It seems logical that the Herdmans would bring ham as a gift, because food is something the Holy Family probably really needed. In past years, the narrator could not wait till the pageant was over, but now she was enjoying it. The nativity reenactment became real and something she could understand and relate to because the Herdmans acted naturally and from their hearts. The congregation feels that way too. "There was something special, everyone said--they couldn't put their finger on what," (87).

Sadly, not everyone was changed for the better because of the Herdman's participation. Alice and Mrs. Wendleken remain stuck up and proud. Through the entire pageant, Alice whispers disapproving comments to the narrator about all the wrong things the Herdmans are doing and how they are ruining the evening. She is unable to see how their actions were actually making the play more authentic and heartfelt. Still bitter about not playing "her" role, Alice is jealous and misses the meaning of Christmas. Her mother, likewise is bitter. Commenting on Imogene's performance she says, "Well, Mary the mother of Jesus had a black eye; that was something special. But only what you might expect," (87). Her comment is sarcastic and unfortunately reflects her hard heart.

The author leaves readers with hope for themselves, however, by giving the reminder that the Christmas story is quite simple, "Hey, Unto you a child is born!" (90).

Discussion Question 1

What is the significance of the Herdmans bringing a ham to baby Jesus instead of the gold, frankincense, and myrrh?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Imogene want to see and think of Mary as clean, pure, and set apart to be the mother of Jesus?

Discussion Question 3

Why does the narrator change her view of Mary to be someone who looks more like Imogene?

Vocabulary

refugees, cockeyed, colic, sore, charitable, confer, collapsible, snuffed



Characters

The Narrator

The unnamed narrator is an average girl who tells the story of what happens in her church one year when the town bullies takeover the Christmas pageant. She is an excellent witness to everything that takes place because she is not only a student and church go-er, but her Mother is also put in charge of running the show. She is able to tell the reader things that happen at the local school, things that happen in her home and at the church and she can relate conversations that her mother has with other adults in the community. She is fair and open-minded as well. While most of the time she tries to stay out of Imogene Herdman's way, she does explain things to Imogene when she has questions and often stands up for Imogene's point of view. By considering this different view point, she is able to understand the Christmas story in a deeper way and ultimately benefits from it. The narrator is also very straight forward in much of what she says communicating not only facts, but people's opinions.

Imogene Herdman

Imogene Herdman is the second oldest of the Herdman clan. She is a terror in school and knows how to rule with fear and intimidation. One of her favorite things to do is blackmail other kids by threatening to reveal their body weights to everyone unless they give her something that she wants. She is in the same grade as the narrator, who has managed to avoid being persecuted up to this point. Imogene becomes very interested in participating in the pageant at church, perhaps because she enjoys going to the movies and thinks it would be fun to be in. She bullies her way into the role of Mary and adds her own flair to the role. Ultimately, she is able to truly identify with Jesus' mother. Both were poor and felt like strangers in the community and in the wonder of the story, Imogene's heart softens and she is touched by the true meaning of Christmas.

Mother

Mother is in some ways a hero in the story. Although she becomes the director of the Christmas pageant when the usual leader bows out following an accident, Mother steps into the role with some concern. She has never run the pageant before. She is even more concerned with the Herdmans show up and high-jack all the roles. But she is a patient leader and explains everything to the Herdmans since they have never heard the Christmas story. Rather than criticize and judge the children as some in the church and community do, Mother shows them kindness and love. She is determined to make the pageant the best one yet. Despite the gossip in the town and the frustrations of constant interruptions, Mother perseveres and leads the Sunday school children to put on the performance. She learns that the Herdmans have the potential to learn and to become better people if they are guided properly.



Alice Wendleken

Alice Wendleken is a classmate and friend of the narrator. She is "squeaky clean" and very proper about everything. For several years, she has played Mary in the annual pageant and she expects to get the role for the coming year as well. After Imogene threatens her with physical harm, Alice does not volunteer for the role, much to everyone's surprise. She is expecting that the Herdmans will completely ruin the pageant and keeps a record of every wrong thing they say and do while at rehearsals, hoping that they will commit some terrible act that will get them thrown out of the performance. She is a very proud person, who thinks she is the only person who could properly represent Mary. She also has not real understanding of what the Christmas story is about or how someone in the church should behave. She is a rule follower, but she has no love or compassion in her heart.

Ralph Herdman

Ralph is the oldest Herdman and ends up playing Joseph in the pageant. He becomes very upset when he learns about evil King Herod. He wants to act out some violent end for the king and is convinced that if the Wise Men had gone back to Herod and revealed where Jesus was that Herod would have murdered the baby. No matter what, he is ready to fight for baby Jesus.

