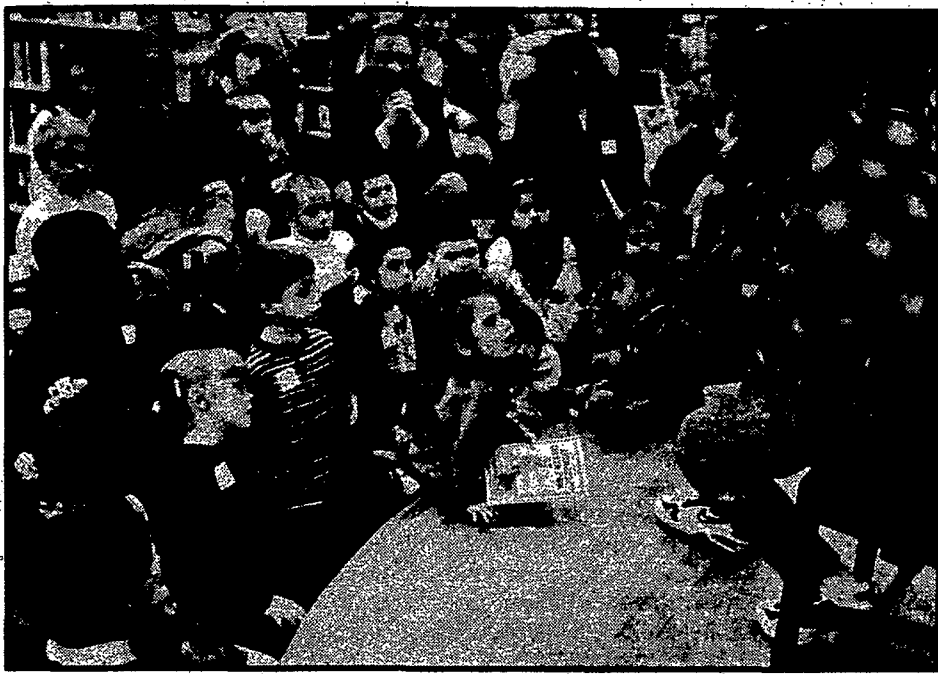




Greg Francis/Staff photographer

John Reitano, right, reads his book *What If the Zebras Lost Their Stripes?* at the Pittsford Barnes & Noble bookstore Dec. 9.

New children's book challenges prejudice

By Lee Strong
Associate editor

PITTSFORD — The children were firm in their reviews.

"I like it because the zebras lost their stripes. I like zebras," Anthony Fabiano said.

"I like it when they were up on the cliff looking at each other. It looked like they were talking to each other," Jordan Jones noted.

And for Betsie Nettles, the message was clear: "Never fight."

These first-graders from Rochester's North Baptist Christian School were at the Barnes & Noble bookstore Dec. 9 to hear John Reitano read from his new book, *What If the Zebras Lost Their Stripes?*

Illustrated by William Haines, the book promotes in a simple and colorful way accepting differences by exploring what would happen if some zebras became all black and others became all white.

Reitano, a Rochester native who now lives in El Segundo, Calif., not only read from the book, but also showed some of the sketches done by Haines for it. He also led 70-plus children and parents in spirited cheers of "Hey zebras, stop fighting!"

"It doesn't matter what you look like," he explained to the children. "All that matters is how we treat each other."

In an interview with the *Catholic Courier*, Reitano, a motivational speaker, explained how and why he came to write the book.

"I was at the zoo, saw a zebra, and started staring at it," Reitano said. "I walked away, and went back and kept staring at it."

He kept going back.

"Something kept drawing me back," he

explained. And then suddenly the premise for the book came to him.

"At that moment I sensed it was more of a gift that was given to me," he said.

The next day he wrote the story. But then he put it aside, writing some other children's stories. Finally, he took the story and the others he'd completed to Haines, with whom he had worked on other projects. Haines immediately gravitated to the zebra story.

After completing the book, they discovered the reality of children's book publishing: repeated rejections by publishers.

"It was really just a lesson in persistence," Reitano said.

Finally, Paulist Press agreed to publish the book, releasing it in September with an initial printing of 5,000. The book sold so well Paulist has released a second printing.

Reitano said that while children have enjoyed the book, it has also elicited strong, positive reactions from adults. He speculated that this is so because all people have experienced prejudice in their lives.

