

# Children's Picture books, epiphanies, and the 1914 Christmas Truce

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## Abstract

Given the widespread expectation that children's war literature should be morally instructive, it is not surprising that epiphanies are a regular plot device used in children's picture books. This article will analyse four children's picture books about the 1914 Christmas Truce which are framed by epiphanic experiences - *Shooting at the Stars: The Christmas Truce of 1914* (Hendrix, 2014), *And the Soldiers Sang* (Lewis & Kelley, 2011), *The Christmas Truce* (Duffy & Roberts, 2014) and *The Christmas Truce: The Place Where Peace Was Found* (Robinson & Impey, 2014).

## Introduction

The epiphany experienced by Saul (who became Paul the Apostle) on the road to Damascus in c. AD34 provided the Judeo-Christian world with a powerful metaphor to describe a sudden or radical conversion from one outlook or course of action to its opposite. Having all but shed its explicitly religious meaning, an epiphany is now used to denote a “sudden, discontinuous change, leading to profound, positive, and enduring transformation through the reconfiguration of an individual's most deeply held beliefs about self and world” (Jarvis v). Given the widespread expectation that children’s war literature must “be morally instructive”, epiphanies are a regular plot device used in children’s picture books about war. (MacCallum-Stewart 180). This is particularly true of those who choose the 1914 Christmas Truce as the setting for a war parable that transforms the historical particularities of an event into a universal human experience (MacCallum-Stewart; Stephens).

The separation of religion from epiphanic experiences mirrors developments in children’s literature, which over the course of the first half of the twentieth century became increasingly secularised. When religion re-emerged as a theme in children’s literature toward the end of the century, it was far less dogmatic and certain than had once been the case. Craig Werner and Frank Riga argue that a wave of scepticism continues to sweep the literature whereby the “questioning modality has shifted radically from the searchable to the searching” (2). In picture books, this searching is often framed as an epiphanic experience, for if the central characters can question cherished beliefs, by extension, so too can the reader. An epiphany must occur within a secular context if it is to resonate with modern readers. For at most, religion can only leave “its residual mark [on children’s literature] in ways that are implicit rather than intentional” (Worsley 162). The epiphanies in the four books being analysed are, with only a few exceptions, therefore devoid of overt religious overtones.

This article will analyse four children’s picture books about the Christmas Truce - *Shooting at the Stars: The Christmas Truce of 1914* (2014), *And the Soldiers Sang* (2011), *The Christmas Truce* (2014) and *The Christmas Truce: The Place Where Peace Was Found* (2014). The authors and illustrators frame the truce as a series of individual epiphanic experiences that convince the soldiers involved to reject the war and the empty values for which it is being fought. The analysis will be framed by Matthew McDonald’s (2008) six Epiphanic Characteristics - antecedent state, suddenness, personal transformation, illumination/insight, meaning making, and enduring nature.

## The Christmas Truce of 1914

Forty years ago, Paul Fussell observed that the Great War was, paradoxically, both a “myth ridden world” and a “triumph of modern industrialism, materialism, and mechanism” (115). The mythology that has encased the Christmas Truce in the years after 1914 has proven particularly useful to those seeking to mitigate war’s brutality with a story that celebrates human virtue. The accepted narrative is that on Christmas Day 1914 near Ypres, a town in Belgium, 100,000 British and German soldiers involved themselves at varying levels in an informal cessation of hostilities that reflected their growing realisation that the war was futile and unnecessary (Hochschild 130). Some went so far as to meet in no man’s land where they exchanged gifts and photographs and, according to legend, played football. The soldiers then returned to their trenches, both enriched and burdened with their new knowledge. For though they had discarded their pre-war notions of patriotism and the glory of battlefield sacrifice,