Gladys Herdman

Gladys is the youngest Herdman and by some accounts, the meanest. Since the Herdman kids all look out for their younger siblings and teach them everything they know, that leaves Gladys to acquire a wealth of knowledge on how to be bad. For the pageant she is selected to be The Angel of the Lord who delivers the news of baby Jesus' birth to the shepherds. The boys playing the shepherds are all afraid of her, something that actually makes their onstage performance believable. Gladys brings a fresh perspective to the role in that she bursts onto the scene and loudly shouts the news to the trembling crowd.

Leroy Herdman

Leroy is the third oldest Herdman. One of his biggest crimes was stealing a chemistry set from the hardware store and then mixing all the powders together and lighting them on fire to see what would happen. The result was the complete destruction of a run down tool shed. Leroy played Melchior, one of the three Wise Men and led the questioning concerning what would happen if they decided to not go home another way, but went back to Herod and told about baby Jesus' whereabouts. He also brings in the Herdmans' ham on pageant night instead of the jars of bath-salts. By the end of the story, rather than stealing something from a store, Leroy is giving up something of his own out of respect and gratitude for Jesus.



Claude Herdman

Claude is the fourth Herdman child. He once brought the family's pet cat, basically a wild animal, to class for Show-and-Tell. The cat was hungry, sprang from the box he was stuffed in and began to create havoc in the classroom. Claude did not help his teacher catch the cat until it calmed down after it ate several of the classroom fish and two mice. Claude never learned what he was expected to for his grade level, but was always passed because the teachers did not want to have him again, along with another Herdman. Claude plays one of the Wise Men in the pageant.

Charlie

Charlie is the narrator's little brother. Charlie is in the same class as Leroy Herdman and has received his fair share of bumps and bruises from him. When Charlie gets tired of Leroy stealing his desserts at lunchtime, he decides to try a new tactic. He tells Leroy he does not care because he gets all the dessert he wants at church. Because of this news, the Herdmans end up coming to church and discovering that there will be a Christmas pageant.

Father

Father is the patient parent in the story. He supports his wife in her role as director of the pageant, even though he would really like his dinner every night. He serves on the charitable works committee in the church. The committee distributes gift baskets to the needy in the community.

Mrs. George Armstrong

Helen Armstrong is a church lady who runs many of the women's activities in the church. She breaks her leg and is hospitalized and is therefore unable to run the pageant. She is very control oriented and continually calls Mother to tell her how she should do things. She is very prideful as well and wants things done exactly her way. In fact, she decides to accept the blame for the imminent failure of the pageant because she was not there to see that things were done properly. She is unable to let it go and let someone else take charge.

Rev. Hopkins

Rev. Hopkins is the church pastor. He does not get too involved with the pageant except when gossip reaches unacceptable levels. He steps in twice to calm the masses. At first, as everyone is complaining that the Herdmans have taken over the pageant, he instructs them that Jesus wants all the children to come to him, even the unruly ones like the Herdmans. He also comes to Mother near the story's end and questions



whether the pageant should be cancelled because of all the chaos on dress rehearsal night. He appears to be a fairly level headed man and listens to Mother's reason, accepting her belief that the pageant will be great.

Mrs. Wendleken

Mrs. Wendleken is Alice's mother. She is very proud of her daughter and has very set ideas of what is proper and what is not. She has apparently instructed Alice in these rules, because her daughter is often commenting that she does not think that her mother would like this or that. When her daughter provides her with sufficient evidence of the Herdmans' bad behavior during the pageant rehearsals, she mounts a phone campaign to get them kicked out. She does not like them being in the pageant and especially wants Imogene out and her daughter back in the role of Mary.



Symbols and Symbolism

The Herdman's pet cat

The Herdman's pet cat is a mean, one-eyed vicious animal, so mean that the mailman will not deliver mail to the house for fear of encountering the creature. He even believes it to be wild bobcat that they brought down from the hills outside of town. The family has a sign on the front lawn that says, "Beware Of The Cat" which actually symbolizes the townspeople's attitude toward the family. The kids, like their pet mascot, are wild and unruly and something of which to be aware.

