

Snow Library Offers Holiday Favorites

by Kaimi Rose Lum

Are you ready to recite rhymes about fugitive gingerbread boys? Hear an old German folktale about spiders who weave tinsel? Meet a latke-loving cat named Mazel?

The staff at Snow Library have been grilled on their favorite holiday books—picture books they loved reading as a child, or stories they’ve enjoyed reading with their own children and grandchildren. We include the titles here, as a sort of reader’s advisory to help you navigate the stacks this December. Most of the books may be found in the children’s section at our library—look for the rows of spines marked with a small Christmas tree or menorah sticker.

Ann, our children’s librarian, is smitten with “The Christmas Wish” by Lori Evert, a story about a small girl named Anja who travels to the North Pole to find Santa Claus. Anja’s dream is to reach Santa in time to be chosen as one of his Christmas elves, but the days are short and the journey perilous. With help from a talking cardinal, a gentle horse, a sturdy ox and a friendly polar bear, she finds her way—but not to the end she expects. The story is told through staged photography reminiscent of Dare Wright’s “Lonely Doll” illustrations, but here the camera shots, by Norwegian photojournalist Per Breiehagen, are full-color and alive with real people and animals—not dolls and teddy bears.

Jenny loves “The Cobweb Christmas,” Shirley Climo’s spin on a German fable about a little old auntie, or “Tante,” who has always longed to see something magical at Christmastime. She makes all the preparations—scrubbing her house from top to bottom until it sparkles, baking sugar cookies shaped like moons and stars to hang on her tree and “rub[bing] apples until they gleamed like glass to hang from the branches, too.” But something is missing, and it isn’t until a band of outcast house spiders gets permission from Kris Kringle to sneak back in and climb the tree that the magic the old lady has wished for begins. The 1982 edition with pictures by Joe Lasker is Jenny’s favorite; there is a newer version illustrated by Jane Manning. Both charm with Climo’s simple, spare language, her attention to detail (the speckled hen that lays an egg for her breakfast, the bells jingling on the harness of the donkey that carries home her Christmas tree), and the gentle pace of the story as it builds to its surprise ending.

Kerry has a soft spot for “The Gingerbread Baby,” author-illustrator

Jan Brett’s twist on the classic tale of the cookie that escapes his bakers. In Brett’s version, a little boy named Matti disobeys a recipe’s orders not to peek and opens the oven door before his gingerbread boy is fully cooked, unleashing a naughty gingerbread juvenile who “rumbles and tumbles” with the cat, outruns the dog, and evades everyone else who pursues him, including the fox. While the chase is on, Matti stays home in the kitchen and cooks up a clever, tasty trap for the gingerbread baby. Does it work? Find out when you read this lushly illustrated book full of homey, pastoral appeal.

Jean is a sucker for “A Cup of Christmas Tea,” Tom Hegg’s story about a young person’s restorative visit with a relative, featuring bright, delicate watercolor illustrations by Warren Hanson.

Jamie is fond of “Olive, the Other Reindeer,” by Vivian Walsh and J. Otto Seibold, about a small dog named Olive who hears carolers singing the Rudolph song and mistakes the line “All of the other reindeer” for a summons to join Santa’s sleigh-pullers. And Linda G. has warm memories of reading “Latkes and Applesauce: A Hanukkah Story” by Fran Manushkin and Robin Spowart. It’s about a young family, a stray dog and a lost kitten who come to each other’s aid during a snowy Hanukkah in old Poland.

I’ll add “A Hanukkah with Mazel” by Joel Edward Stein and Elise Vavouri to the list. Though I observe Christian holidays, in the course of a holiday research project last year I discovered Stein and Vavouri’s lovely picture book, about a starving artist and the lucky cat who wanders into his life on the first night of Hanukkah. My kids found the story and pictures so enchanting that we have started a tradition of reading it aloud together at this time of year, along with “Christmas on Exeter Street” by Diana Hendry, illustrated by John Lawrence, and “The Year of the Perfect Christmas Tree” by Gloria Houston, illustrated by Barbara Cooney.

One last recommendation comes from Tavi, our library director. His childhood favorite, after “The Night Before Christmas,” was “The Gift of the Magi,” O. Henry’s masterpiece of a short story. It’s a love story that you’ll never forget—ideal for readers in the middle-school years but also capable of captivating younger ones, especially when read aloud.

Happy holidays—and happy reading—from the staff at Snow Library.

Kaimi Rose Lum is assistant director at Snow Library in Orleans.



SNOW LIBRARY

Christmas In Early New England

by Caroline Imparato

Close your eyes—metaphorically of course; you wouldn’t be able to read this if you actually closed your eyes. What do you see in your mind’s eye when you hear the words “New England Christmas?” Thoughts of candles in the windows, of snow covered homes, the smell of something with a touch of cinnamon baking, Christmas dinner, pie, exchanging gifts, someone bringing in more logs for the fire, snowmen and ski trips, maybe music? These seem like timeless traditions that have been passed down for generations. But if we look far enough back we would find that Christmas in New England has not always been as cheery and cozy as we know it.

Did you know that celebrating Christmas was actually illegal between 1659 and 1681? You could be fined five schillings if the authorities saw you marking the Christmas occasion. It wasn’t until the mid-1800s that Christmas was seen as a public holiday. (Nissenbaum 1996)

If you go back a few more years to 1621, you’ll find that opposing the celebration of Christmas began with the first New England colonists, the ever-famous Pilgrims. The leaders of the group were Separatists. Similar to the Puritans who arrived a decade later, Separatists wanted to “separate” themselves from the Church of England, who they felt were too similar to the Roman Catholic Church. They wished to worship God and follow the Bible in the purest form possible. Because of this, they took the Bible word for word, and there was no mention in the Bible that Christmas was celebrated on Dec. 25. Therefore, no one should be celebrating the Christmas season. (Nissenbaum 1996)

To be fair, Christmas revelry looked quite different in those days than they do now. People were known to see the Christmas season as an excuse for excessive eating and drinking, leading to drunken fights, degenerate behavior, gambling, and begging, often in public places. It was a little bit grittier than cookie exchanges and reindeer sweaters. The Puritans and Separatists objected to the season for lots of reasons. (Nissenbaum 1996)

I’m sure we’re all glad that we have the holiday traditions that we do. And it’s even better that we can freely and legally celebrate the holiday season as we and our families and friends see fit.

So if you’re looking for ways to mark this special time of year, why don’t you join the Atwood Museum for our holiday events! The museum will be open every Friday and Saturday afternoon, from 1 to 4 p.m., in December.

On Dec. 14 at 9 a.m. we will be hosting Grub with the Grinch where families can enjoy breakfast and a story with the Grinch himself. In addition, on Dec. 14 starting 1 p.m., there will be the annual Hearthwarming where Santa will be visiting and guests can enjoy cider, cocoa, cookies, and music. We also have our Stuff-A-Sleigh going on all month where people can drop off hats, mittens, gloves, and scarves for Monomoy Community Services. Finally, we have our Historic Hauls Year End Sale going on in the museum shop throughout December. Visit our website www.chathamhistoricalsociety.org for event details.

Caroline Imparato is the administrator at the Atwood Museum, home of the Chatham Historical Society.



AT THE ATWOOD MUSEUM



Grub with the Grinch will be held on Dec. 14 at the Atwood House Museum. COURTESY PHOTO

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