

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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### **'A Boat for Pepe' [Peppe]**

A year or so ago, Leo Politi came to Monterey to visit for several days, to absorb the atmosphere of the old town, to live among the fisherfolk, to draw and paint pictures near the wharf, to learn about the old customs, and finally to go away and write a delightful little book. That little book – just published – is entitled "A Boat for Pepe."

This is Leo Politi's first book since he was awarded the Caldecott Medal for the most distinguished American picture book of 1949, "Song of the Swallows." The author is the son of an Italian father and mother, is an American artist who lives in Los Angeles. He has a small son and daughter of his own, so his books appeal to children and grownups alike.

In "A Boat for Pepe" the little boy looks down from his perch in a twisted cypress tree on the fishing fleet in the beautiful harbor of Monterey. How he wishes for a boat of his own!

The story tells how Pepe's father, a Sicilian-American fisherman, goes out with the boats and is almost lost at sea, and of Pepe's faith that he will return. Together he and his father prepare for the festival of the Blessing of the Fleet, in which the whole family takes part. Through his old friend, Geramia, Pepe finally gets his wish. "The setting of this book, the old California capital of Monterey, is particularly charming," to quote from the flyleaf.

The illustrations, all the work of the author-artist, are delightful. One shows the little boy on the hill above the wharf, flying his kite and looking down upon the tile-roofed houses, the Custom House and the boats at anchor. There is also a fascinating drawing, in color looking from the wharf up the hill, with the Custom House, Casa de Oro, The First Brick House, Whaling Station and the First Theatre, all pictured with an artist's true appreciation of the old town. There are gay pictures of the shops, the ships, the people and boats on the wharf, mending of nets, sea shells, moonlight scenes on the water, the beach and a charming double page painting of the procession at the time of the Blessing of the Boats, with Santa Rosalia being carried standing in the center of a flower-laden rowboat, from the church to the wharf.

"On the float stood the littlest girls, with their paper wings. They looked like real angels.

"Slowly the procession went from the church to the wharf. Peppe's mother walked right behind the float...

"On the wharf the Bishop in his red robe gave the fishing boats his blessing. Peppe went on his father's boat, and his toy boat was blessed too.

"Bless, O Lord, these boats and all who travel in them, as You blessed the Ark of Noah after the flood. Keep them free from danger and, at the end of their work, bring them back to their families safe and sound"

"Everyone was quiet as the Bishop said the words. The only sound was the cries of the seagulls flying in the clear air. On the boats the bright flags fluttered in the breeze."

Leo Politi also wrote "Pedro, the Angel of Olvera Street." It is a Christmas story and is entertaining for readers of all ages. Pedro lived on Olvera street in the heart of the big city of Los Angeles, where there are Mexican shops and houses and where every year at Christmas time there is the Posada procession. On the particular Christmas about which Leo Politi writes Pedro was a little red-winged angel who led the procession.

In both books, the one about Peppe and the one about Pedro, there are songs and music that go with the story. The story of the charming Christmas procession could very easily be made into a pageant or a play, as it often is in some of our Southern California cities and in Mexico.

Mrs. Mary Greene, curator of the Old Custom House, assisted Mr. Politi very materially in gathering the correct information for his book. He spent much time on the balcony of the Custom House, watching and sketching. Mrs. Greene and her daughter, Barbara, showed him their moving pictures of the Santa Rosalia festivals and processions. When one finishes the little book it is with complete satisfaction in the artist-author's descriptions – both in words and drawings – of old Monterey and the life of the fisherfolk on the old wharf.

Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, are the publishers of both books.