The Gifts of the Wise Men

In the Bible story, kings or Wise Men from the East bring gifts to baby Jesus. Scholars have guessed that each of these gifts had a significant symbolic meaning. The gold represents the kingly nature and position of Jesus as King of the Jews. Both frankincense and myrrh are derived from a resin which comes from extracting sap from two different types of trees. The resins and the oils they produce were extremely valuable during ancient times and would also be appropriate gifts to give to a king. The oils also have symbolic meanings. Frankincense was often used in religious ceremonies so it is possible that the gift represented Jesus' future role as Priest, a representative between man and God. Myrrh was a spice that was often used for burial and embalming and it is thought that the expensive gift is symbolic of Jesus' role as the Sacrificial Lamb who was born to die for His people's sins.

The Herdman's Ham

New to church, the Herdmans see things differently. The Wise Mens' gifts of frankincense and myrrh do not make sense to them because they see no value in them. The Herdmans saw Mary, Joseph, and baby Jesus as a poor, probably hungry family that needed practical help, like food. The Herdmans do not have much, but they are willing to give up their own Christmas ham, a charitable gift from their community food basket. The ham, given by the Herdmans to baby Jesus represents their humility at understanding who Jesus was and that He wants people to give generously to people in need. They understand hunger and need. So, when they see it portrayed in the pageant, they meet the need in a very practical way.

The Christmas Pageant

The pageant itself is a dramatic representation of a the story of Jesus' birth as told in The Bible. Many churches act out the story, including actors, costumes, and music. For some it is an annual event and a tradition within the community.

The library

A library is a place to acquire knowledge through reading and study. None of the Herdmans have ever gone into the public library, and Imogene does not even know how to go about getting a library card. When the Herdman clan becomes upset about evil King Herod, they want to know what becomes of him, since the Christmas story in the Bible only mentions him briefly. Their passion about the subject is so great that they are motivated to go to the library and find books on the subject and learn about Herod. The library becomes a place for the children to become more than they are, to actually learn something.



Settings

Woodrow Wilson School

The town elementary school is where most of the kids interact with the Herdmans on a daily basis. It is a small school where everyone knows everyone else. All the teachers are familiar with the Herdman family and know how difficult the children are to teach. The narrator provides readers with many stories of all the bad things the Herdmans do at the school, which serves as their playground for bullying other kids. Claude creates chaos in his classroom when he brings the family's wild cat in for Show-and-Tell. The Happy Family dollhouse is knocked over along with a globe of the world, and the class's twenty gallon fish tank is broken and fish are thrown everywhere. Imogene is skilled at hiding in the nurse's room in order to find out the weights of various kids in her class so that she can later blackmail them. Kids are teased on the playground and lunches are stolen in the cafeteria.

The narrator's house

The narrator's house is where readers can hear what is going on with the Mother and her family in regards to running the pageant. The narrator is able to overhear her mother's telephone conversations and discussions she has with Father. This setting gives readers insight into the adult view of the Herdman clan and what might be expected of their involvement in the pageant.

The church

The church is unnamed, perhaps because it can then represent any church in any town. Many churches have annual Christmas pageants. It is possible that something similar could happen anywhere. This particular church follows the tradition of having the children reenact the Christmas story. Most of the action takes place in the main auditorium since the pageant is rehearsed in that space. The ladies committee occupies the kitchen where they bake and later burn their desserts. Also, the ladies bathroom is where Imogene spends some of her time smoking cigars.

The community library

The town library is overseen by the librarian, Miss Graebner. She is always happy to issue library cards to the children in town because she wants them to read. She also keeps a close eye on the materials in the lower level of the library and has a chain across the entryway to the steps. She can hear if anyone disturbs it. She is also very wary of allowing the Herdman children in the library, but she gives them access. They are able to do their research on Jesus and King Herod.



Fred Shoemaker's tool house

The story opens with the burning of Fred Shoemaker's tool house. The building was falling down, and many of the neighbors wanted him to tear it down because they were afraid it would attract rats. The Herdman kids were inside it, playing with a chemistry set and matches when it all accidentally caught fire and burned to the ground. The Herdmans did not get in trouble, and Father commented that burning it down was the only good thing the Herdmans ever did.



Themes and Motifs

Complacency in Religion

Robinson's story is a clear picture of religious practice that has become routine resulting in a lack of spiritual understanding for the very people it is meant to strengthen. The Christmas pageant is an annual tradition. People expect it to happen every year, but it is always the same. On one level that is to be expected, because the nativity story itself does not change. But the production is staged the same way every year, by the same leader and there is always the same casting among the children. For many, like Father, it has become an event to attend simply because it is expected, not because it is meaningful and a heartfelt celebration of Jesus' birth.