"I think that everybody does in some way, regardless of your ethnicity," Reitano said. "I think all forms of prejudice are based on ignorance."

Reitano said his Catholic upbringing — his family attended St. Augustine Church in Rochester, then St. John the Evangelist Church in Greece — is manifested in the book, though in a quiet way.

In the story, once the zebras have discovered that they can get along despite their differences, they are given their stripes back by passing through a rainbow.

"That rainbow represents God," Reitano said. "It's like God took away their stripes as a kind of test for them."

Christmas season reminds us that God welcomes all home

One of my earliest childhood memories took place on Christmas Eve when Santa Claus came to our house. I was about 4 years old at the time and I remember telling my mother that "Santa" looked a lot like our next-door neighbor, Mr. Howland. But whatever doubts I had about



BY EILEEN MARX

family matters

Santa that night quickly disappeared as he said good-bye at our front door.

"Where are your reindeer, Santa?" I asked.

Without hesitation Santa replied, "Well, they're right there on your front lawn. It's hard to see them in the snow. But if you look over by that tree ..."

As he opened the door and a gust of wind blew into our front hall, I stretched high on my tippy-toes and for a fleeting moment, I spotted three reindeer standing near our birch tree.

If only we could hold on forever to the faith we had as children. It's a faith of openness, innocence and awe that we wish we could recapture as adults. In the eyes of many children, the world is a place of wonder and marvel, where reindeer fly, where people are good and where there is a God who watches over us all. And then one day we learn about Santa, and Christmas is never quite the same. Children also learn — some much too early in life — that the world isn't always a safe place and there are more than a few people who do terrible things. So much of the goodness and mystery of life that we believe in as children has disappeared before we've reached adulthood.

I wonder if one of the reasons that so many people stop going to church and believing in God is fear — fear that like so many other beliefs we've held over the years — this one too will be shattered. As one childhood belief after another is shot down, are we frightened that the belief we hold dearest — the one that sustains us when all others fail — will be destroyed as well? We need to know that the birth, death and resurrection of our Lord really did take place and that God's promise that he would send his Son to conquer sin and death is as real as it gets.

I think many of us have had times in our lives when we've "fallen away" from our church and our faith in God. For a few years I didn't go to church, except at Christmas, Easter and when I was home for the holidays visiting my parents. I don't think I ever stopped believing in God; my faith was just slowly fading away. It was difficult to go to Christmas Mass at this time in my life. I felt awkward, sad and disingenuous.

After a time, I realized that God would use whatever faith I had and help me to understand that even though I had let go of

God, he would never let go of me. And this is the message of Christmas: that God became man to save us all, no matter how low we've sunk or how far we've run away from him. God is a persistent and loving Father who wants us back. He knows the

potential we have to touch the lives of others with his love and life and he won't give up on us that easily.

On Christmas we're reminded that this may be the only day of the year when a friend, neighbor or family member comes back to church. Those who have been away may feel uneasy stepping back into God's house. They may feel that it's been too long and they're simply going through the motions like many other holiday traditions. Let them know it's OK if they can't remember the words to all the prayers. God already knows what's in their hearts. It's important to remember that Jesus didn't come to those who had it all figured out. Jesus spent a lot of his ministry lifting up his friends and followers who often experienced doubt and denial. But these were the same people in whom Jesus entrusted the future of his church once they "turned to him with their whole hearts."

In this Christmas season we celebrate the joy of homecomings in our families and in our churches. We celebrate the finding of the lost sheep — those lost to indifference; addiction, depression and abuse but who were found by a steadfast and jubilant shepherd. The words of Jesus are clear about how deeply he longs to have all his children back in his arms: "Once arrived home, he invites friends and neighbors in and says to them, 'Rejoice with me because I have found my lost sheep.' I tell you, there will likewise be more joy in heaven over one repentant sinner than over ninety-nine righteous people who have no need to repent."

This Christmas Eve, if you've been away from the church, try to let your doubts disappear as you stand at your church's front door.

"But where are you, Lord?" you'll ask.

Without hesitation he'll reply, "I'm here, right in front of you. Some days it's harder to see me. But if you look over here ..."

Then open the door of your heart and let a gust of the Spirit's cool air blow into your life. Stretch high and look for the Infant Jesus. You'll find him whenever you reach out to the hungry, the thirsty, the sick, the poor and powerless, the faithful and the fallen away. And he will be real.

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Marx lives with her husband and two children in Lawrenceville, N.J.



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