

Reflections on GREAT JOY and holiday memories from



KATE DICAMILLO and BAGRAM IBATOULLINE

KATE DICAMILLO

How did Great Joy start?

Great Joy started with a sentence that haunted me for a couple of weeks before I finally wrote it down: “This was in a dark time, when music was seldom heard.” But the thing was I *could* hear music. Where was it coming from? That’s when the organ grinder appeared, and with him, the monkey. And when I looked away from them, when I looked up, I saw Frances watching them both, worried. That sentence that I began with, about the dark time, did not ultimately make it into the story, but the notion of it, the feeling of music in a dark time, guided me through the story.

This is your first picture book. Did you know that the story would take this shape?

No. As we all know by now, I never know what I’m doing. But the story knows. That is, the story is smarter than me and figures out how it should be told, if I have enough sense to step back and let it be.

Once you knew it was a picture book, was Bagram Ibatoulline always the illustrator you had in mind?

I actually wrote this book before I was aware of Bagram (talk about dark times!), so I didn’t have him in mind when I wrote it. Bagram has an utterly unerring ability to paint what is in my head. He got the setting exactly right. He got everything exactly right.

As an aside, I now often write with Bagram in my mind, thinking: How would he see this? He’s a genius. It has been a profound pleasure to have him bring my words to life.

Do you remember being a child and becoming aware of people who did not have anywhere to sleep?

When I was in third grade, in one of our reading textbooks there was a story about a little boy who lived in Korea who slept on the street on a straw mat and never had enough to eat. I remember coming home the night after I read that story and sitting down at the dinner table. It was dark outside, and there was one light on over the table, and I sat in that small pool of light and thought about the boy in Korea—how I could have been him and he could have been me.

How did Christmas morning unfold in your house?

I've heard of households where the parents make you stay in bed until it is light outside. I've heard of households where you have to eat *breakfast* before you can go and look under the tree. Happily, we were not that kind of household. We got up at the crack of dawn: five o'clock in the morning, usually. We still do that today, even as adults. There is magic in that early morning hour.

Were you ever in a Christmas pageant?

What we usually did at our church when I was a kid was put on Christmas "programs." These involved a lot of singing, and I presented a problem at these affairs because I could not sing. Also, I was incredibly short, and so for reasons of symmetry, when everyone was lined up to sing it was necessary for me and my tuneless self to be up front. I was encouraged by the adults in charge to mouth the words but not sing them, which I did; but inside, in my heart, I was singing like you wouldn't believe.

What did your Christmas tree look like? Did you have any favorite ornaments?

Christmas trees were a very big deal in my house. We didn't put the tree up until Christmas Eve, and that made the whole process doubly magical. There is an ornament constructed of a margarine tub with cotton and buttons glued on it to resemble Santa Claus that I made in nursery school and that still (much to everybody's disgust) gets hung on the tree every year. It is, I must admit, a bit bedraggled. But I think it has quite a bit of spirit left in it.

BAGRAM IBATOULLINE

Do you have a favorite book from your childhood?

It is difficult to pick just one favorite book from my childhood. I enjoyed all of Andersen's tales, the Brothers Grimm, Jules Verne's novels, Russian folktales and fairy tales, ancient Greek myths, Mark Twain, and other books from around the world that were available.

This is your second collaboration with Kate DiCamillo. What is that experience like?

Yes, it is a second time. Unfortunately we haven't met yet. I have only Kate's text to work with, but I get her feedback on the illustrations. I've had a wonderful experience.

Great Joy is a truly heartwarming Christmas story. What methods did you use to create such luminous pictures?

I have memories from my childhood, and I've tried to show how I felt about the holidays when I was a kid.

What's your fondest holiday memory?

My fondest holiday memory is of when my family was all together, everybody happy, love and warmth everywhere. I remember that we all had fun and laughed. It was a time of joy.

What's next for you?

Next is Hans Christian Andersen's *Thumbelina*, retold by Brian Alderson, scheduled to come out in the fall of 2008.