Some in the congregation seem to have also lost, or perhaps never had, an understanding of the significance of Jesus' coming and the purpose of church itself. They are focused on rules and procedures and filled with pride in their own accomplishments rather than a desire to welcome others and share the blessings of the church. Mrs. Armstrong is an accomplished leader in that she is good at organizing others and giving orders, but she is all business. She runs things her way and there does not appear to be room for error or change. Rather than allow Mother to have some freedom in running the pageant, Mrs. Armstrong insists on delivering to her every detail of what she should say and do. It is almost as if Mrs. Armstrong assumes that it would not be possible for anyone else to figure things out on their own. Her goal appears to be to put on a well polished production without any thought as to how to make the pageant truly meaningful. She does take into consideration the type of person who should portray Mary, but she only sees Mary as a cheerful, happy, unselfish and kind person (30).

As Robinson later points out, the Herdmans discover that Mary and Joseph were also more like poor refugees, strangers in town with no place to go and feeling very out of place. This change in perception is one of the key elements that makes the production more authentic and fills the roles with more meaning, which is reflected outward to an audience that is hungry for something new.

Similarly, Alice Wendleken views herself it seems as Queen of the Pageant since she has played Mary for several years. She views this as the primary role and is very proud of herself. As Mary, she is the center of attention and she does everything to make sure she looks perfect. Even when she is stuck in the angel choir, she still primps herself to look her very best and puts Vaseline on her eyelids so they will shine under the stage lights. It does not seem to matter to Alice that Mary was a humble woman, dutifully accepting her in role in Jesus' birth. Ultimately, during his life on earth, Jesus taught about welcoming others and putting other people first, a position that anyone in a church should be following. This is certainly not Alice's position. She wants the Herdmans gone. Unfortunately, others in the church and community take this position as well. Because the Herdmans have such a bad reputation, everyone assumes they



will turn the pageant into a disaster and ruin the precious tradition. They are not pleased, as they should be, that the Herdman children have actually come to church and are learning about God. Rev. Hopkins finally has to remind everyone of the church's mission, to "suffer the little children" to come to Jesus, even the Herdmans (41-42).

The narrator and her family are also shaken out of their complacency by the Herdmans' views. With fresh perspectives, the Herdman bring up questions and make points that the narrator and her family have never considered. Previously, they saw the manger scene as a calm and peaceful place with sweet smelling hay. But now, they see a new reality. As Mother says, "...It was perfectly disgraceful...I never thought about it much...but that doesn't change the fact that they put Mary in a barn," (56). The narrator also has several revelations and gets fresh perspectives on the nativity story as she considers the Herdmans' points. For example, why wouldn't baby Jesus need to be burped or have colic. "After all, that was the whole point of Jesus--that he didn't come down on a cloud like something out of "Amazing Comics," but that he was born and lived...a real person, " (82). By the end of the pageant, the narrator's view of the Christmas story is transformed. She no longer sees things the same way. The picture perfect idea of the people in the story that the church has always offered up has been replaced with the more natural, heartfelt images of the Herdmans.

Bullying

Bullies like the Herdmans have tough exteriors, but people who model kindness can crack the hard shell and release a kinder person. Imogene Herdman is a master bully. She deceptively manipulates the teachers and the school nurse and is able to get everything she wants from her classmates by blackmailing them. She even bullies her way into the role of Mary in the pageant by threatening Alice with sticking a pussy willow in her ear. Because no one has ever challenged her, she has never had to learn how to get along with others and she simply becomes meaner.

However, Mother seems to have a better relationship with Imogene. Mother has something Imogene wants - knowledge, and Mother is happy to share it with her. Imogene does not really listen to the teachers at school, but once in church she becomes interested in hearing the Christmas story. She, along with her siblings, ask lots of questions because the story is interesting and they want to understand what is going on. Despite their constant interruptions, Mother remains patient and answers all their questions. She is even a bit surprised and pleased with Claude when he correctly guesses that the Wise Men were rulers (52). When conflicts arise, Mother does not become overly exasperated or angry. Instead she works through the issues with the Herdmans and is respectful and kind. For example, when Mother wants Imogene to take out her very large gold hoop earrings, Imogene explains that she can't because they have just been pierced and the holes might close. Rather than forcing Imogene to comply, Mother seeks a compromise, "All right...but we'll try to find something smaller and more appropriate for you to wear," (71).



The end result of Mother's patient work with the Herdmans is that they came to church and learned something. They were exposed to the Christmas story for the first time and were changed by it. The kids sacrifice their Christmas ham and give it to baby Jesus and Imogene finds herself overcome with emotion "crying and walking into the furniture," (88). The girl who began the story as a mean bully, was softened by patience and love.