they remained subject to military discipline and the authority of men who had experienced no such insight themselves. The story often includes contested references to men refusing to fire on each other when the truce ended or being punished for their participation. However, the motivations for the truce were more prosaic than altruistic. Mud, rain, curiosity, lack of personal animosity toward the enemy, heavy casualties, thwarted hopes for an end to the war by Christmas, and homesickness were the driving forces rather than the rebellion foregrounded in some interpretations (Crocker 4). Beginning in the 1960s, however, the truce was “repackaged and repurposed by historians and others” as a “soldier’s rebellion against the tragic waste of war and the stupidity of ... the politicians and generals”. In the process, it has become a “historiographical touchstone for the conventional narrative of the First World War and an enticing shorthand for the view that the conflict was futile and senseless” (Crocker 19).

The characterisation of the truce as an epiphany allows for a celebration of human nature by drawing on the strong cultural attachment to Christmas as an opportunity for moral redemption (Baguley and Kerby). Indeed, as Brown and Seaton (1984) observe, the truce is probably the “best and most heartening Christmas story of modern times” (p. xxv). By framing the denouement of the truce as a series of personal epiphanies during which the soldiers recognise the war’s futility is consistent with the wider imagining of the conflict. Since the 1960s the wider understanding of the war has been “distilled into poetry” which positions the war as little more than “poets, men shot at dawn, horror, death, waste” (Reynolds xvi; Todman 158-160). Fidelity to this construct is an important consideration, as picture books are usually chosen by parents or family members. As such, they are an important indicator of contemporary attitudes and morals (Flothow; Avery). A Christmas parable that celebrates the recognition by front line soldiers of both sides that the war is “a betrayal of the ruled by the rulers” does not challenge this popular understanding (Paget 83).

## **Methods**

As outlined by Matthew McDonald, epiphanies share six characteristics that can be adapted for use in a variety of cultural and literary contexts. They are a valuable framing device as the modern secular understanding of the term lacks nuance, thereby leaving it ill-defined and regularly employed to describe the acquiring of any type of new knowledge.

**Antecedent state:** Epiphanies are preceded by periods of anxiety, depression, and inner turmoil.

**Suddenness:** Epiphanies are sudden and abrupt, bringing with them life altering insights. The suddenness is possibly reinforced by them being the unexpected outcome of an apparently unimportant moment, object or experience (Beja; Johnson).

**Personal transformation:** Epiphanies are an experience of profound change and transformation in self-identity. An epiphany is an aspect of a person’s lived experience, including what they know or think they know of themselves and others; an “uncomfortable transfiguration of the self” (Platt 179).

**Illumination/insight:** Epiphanies comprise an acute awareness of something new, something to which the individual had previously been figuratively blind.

**Meaning making:** Epiphanies are profound insights because they are deemed significant to the individual's life.

**Enduring nature:** Although the actual epiphany is a momentary experience, the personal transformation that results is permanent and lasting.

## Results/Discussion

Antecedent state:

The characterisation of the Great War as an apocalypse for Western Civilisation still has a remarkable currency. The turmoil of the battlefield, a common trope in Great War literature, is regularly contrasted with what had until then been a “hot, sun drenched, gorgeous summer ... the most beautiful within living memory ... remembered by many Europeans as a kind of Eden” (Fromkin 11). This late-Edwardian idyll is then juxtaposed against the troglodyte world of the Western Front where men's bodies and minds are smashed and destroyed, as are the illusions which had motivated their enlistment (Fussell 36). In *And the Soldiers Sang* both author and illustrator draw heavily on the image of the Western Front as a “dystopian wilderness ... a pestilent waste of shattered trees, toxic soils and scattered bones” (Gough 56). The protagonist is one of 300 “gangly innocents” shipped to the Western Front, a “planet away from Cardiff, Wales and the meadows of my youth” (4-5). He is soon exposed to “sniper, shell, sleet, and snow” (7), “trench rats fattened on corpses”, villages that had been “bombed, battered, and emptied of humanity”, and “machine-gun fire, the whizz-bang of the field guns, [and] reconnaissance planes droning overhead”. Between the two sides is a frozen no man's land that is a “bone orchard for soldiers falling like ninepins quick with lead” (p. 10), littered with “humps of dead and wounded” (12), and described variously as “forbidden ground” (15), a “hushed moonscape” (27), and a “moonlit desert of the dead” (27). This rhetoric is matched in *The Christmas Truce* where references to the “dead lay[ing] still in no man's land”, “frozen foreign fields [that] were acres of pain”, and “men who would drown in mud, be gassed, or shot or vaporised”. This emphasises that this is a world in turmoil, thereby foreshadowing that the epiphany will culminate in a profound alteration in the soldiers' world view. John Hendrix likewise establishes the turmoil preceding his protagonist's epiphany in *Shooting at the Stars* through an exploration of the disenchantment of the front-line soldier. His youthful protagonist is Charlie, an English soldier who only a few months before had been in school and whose fresh face and freckles reinforce his proximity to childhood and act as a metaphor for the innocence and naivety of the soldiers. His worldview is, however, quickly shaken by “life in this foul pit” (6). The usual suspects are gathered - the rain, the snow, the mud, the rats, and the artillery fire, all of which combine to encourage a rejection of narrow patriotism and replace it with wider, more universal human values.

Of the four books being analysed, *The Christmas Truce: The Place Where Peace was Found* makes the most overt embrace of the Truce as a Christmas parable. For example, the cover of the book emphasises the extent to which the work of both author and illustrator is culturally situated, including as it does a Christmas tree, Christmas lights, and a gentle rather than foreboding winter scene. Martin Impey's beautiful winter scapes have an ethereal quality, with few overt references to violence; for example, a destroyed building is softened by a dove carrying an olive branch, itself resonant with scriptural antecedents. Even the devastated landscape of the battlefield is illuminated by the “moon shining bright. That lit up the place where peace was found”. The written word also evokes a distinctive soundscape, inviting the

reader to imagine the sounds of soldiers singing the carol *Silent Night* and of bells ringing from the tower of a shattered church. By positioning the narrative as a Christmas story, author and illustrator have a rich tradition of Christmas epiphanies on which to draw.

### Suddenness

The epiphanies abrupt intrusions into everyday life are evident in the central trope of the Christmas Truce narrative, the singing of *Stille Nacht (Silent Night)* by German soldiers. In *And the Soldiers Sang* the soldier protagonist responds with the *First Noel*; in *Shooting at the Stars*, the German soldiers decorate their front line with Christmas trees festooned with candles and lanterns; and *The Christmas Truce: The Place Where Peace was Found* names individual German soldiers in order to emphasise the transnational nature of the truce. In *The Christmas Truce* the soldiers sing Christmas carols until the “Germans stood, seeing across the divide, the sprawled, mute shapes of those who had died”. The truce then begins with a jarring suddenness, so much so that it is described in the language of an attack: “It was up and over, every man, to shake the hand of a foe as a friend or slap his back like a brother would”. Each of the books makes this powerful moment sudden in a narrative sense but also sudden in how briefly it is described. For though it is a development on which the story pivots, it consumes little of the authors and illustrators’ focus or time. It is what it leads to that interests them.

### Personal transformation

The epiphanies each involve a profound personal transformation in the self-identity of the protagonists. In *And the Soldiers Sang*, the performance of *Silent Night* and the *First Noel* inspires “a brave unarmed German” to climb from his dugout and begin a “slow march over forbidden ground”. He is met there by a member of the Scots Guard. This so “emboldened” their comrades that “dozens and then hundreds of us took our first halting steps toward a court martial offence on both sides; fraternizing with the enemy” (7). In *Shooting at the Stars*, a German and an English officer meet in no-man’s land and shake hands in an act of friendship then repeated by soldiers of both sides. The encounters are transactional, with gifts and tokens exchanged. Hendrix includes a moment where the young soldier exchanges buttons from his uniform for a German soldier’s buckle, an incident borrowed from historical accounts of the truce but which now is used to symbolise the extent of the goodwill engendered by the epiphany. This meeting, which in each of the books was instigated by the Germans, is repeated in *The Christmas Truce: The Place Where Peace was Found*: “friends were made at Christmas time/ When enemy soldiers held out a hand/ A sign of peace in No Man’s Land”. The transformation from soldiers tasked with killing their opponents to men who now recognise their common humanity is at the core of this epiphanic experience.

