



Seasonal Stories

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[11](#) [3]

Article Category:

Other Articles

Byline:

Suggestions for additions to your Christmas storytime.

As Christmas approaches and excitement mounts in homes and classrooms, there seems to be a particular need for stories set at this very special festival. It's a time for sharing old favourites in well-established rituals; but there's a place for new friends too. This year there is a plentiful supply on offer. Most are picture books but their appeal is across a wide age range.

We've picked some we think you might like to consider inviting to your story-time this Christmas.

Clement Moore, an American, wrote **The Night Before Christmas** for his children in 1822. The poem, originally called **A Visit from St Nicholas**, was published in a newspaper the following year and was largely responsible for creating our picture of Father Christmas as a jolly, fat old man with a white beard and dressed in furs. It has been a traditional part of American Christmases ever since and this year there seems to be a determined effort to make it part of ours too. There are at least three different versions on offer.

One, illustrated by Michael Hague, Benn. 0 510 00120 3, £3.95, is a pop-up.

This has some spectacular paper sculpture effects of 'St Nick', reindeer and sleigh on the housetop or soaring above snow clouds. Unfortunately, because parts of these are printed on only one side, each set piece can be viewed satisfactorily from only one angle - look from the side or back and the illusion is shattered by lots of plain white card.

This may keep the price down but it makes the book less attractive for using with a group of children who might otherwise be dazzled. There are also bits that move. Some tab-pulling makes Santa's 'little round belly' shake 'when he laughed like a bowl full of jelly'. Very entertaining. Unintentionally entertaining is another moveable where Santa zooms up the chimney but - at least in my copy - leaves his boots clearly visible in the fireplace. Children's reactions to that one vary from innocently awkward questions to facetious remarks about the length of Santa's legs. If I could borrow a copy, I'd use it in displays for its 3-D appeal; but for year after year durability I'd pick the version which appears on our cover.

The Night Before Christmas

Tomie de Paola, Oxford, 0 19 279758 1, £3.95

Apart from its richly unusual colours, beautiful design and decorated borders based on designs from New England quilts, what appeals to me most about this book is the way the pictures subtly but clearly establish a link between Santa Claus and the parents in the poem who witness his visit. Together, it is implied, they join in the magic conspiracy of Christmas present giving. Not an implication to be laboured or made explicit among those who share this lovely book;

but an impression to leave lying in the mind.

In its third version the poem appears on tape as part of

Here Comes Christmas!

Macdonald Educational, 0 356 07541 9, £2.75 (inc. VAT)

This cassette tape runs for fifteen minutes (approx.) each side. Side One has an original story by Clive King (he wrote **Stig of the Dump**) called **Bells for Christmas**, with songs to fit written by Robert Pell and sung by children. It is about how Mr McCann the toy shop man, Sandra Twirl the checkout girl, Red-headed Roy the butcher's boy, Amelia Fife the farmer's wife, Mr Proctor who drives the 'copter and A. N. Other (guess who?) manage to get through the snow to ring the six bell peal which will wake the village for Christmas. Side Two is an anthology of Christmas poems (including **The Night Before Christmas**), songs and carols.

Quality and presentation could have been improved in places, but as original material in a medium which doesn't offer a rich choice it's worth considering. Good potential for listening, joining in, acting out; or as a model for do-it-yourself.

Teddy Bear Postman

Phoebe and Selby Worthington, Warne, 0 7232 2768 3, £2.95

Teddy Bear Coalman is a book of enormous charm which has delighted children for years. No matter that he delivers the coal by horse and cart and is paid in pennies - such anachronisms are meaningless beside the comfortingly predictable story with its exciting and noisily repeated BANG, BANG, BANG as the sacks of coal are delivered. The same qualities are found in two new stories about the famous teddy bear. Last year he appeared as **Teddy Bear Baker**, and this year he's back as **Teddy Bear Postman**, still deliberately and delightfully out of step with modern technological innovation.

Teddy Bear Postman won't do much to develop the young child's concept of the Post Office at Christmas (any more than **Teddy Bear Coalman** or **Teddy Bear Baker** did for those industries). He's a one-bear operation again: wearing a holly-bedecked hat, he collects, postmarks, delivers, repacks (all by hand) in a world where people and teddy bears live and work side by side. It's a world where people are grateful for a job well done and a tired bear can hang up his Christmas stocking at the end of a satisfyingly well-ordered day. Old-fashioned? Perhaps on one level. But as food for the imagination it's warm and reassuring. Teach them about the Post Office some other time.