Peer Pressure

The noise and pressure of the crowd can often make people compromise their principles, but a person of strong character will maintain their position. This is especially true of Mother in the story. She is thrust into the role of director after Mrs. Armstrong has her accident. She is very gracious and listens to Mrs. Armstrong's advice, but she is her own woman and completely capable of the handling the job. She intends to run the pageant her own way, and that is fine. It just may not be fine with Mrs. Armstrong, who is used to controlling everything and everyone. She was even giving orders to the neighbor as they carried her into the ambulance (18). Instead of barking orders, Mother is patient with the Herdmans and is kind and respectful to them when they volunteer for the pageant roles. Once news gets out that the Herdmans are in the play, several women call Mother to express their concern. Some feel the Herdmans will ruin the whole thing, others say it is sacrilegious for Imogene to be Mary (39) and someone else calls Mother crazy. Another woman suggests that maybe the Herdmans could hand out programs instead. Mrs. Armstrong even takes the blame because she was not there to run things. Despite all these negative comments and pressure to kick the Herdmans out of the play, Mother remains strong and is determined to make the pageant work. She sees some good instincts in the Herdmans and she wants to encourage them. In doing so, she gives the Herdmans the opportunity to be exposed to church which inspires them to learn and grow and ultimately produces a more meaningful pageant.

Traditions

Traditions are a vital part of holiday celebrations, but they can become stale and commonplace if they become void of meaning. The annual Christmas pageant at the narrator's church has become routine and worn out. It is the same thing every year. As she states, "Our Christmas pageant isn't what you'd call four-star entertainment...The script is standard (the inn, the stable, the shepherds, the star), and so are the costumes, and so is the casting," (20). Very little changes. Everyone wears old bed sheets or their father's bathrobes, the little kids are angels, the big boys are the Wise Men and Alice Wendleken is always Mary. Mrs. Armstrong runs things the exact same way and everyone is bored. The narrator's father never wants to even go because there is never anything different and the narrator herself confesses that by the time they usually get to singing "Silent Night" she was "fed up with the whole thing and couldn't wait for it to be over," (85). Everyone is just going through the motions and the depiction of the nativity scene has lost its meaning.



However, when the Herdmans take over the roles in the pageant, things are definitely different. All this is new to them. They are learning about Mary and Joseph and baby Jesus, Herod and the Wise Men and they question everything. Their interest in the story is so great, they are even motivated to go into the public library for the first time and do research on mean Herod. They also are able to relate to the Holy Family on a more personal level. They see them as needy and in trouble, and probably see themselves the same way. They become passionate about helping them and therefore breath life into the pageant. Because these new "actors" care about the people they are portraying, the pageant comes alive and people in the congregation are given a renewed appreciation for the tradition.

People's Ability to Change

The Best Christmas Pageant Ever is a novel about how humble people are likely to experience a more meaningful life as they allow for change compared to those who are convinced they know best and shut themselves off to new possibilities. As in many good stories the cast includes the humble characters and the proud people who oppose them. Happily in this story there are more people who are open to change than those who remain stuck in their ways.

The story's narrator is one of the characters who considers new viewpoints and allows them to change her thinking. For her, the nativity story has become mundane and dry, but the Herdmans' fresh perspective breathes life into it. Her view of many aspects of the story changes and she thinks about things in greater detail. Why did they put Mary in a barn? What if the Wise Men had gone back to Herod and told him Jesus' location? Would there even be a Jesus? Why wouldn't Mary need to burp her baby? Did Jesus' have colic? Did the Wise Men stay for a while before they headed back on their long journey? As the narrator considers all these new ideas, her appreciation for the Christmas story is deepened. It is no longer dry and boring, but becomes meaningful. Although she has been going to church for years, she does not assume a position of superiority in her knowledge of church things. She is willing to consider someone else's viewpoint and discovers that it not only makes sense but in fact brings the Bible story to life. Without that open mindedness, the narrator may have missed the benefit of a meaningful Christmas experience.

The Herdmans also find themselves experiencing a more meaningful life. Even though they are rough around the edges and make a lot of noise, they are of humble means. They know that they are poorer than most and that they rely on others for support. They know what it is to be in trouble and outcast from the main stem of society. As such, they can relate to Mary and Joseph. Seeing themselves in the Christmas story softens their hearts and changes their perspective somewhat. Suddenly, they discover that they are not alone, but realize that God understands them and has even been them. They are able to experience the wonder of Christmas in a rich way that many others in the church do not.