Personal transformation is not, however, a universal experience. The absence of empathy between the common soldiers and their officers reminds the reader that people are separated by more than just nationality. For example, in *And the Soldiers Sang*, the truce is ended by the arrival of officers, for “the peals of laughter announced our ‘treason’, arousing the brass hats to fury” (23). In *Shooting at the Stars*, the return of “the major” marked a return to hostilities. Notably, the officer who accuses his men of acting “like traitors to Britain” had come “bounding in from the rear trench headquarters” (31). By contrast, the soldiers, bonded by their suffering and the epiphanic insight it provides have transcended national hatreds. The protagonist nevertheless has seen the truth of their temporary fraternisation and

acknowledges that “tomorrow I suppose we will all fight for our countries”. But his old certitude is gone, for having recognised the humanity of the German soldiers, he suspects that “our side will spend the rest of the night aiming high above their trench, shooting at the stars” (33). The soldiers in *The Christmas Truce* likewise aim at the sky rather than shoot the men with whom they had only recently made “a battleground a football pitch”. By creating antagonists that are part of the same army, the books encourage a more critical view of patriotism. This encouragement is at the core of the epiphany’s value in children’s war literature, but in this case, it ultimately ends in tragedy.

Illumination/insight and meaning making:

The act of meeting in no-man’s land encouraged an acute awareness of something to which the soldiers had previously been blind. In *And the Soldiers Sang*, the protagonist “crawled up and shuffled toward my first Hun. We stared at each other, two baffled amateurs playing at professional slaughter” (16). As they stand opposite each other, they recognise themselves in the other. What follows is an increasing level of intimacy – the exchange of chocolate, photographs, a makeshift spit for Christmas dinner, and the legendary game of football. Yet each book moves this insight beyond a light-hearted fraternisation by emphasising the grief that pervades the shared efforts to bury the dead without distinction of nationality. The soldiers have made meaning in their new friendships while simultaneously acknowledging the meaninglessness of the war. After that is complete, and “For the rest of that charmed evening, combatants turned companions. It was like Saturday night under a streetlamp in every man’s land” (19). As Gordon Myskow characterises it, there has now been as a “calibration of the right values” (32). At the end of the truce, the soldiers “turned away – backward glances from both sides – and watched our flourishing friendship, the tag end of war weary hope, perish like a pinched candle flame” (24).

*The Christmas Truce* characterises the actual moment that the soldiers experience an epiphany as a recognition that they are all victims, surrounded by the “sprawled, mute shapes of those who had died” (20). They too share the task of burying the dead, and after this “marvellous, festive day and night” their “fallen comrades” now lie “side by side beneath the makeshift crosses of midwinter graves”, joined in death in a way that had been impossible in life (34). The protagonist in *Shooting at the Stars* is driven to ask an existential question: for “what else could create such spontaneous peace but the hand of God himself?” (21). This leads to a more practical, though no less pressing question when challenged by ‘the major’: “How could a day of peace be treason?” (31). Unlike the other authors and illustrators, Impey and Robinson draw on religious imagery in *The Christmas Truce: The Place Where Peace was Found*, to the extent that they have the soldiers celebrate Mass in the ruins of a church. Ahistorical, certainly, but it is an attempt to sanctify the shared epiphany by one of the few overtly religious references.