Also for the youngest

How Brown Mouse Kept Christmas

Clyde Watson, ill. Wendy Watson, Hamish Hamilton, 0 241 10505 6, £3.95

The awe and magic of Christmas are evoked in this unpretentious little book. A young mouse leaves his attic home and ventures down to the 'people part of the house' to partake of the seasonal delights on the night before Christmas; he scurries from room to room nibbling and exploring, and returns safely to the mousehole before the sleeping household awakes in the morning. Soft, glowing colour-washed pictures complement a story that is a pleasure to share with the very young.

and

Lucy and Tom's Christmas

Shirley Hughes, Gollancz, 0 575 02970 6, £3.95

Two old friends make a most welcome return in an enchanting Christmas story which captures the warmth and excitement (not to mention the occasional tears) of the festive season; the sequence showing baby Elizabeth receiving, unwrapping and playing with everything but the contents of her present, and finally falling asleep with the effort, is simply beautiful. I'd like to think that the sharing of this book will become part and parcel of every young child's Christmas.

The Christmas Tomten

Viktor Rydberg, illustrated by Harald Wiberg (English adaptation by Linda M. Jennings), Hodder and Stoughton, 0 340 27065 9, £3.50

Another Christmas Eve story, this time drawing on Swedish folklore with its trolls and the Christmas Tomten who delivers Christmas gifts. Harald Wiberg's pictures, especially those of the snowy, tree-filled Swedish landscape, are a beautiful complement to the story of Little Vigg who travels with the Tomten to cottages, farms, grand houses, even the King's castle, and finds out more than just what everyone is getting for Christmas. A moral tale but told with humour and insight. And it ends with 'goodness, joy and light'. What could be more appropriate for Christmas? All ages.

Fair's Fair

Leon Garfield, pictures by Margaret Chamberlain, Macdonald, 0 354 08126 8, £3.25

'Jackson was thin, small and ugly, and stank like a drain.' So begins Leon Garfield's first picture book, a story set in a snowy Victorian London in the week before Christmas. Jackson has no mother, no father, no shoes worth mentioning. But he does have a moral philosophy, summed up in the title of the book, and a number of other qualities which lead him to share his hot pie with an enormous black dog. That is the beginning of a strange adventure which reaches its climax on Christmas Eve. A hugely satisfying tale of virtue tested and rewarded. Vividly told and just asking to be read aloud. Don't miss it.

Quincy

Tommy Steele, illustrated by Peter Wingham, Heinemann, 0 434 96455 7, £3.95

Another 'Celebrity Snare'? Not really, though it will undoubtedly sell more than it would if it had been written by Joe Bloggs. The plot isn't particularly original. On the night before Christmas Eve - the one night of the year that toys come alive - Quincy, the boy doll, sets out on a hazardous journey from the basement to the top floor of a huge toyshop to enlist the help of Santa Claus in saving him and all the other reject toys from the furnace. It's episodic, with some good set pieces.

Imagine the sort of story Tommy Steele would write for children - this is it, raised above the level of cliché by a cheerful warmth and directness in the telling. Read it to lower juniors in the week before the end of term and I'll bet a good time is had by all.

What-a-Mess and the Cat-next-door

Frank Muir, illustrated by Joseph Wright, Benn, 0 510 00107 6, £3.95

Christmas Eve, and What-a-Mess, the Afghan puppy, is once again trying to do the right thing. This time he's helping out by dragging that old fir tree from the living room. Part of the appeal of these books lies in the miniature world of people and creatures which Joseph Wright creates, alongside the main story, in the pictures. He's as crazily inventive as ever. Read it and leave it around for the children to pore over at leisure.

A Day to Remember

words by Bernard Stone, illustration by Anton Pieck, Benn, 0 510 001 13 0, £3.95

Anton Pieck, a Dutch artist, was born in 1895. His pictures show the Holland of his childhood or even earlier and are loving recreations of buildings, shops and, above all, people going about their everyday lives. Here, twenty-seven pictures are linked by a simple commentary. It is the feast of St Nicholas, nearly Christmas. Plump geese hang in the poulterers, the river freezes, everyone goes skating, St Nicholas arrives in procession, dressed as a bishop and accompanied by his assistant, Black Peter the sweep whose job is to punish all the bad children (although the commentary won't tell you that), the carol singers tour the city. The book seems to be an attempt to emulate **Our Home** and **Our Farm**, the turn-of-the--century Swedish classics by Carl Larsson (Methuen). It isn't as successful in that it lacks the unifying focus of a single family. Bernard Stone's words provide only a tenuous narrative thread. Nevertheless the pictures are endlessly fascinating and rich in opportunities for speculation and story-making with older children.

Reviews by **Jill Bennett** and **Pat Triggs**.

Page Number:

28

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[1] <http://savfikn.booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/jill-bennett>

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