Unfortunately, there are proud members of the congregation who are unable to move from their positions and miss the opportunity to find richer meaning in their faith. The Wendlekins are just such an example. Alice and her mother are very self-focused and want the attention of the congregation to be on Alice. Alice, in particular, is so set on that goal, that she misses any of the wisdom that the Herdmans bring out in the story. Every action or statement the Herdmans make is met with a sneer and is recorded on her "notepad of wrong-doing." In the midst of the pageant, as the Herdmans bring a true gift (the ham) to the baby Jesus, Alice is unable to see it as a touching act of true love and service. "They're ruining the whole thing!" she whispers to the narrator, (85). And finally when the pageant is over and everyone else is moved by the production and commenting on how it was different and wonderful, Alice's mother still finds something to complain about. She did not see anything new or valuable in the production, only Imogene's black eye. With a touch of sarcasm she says, "...that was something special. But only what you might expect," (87). She and Alice leave the pageant holding on to bitterness, rather than receiving the blessing of a special evening.



Styles

Point of View

The Best Christmas Pageant Ever is told in the first person with an unnamed narrator telling the story. The author does not specifically state that the narrator is a girl, but clues within the text provide that information. The most obvious one is that Alice hopes the narrator will not be playing Mary, the mother of Jesus. The narrator is also a classmate of Imogene Herdman, the second oldest of the rowdy clan. This puts her in a good position to know what is going on with the Herdmans in both the school and the town. She knows the history of all the bad things the Herdmans have done at school, and she is a reliable source of information. She is also the daughter of the woman who gets put in charge of running the pageant this particular year. This also puts her in a good position to hear all of the adults chattering about the Herdmans and the consequences of having them in the pageant. The narrator can report on all aspects of the story, from school, to home, to church, sharing people's actions and conversations as well as her own perspective on what is taking place.

Language and Meaning

In writing the story, the author does not spend much time on giving readers description of the various settings. She does not describe the school or the church buildings or the narrator's home, perhaps because the buildings themselves in no way impact the story. Readers can easily rely on what they know of similar places like a church or school in their own community. The focus in this story is on the characters and the changes that take place in their hearts and attitudes. For this reason, the author does communicate what each of the characters is like as evidenced by their actions and words. For example, the children in the story are very straightforward with their ideas and their words. The Herdmans are very rough in their actions, burning down buildings, blackmailing kids over their weight, stealing desserts in the lunchroom and smoking cigars.

The Herdmans speech is very abrupt as well, and they often argue among themselves. The narrator, even though not rude or rough, is very direct with her words. She is not afraid to say exactly what she thinks. For example, when talking about Imogene blackmailing a fellow student out of a charm bracelet she comments about the girl always bragging about her charms. "They were great charms, but everybody got so sick of hearing about them, so it was almost a relief when Imogene blackmailed it out of her," (12). She also is able to provide her opinion and observations about things that are said and done by others. When Mother tells Imogene that no, she cannot just walk off with someone's baby from the front of the A&P, she assumes Imogene knows as much. But the narrator says, "I doubt if Imogene did know that--she walked off with everything else," (66). In contrast, Mother is naturally more adult-like and mature in her speech and



she is kind and polite. Other adults like Mrs. Armstrong and Mrs. Wendleken are more know-it-all and formal, both in their attitudes and their speech.

Robinson uses very simple language and lots of dialogue. This allows the reader to be right in the action and experience it as it happens. Some of the words she uses are not commonly used among modern readers but their meaning is still clear based on the context. Words such as "pestered," "clonked," and "hollered," have fallen out of everyday contemporary speech. However, they contribute to the book's charm and give it an old-fashioned sort of appeal.

The author also uses a great deal of humor throughout the story. Many of the scenes seems like a comedy skit, because several of the characters continually say and do funny things. For instance, Mother knows how to keep things light in the home. At one point Father is so desperate for some supper that he goes out on the porch and rings the doorbell so his wife can get off the phone with Mrs. Armstrong. He acts like a vagrant begging for a meal. Mother replies, "Come on in. What will the neighbors think, to see you standing out there ringing your own doorbell? And why didn't you ring the doorbell ten minutes ago?" (30-31). Imogene is also frequently delivering very matter of fact one liners. When she learns about the Wise Men coming onto the scene and learning that they were kings, she remarks, "Well it's about time...Maybe they'll tell the innkeeper where to get off, and get the baby out of the barn,"(52). Not to be left out, the narrator is also quite humorous as she often states very clearly the plain truth. As she points out to Alice that it made sense for Wise Men to stay in the stable and rest for a time she comments, "They're supposed to have come a long way. You wouldn't expect them to just show up, hand over the ham, and leave!" (85). Together, the colorful antics and comedy routines and one-liners make the story very entertaining.