Enduring nature

There is no suggestion that this epiphany was, in an historical sense, anything but an isolated event, yet the books make it a cosmopolitan memory, one that speaks to broadly humanistic concerns. Nevertheless, by choosing an historical event, the authors and illustrators render any broadening of focus beyond that evening and part of the following day problematic. Impey and Robinson finish *The Christmas Truce: The Place Where Peace was Found* without exploring how the truce ended, thereby sidestepping the awkward fact that the war

continued until November 1918. They conclude the book with a tableaux of a modern Christmas celebration surrounded by photographs and mementos indicating that at least one of the British soldiers present enjoyed a long and happy life. Some of the mementos, such as a picture of the truce, indicate that the epiphany had guided the soldier to make meaning in his post-war life. In contrast, the other three texts acknowledge that the enduring nature of the epiphanic experiences rests with the readers rather than the protagonists. In *And the Soldiers Sang*, the protagonist is killed when the German equivalent of his own officer class move into the line opposite his regiment. They are “hard-nosed Prussians” who are “ignorant of the pause, callous to the cause”. While “daydreaming about how spring in Wales would be welcoming me back before the moorlands greened”, he is shot dead by a sniper. (29). The final page in *Shooting at the Stars* is a double page image of the main protagonist waving across the shattered landscape of no-man’s-land to a silhouetted German doing the same while illuminated by a Christmas tree. Likewise, *The Christmas Truce* makes it clear that this is an isolated incident, one that occurs “beneath the shivering, shy stars and the pinned moon”, but also “the yawn of History”. Though “each man later only aimed at the sky”, the frontline soldiers exert little agency beyond that protest. This is consistent with most post-war European war literature. Poets such as Wilfred Owen, and Siegfried Sassoon and novelists such as Henri Barbusse and Erich Maria Remarque portrayed the front-line soldier as a passive rather than an active hero. What he does is never as important as what is done to him (Gerster). This is not as big a limitation as one might expect, for few of the participants would have survived the war unscathed and even if they did, they have all died in the years since. It is the readers who can still exert agency, for they have now experienced the same insight.

## **Conclusion**

The authors and illustrators of the four books analysed in this article have balanced their rejection of war with an acknowledgement that the suffering and the tragedy were the catalysts for a profound alteration in their thinking. The soldiers (and by extension, the readers) have now adopted the correct moral reading of the war. Yet the insights gained by the soldiers and their ‘rebellion’ against the war could not save them. The historical record, and its wide circulation, would quickly render that ending inauthentic if any author or illustrator were unwise enough to attempt it. They are not interested, however, in refighting the battles of the Great War, but instead seek to communicate the insight gained by the soldiers at so exorbitant a cost to modern audiences. Their efforts have taken on an even greater resonance now that Europe has again been plunged into war. The question of what epiphanies different groups fighting in the Ukraine will experience and deem worthy of being explored in children’s literature is uncertain. Early signs in the media suggest that the outpouring of support for Ukrainian refugees in countries such as Poland (though notably not extended to Indian and Nigerian students) might well serve as the basis for the transformation of the historical particularities of the conflict into universals of human experience. It is difficult to see how in the current climate a children’s picture book could move beyond a narrative of refugee resettlement or a Russian soldier’s epiphany regarding his involvement in the war. Perhaps in time there will be an opportunity to see a shared Ukrainian/Russian epiphany explored in a picture book, but it would be an ambitious move by a UK publisher, or indeed, one based anywhere in the Western world, to publish a children’s book that even hinted at a shared complicity. Perhaps as with the truce, a mix of myth and history will prove

successful. The legend of the Ghost of Kyiv, a Ukrainian fighter pilot and scourge of the Russian Airforce, is easily dismissed as a fiction; it is nevertheless a reminder of how appealing myths are in times of turmoil, regardless of whether it be Christmas on the Western Front in 1914 or the skies over Kyiv in 2022. In that sense, it is possible that at least in the world of literature, people are free to pick and choose which epiphanies resonate most powerfully with their world view. It is a testament to the Christmas Truce that it continues to do so after more than a century.

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