

KIRKUS
REVIEWS

JACQUES AND THE FORBIDDEN CHRISTMAS

BY MARTHA SEARS WEST • ILLUSTRATED BY MARTHA SEARS WEST

CLEAN KIND WORLD BOOKS (62 pp.)

The meaning of Christmas flourishes amid oppression in this children's book

Set during the French Revolution, this story (enhanced with digital illustrations by West) details the conflict's religious persecution through the eyes of a pale-skinned child named Jacques. Jacques and his family are heading to town to see the Nativity scene put up at the cathedral. But when they arrive, they discover that a soldier is standing guard and they are told that there are no religious celebrations allowed within—just banquets and balls. Dejected, Jacques wonders aloud to his father how there can be a Christmas at all this year, to which his parent responds: “By helping someone else remember the Christ Child.” Inspired by his father's words, Jacques begins to sculpt his own little Nativity set, beginning with the Holy family and then extending his figures to include his neighbors: an older man gathering sticks and his dead wife (depicted as an angel), a shepherd and his sheep, and a milkmaid. Jacques also strikes up an odd relationship with the guard at the cathedral, bringing him little gifts to help keep him cozy and comfortable. The soldier eventually warms to Jacques' attention and celebrates Christmas with the boy's family. The tale is followed by a brief, useful history of religious oppression during the Revolution as well as intriguing information about the tradition of homemade Nativity figurines, called santons. Jacques is too saccharine to feel like a real child living during a time of turmoil, his wholesome credulity feeling forced. But the vivid historical setting and theme help to lend interest to his tale. This would be a good introduction to conversations about the history of religious persecution of all kinds.

A Christmas story about an overly naive boy with a distinctive historical setting.