Structure

The story is set up in a very simple format, with short chapters. The narrator walks the reader through the whole pageant process and gives her comments on what she thinks all along the way. The opening chapter provides the background on the Herdmans and their history of terror in the town and in the school. This leads easily into how they ended up going to church and finding out about the Christmas pageant.

The heart of the story focuses on the rehearsals and all the funny antics that take place as Mother attempts to put together a reasonable performance. These chapters also allow the reader to see into the other characters' attitudes toward the Herdmans. In little bits, Mother and the narrator see that perhaps the Herdmans have some redeeming qualities and that some of their ideas are not too far off from the truth. The closing chapter of the book reveals the end result of the pageant itself as the production goes on. It reveals what the Herdmans have learned and how the Christmas story has changed their attitudes and behaviors somewhat. It also reveals how the narrator and other people in the congregation have been impacted by the Herdman's involvement in the Christmas pageant.



Quotes

The Herdmans were absolutely the worst kids in the history of the world.
-- The narrator (chapter 1)

Importance: This is the opening line of the book and sums up the attitude everyone in town has toward the Herdman kids. Their reputation for creating trouble everywhere they go is well known and everyone pretty much has the same idea about the family. It is an important statement to make at the beginning of the book, because the story is about the transformation that takes place in the children once they become participants in the church's Christmas pageant and the change that comes over the townspeople as their own eyes are opened in new ways.

The Herdmans moved from grade to grade through the Woodrow Wilson School like those South American fish that strip your bones clean in three minutes flat...which was just about what they did to one teacher after another.
-- The narrator (chapter 1)

Importance: The narrator is explaining how tough the Herdmans are in school. They do not learn what they should but the teachers pass them anyway, because with so many of them, they do not want two Herdmans in their class the following year. The author uses a simile to describe the teachers feeling of being chewed up and comparing it to being eaten by piranhas.

We figured they were headed straight for hell, by way of the state penitentiary...until they got themselves mixed up with the church, and my mother, and our Christmas pageant.
-- The narrator (chapter 1)

Importance: The narrator has just described the extent of the Herdmans' awful behavior throughout the entire chapter. They do bad things and as far as most people think they would be headed to hell at the end of their lives, but not before spending time in the state prison during their lifetime on earth. The statement also provides a segue into the next chapter where the Herdmans begin to get involved with the church. The mention of hell provides a contrast with what is coming in the rest of the story as they begin to spend time in church.

Our Christmas pageant isn't what you'd call four star entertainment. Mrs. Armstrong breaking her leg was the only unexpected thing that ever happened to it.
-- The narrator (chapter 2)

Importance: The narrator is explaining the basics of the church's annual Christmas pageant. It is the same every year and has in fact become quite boring. The costumes are always the same, the people playing the roles barely change, and nothing new ever happens. It is only when Mrs. Armstrong, the woman who always runs the show, breaks her leg and cannot participate this one year that things are shaken up and change occurs.



I like all the other stuff but she said to write down what we liked best, and what I like best is no Herdmans.

-- Charlie (chapter 2)

Importance: Charlie is asked to share with everyone what he likes best about Sunday school. While he enjoys going to church, what he likes best is that there are no Herdmans present to poke or push people around. Charlie is often teased by Leroy Herdman, so he is glad to have a break from him on Sundays. Even though Father says that is not a very Christian thought to have, Mother understands that it is very practical and reasonable.

And then I always remind them that there are no small parts, only small actors.

-- Mrs. Armstrong (chapter 3)

Importance: Mrs. Armstrong like to run the pageant as a lofty ideal with a nice sweet Mary and everyone neatly performing in their assigned place. She uses this phrase at the beginning of each year's rehearsal. She assumes that the children know what it means, but when Mother asks her daughter, the narrator, if she knows what the phrase means, she discovers that they in fact do not understand its meaning. The narrator thinks it has something to do with how tall the kids are and where they stand on the risers, but learns that it is about everyone being equally important in the pageant, no matter what their role.

That woman! She must be surprised that the sun is still coming up every morning without her to supervise the sunrise.

-- Mother (chapter 3)

Importance: Mother is furious that Mrs. Armstrong wants to take the blame for having the Herdmans in the Christmas pageant. Mother is in charge for the year and she does not appreciate Mrs. Armstrong's constant input and desire to retain control. She wants to be respected and allowed to do her job. The reaction from Mrs. Armstrong only serves to drive Mother to make this year's pageant the best one ever, even with the Herdman kids in the leading roles.

