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A War Of Gifts: An Ender Story



Synopsis

Orson Scott Card offers a Christmas gift to his millions of fans with this short novel set during Ender's first years at the Battle School where it is forbidden to celebrate religious holidays. The children come from many nations, many religions; while they are being trained for war, religious conflict between them is not on the curriculum. But Dink Meeker, one of the older students, doesn't see it that way. He thinks that giving gifts isn't exactly a religious observation, and on Sinterklaas Day he tucks a present into another student's shoe. This small act of rebellion sets off a battle royal between the students and the staff, but some surprising alliances form when Ender comes up against a new student, Zeck Morgan. The War over Santa Claus will force everyone to make a choice.

Book Information

Series: Ender

Audio CD

Publisher: Macmillan Audio; Unabridged edition (October 30, 2007)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1593976313

ASIN: B0042P59UA

Product Dimensions: 6.1 x 0.5 x 4.4 inches

Shipping Weight: 3.2 ounces

Average Customer Review: 4.0 out of 5 stars See all reviews (154 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #4,720,521 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #38 in Books > Books on CD >

Authors, A-Z > (C) > Card, Orson Scott #3251 in Books > Books on CD > Science Fiction &

Fantasy > Science Fiction #3796 in Books > Books on CD > Science Fiction & Fantasy >

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Customer Reviews

Science fiction and Christmas usually don't connect. They have different focuses, and not much in common. But Orson Scott Card gives it a good try in the megabrief novella "A War of Gifts." Despite a rather abrupt ending, it's a pleasant little story with a dark side that one doesn't expect from a Christmas story, and a Scroogian main character who's hard to like. That character is Zeck Morgan, son of a fanatical preacher who condemns everything, and "purifies" Zeck by beating him. Even when he's drafted into Battle School, which does not allow outward religious observance, he shows nothing but pious contempt for his classmates and superiors. But on Sinterklaas, one Dutch boy

slips a gift into another's shoe. Zech sees and reports it, but their superior doesn't care. Soon the other children have decided to pull a "Santa Claus" -- they'll exchange little gifts and favours over the holidays. But since Zech believes that Saint Nick is a tool of the devil, he disrupts the festive favors -- and it may take Ender Wiggin to show him what the real problem is. Just a warning: this book is very short. Very short. As in, 130 smallish pages short -- if rendered in normal pages, it would be a fair-sized short story. But despite its brevity, it is a pleasant little story. Half is a story about kids celebrating the spirit of Christmas (or Hanukkah, or Ramadan) despite their sterile, grim surroundings. Lots of fun, goodwill, and general holiday spirit. But about halfway through, it suddenly becomes darkly unfestive, as Ender tries to force Zech to confront -- without any "my father says" or Bible quotes -- the painful truth of his own feelings, and his father's cruelty. Okay, readers will have picked that up long before.

Orson Scott Card has long since earned his place among the true masters of science fiction with novels like *Ender's Game*, *Pastwatch*, the *Homecoming* series, and his alternate history/fantasy *Tales of Alvin Maker*. His Ender universe has been expanding for some time now, and this year he dives back into the time period of the first novel for a short Christmas tale, *A War of Gifts*. In the original *Ender's Game*, Ender Wiggin was recruited, along with hundreds of the most brilliant children on Earth, to train in an orbital battle school for the day when the human race would have to repel an invasion from an alien race they only barely defeated once before. In *A War of Gifts*, the camera moves from Ender to another student at the school, Zeck Morgan. A fundamentalist Christian, Zeck refuses to participate in the wargames at the school, and when a pair of Dutch students participate in a Sinterklaas Day celebration (St. Nicholas' Day, on Dec. 6), he issues a complaint about their being able to express their religion while others are suppressed. The other kids don't take kindly to Zeck's reaction, however, and the children of Battle School begin a mini-mutiny, trying to find small ways to celebrate Christmas despite the protestations of the adults running the show. In the end, Zeck has to face Ender to discover a truth hidden from everyone, even himself. This story fits neatly between the pages of *Ender's Game* and makes for a highly unique Christmas tale. Most Christmas stories these days are more secular in nature -- about Santa and Frosty and the like -- and I really have no problem with that.

The physical dimensions of Orson Scott Card's diminutive new seasonal story, *A WAR OF GIFTS*, brought out the Christmas stocking-stuffer in me right away. What a "cute" little book, I thought. A cozy evening of reading later, I was amazed at the breadth and depth of wisdom I encountered

within a mere 126-postcard-sized pages. The journey to Card's futuristic world of the popular Ender series --- specifically to an elite Battle School for preteen children housed in an orbiting space station above Earth --- offers a concentrated experience of artificially constructed peer-group societies in which any deviation from prescribed behavioral norms carries enormous risk. Created to indoctrinate the younger generation by weaning students away from any "distracting" attachments to family, culture, religion, ethnicity, passion, altruism and the like, Battle School's mandate is to select the best, brightest and potentially most dangerously independent children and reform them into wholly focused galactic warriors. In essence, however, Battle School is really an ultra-sophisticated and high-tech version of old-style American boot-camp training --- or, perhaps more potently for Canadians, the infamous "residential" schools of the 19th and early 20th centuries, where aboriginal children were forced to learn in an environment stripped of their native traditions and languages. But Card (despite having abundant theological qualifications to do so) doesn't spend time abstractly moralizing or preaching from some distant pulpit about various forms of child abuse, war-footing mentality or social conditioning.

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