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The Night Before Christmas

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~~Editor's Choice:~~

off

Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

5

Robert Ingpen is perhaps the most prolific and celebrated of modern illustrators of classic children's books; and this early nineteenth century poem seems to be now as much a part of the idea of an English speaking traditional Christmas as carols, turkey and Christmas pudding. In fact, if you believe Wikipedia, the poem is possibly responsible for establishing the idea of Santa Claus visiting each house on a sleigh pulled by reindeer and the now often impossible feat of entering by the chimney. Ingpen's is the latest in a long line of illustrators, and he brings to it the precision of line and brilliance of characterisation that you would expect, but also a sense of reality, stillness and mystery that calms the hectic rhythm of the poem. Sometimes, where the poem suggests movement, Ingpen's illustration shows the close of the movement, or moves into long shot. This is an almost austere version which, for the most part, respects the historical context of the poem. The only Christmas tree is one of the small decorations above the four lines of text that appear on each page or spread. The house that St Nick visits is a large isolated farmhouse with nothing more than a wreath on its door. Its interior is left largely to our imagination. What counts is the cold moonlit night with snow still in the air, the reindeer and St Nick himself. No Christmas card scene. Outside you can feel the chill and in the endpapers' icy sky almost discern the shape of the reindeer, which are, when they actually appear, naturalistic, unruly and boisterous, hardly harnessed to their work, a kind of wild magic. And St Nick, despite our expectations, a merry plump elf, just as the poem says he is, yet whose beaming features, wrinkled and weathered, warmly dominate this version and suggest a real, reassuring and mischievous old man. It's a version that respects the seductive idea of Christmas Eve that the poem helped to create but strips back much of the cliché that has attached to it.

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