You mean they tied him up and put him in a feedbox? she said. Where was the Child Welfare?

-- Imogene Herdman (chapter 4)

Importance: Imogene is reacting to a part of the Christmas story as she is hearing it for the first time. She is learning about baby Jesus being wrapped in swaddling clothes, a term the kids had never heard before, and laid in a manger. Imogene is struggling with reconciling in her mind that anyone would treat a newborn baby so roughly. It is hard for her to believe that Mary and Joseph had to have their baby in a barn and that Jesus had no bed in which to sleep. She knows that her life is pretty rough, but at least someone from Child Welfare is always checking up on her. She is questioning who was looking out for this family?



No, their chief instinct was to get Mary and the baby out of the barn. But even so, it was Herod they wanted to do away with, and Mary or Joseph. They picked out the right villain -- that must mean something.

-- Mother (chapter 5)

Importance: Mother is recognizing that the Herdmans do have some sense of right versus wrong. They were deeply aware of the injustice of Mary having to sleep in the barn when she was fully pregnant and about to give birth. They see that the family was poor and in need of help, but that the best that anyone could do was to show them the stable. Mother and Father see clearly as well, for the first time, that the Christmas story is often glossed over into a nice peaceful scene, but that really it was a dirty, leftover accommodation. But the Herdmans are not angry with Jesus' parents, they are angry with King Herod for being a bad king and not good and caring. Mother sees that the Herdmans have the ability to discern right from wrong and has some hope that they can learn this for themselves.

Alice wrote all these things down, and how many times each thing happened. I don't know why, unless it made her feel good to see, in black and white, just how awful they were.

-- The narrator (chapter 5)

Importance: The narrator is annoyed that Alice is keeping a record of the Herdmans' "sins." She cannot understand why someone would think to do such a thing. The narrator understands that the Herdmans have never been to church before, so why should they be expected to know how to behave or what is expected of them? In fact, they have not had much guidance on morality or behavior at all. She wonders if Alice is keeping the notes not only because then she has evidence against the Herdmans in her attempt to get them kicked out of the pageant, but also because it makes her feel superior to them.

It turned out to be the one great sinful thing Alice kept hoping for.

-- The narrator (chapter 6)

Importance: The narrator is talking about the fire trucks coming to the church because Mrs. McCarthy saw cigar smoke in the ladies room and thought the building was on fire. Imogene had been smoking in there during the break and Mrs. McCarthy of course did not expect any of the ladies or children to be smoking in the building. Alice has been waiting for something really big and bad to happen so she can report everything to her Mother in a last attempt to get the Herdmans kicked out and gain the role of Mary for herself.

After all, that was the whole point of Jesus--that he didn't come down on a cloud like something out of "Amazing Comics," but that he was born and lived...a real person.

-- The narrator (chapter 7)

Importance: Alice has just finished complaining about Imogene burping baby Jesus. Then she wondered if maybe Jesus might have had colic. The narrator thinks that it is



perfectly reasonable to think that Jesus had to burp, just as any other baby must. As she points out, that it the whole point of Jesus, God in the flesh, being born as a baby. He became like everyone else on earth. He did not just appear and go around like a super hero, not really relating to anyone because he was different.

They're supposed to have come a long way. You wouldn't expect them to just show up, hand over the ham, and leave!

-- The narrator (chapter 7)

Importance: Once again, Alice is complaining about something the Herdmans are doing differently during the pageant. She cannot understand why the Wise Men, played by Claude, Leroy and Ollie, brought a ham to the baby Jesus instead of the jars of bath-salts that represent the gold, frankincense and myrrh. And she wants to know why they are hanging around the scene instead of leaving to go home by another way. The narrator stands up for them and uses logic to do so. They have traveled a long way, so it makes sense that they would sit down and rest for a while. They would not just show up, drop their gifts and leave right away. The Herdmans are bringing a sense of reality to the pageant that the narrator and others had not considered before.

Christmas just came over her all at once, like a case of chills and fever. And so she was crying, and walking into furniture.

-- The narrator (chapter 7)

Importance: The narrator is explaining how Imogene suddenly grasped the true meaning of Christmas. Perhaps more than anyone at the church, Imogene can easily identify with Mary, not because she was good and holy, but because she was poor and seemingly felt very out of place in the world. She sees the goodness in the Holy Family and her heart is softened, so she cries over the beauty of it all and, perhaps, has some hope that she can fit into the world, too.