

Christmas books - stories for children, fiction, cookbooks, gift ideas

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Christmas is an annual holiday celebrated on December 25. It commemorates the birth of Jesus of Nazareth. The day marks the beginning of the larger season of Christmastide, which lasts twelve days. The nativity of Jesus, which is the basis for the anno Domini system of dating, is thought to have occurred between 7 and 2 BC. December 25 is not known to be Jesus' actual date of birth, and the date may have been chosen to correspond with either a Roman festival or the winter solstice.

Modern customs of the holiday include gift-giving, Church celebrations, and the display of various decorations—including the Christmas tree, lights, mistletoe, nativity scenes, and holly. Santa Claus (also referred to as Father Christmas, although the two figures have different origins) is a popular mythological figure often associated with bringing gifts at Christmas for children. Santa is generally believed to be the result of a syncretization between Saint Nicholas and elements from pagan Nordic and Christian mythology, and his modern appearance is believed to have originated in 19th century media.

Christmas is celebrated throughout the Christian population, but is also celebrated by many non-Christians as a secular, cultural festival.

The word Christmas originated as a compound meaning "Christ's Mass". It is derived from the Middle English *Christemasse* and Old English *Cristes mæsse*, a phrase first recorded in 1038.] "Cristes" is from Greek *Christos* and "mæsse" is from Latin *missa*. In Greek, the letter X (*chi*), is the first letter of Christ, and it, or the similar Roman letter X, has been used as an abbreviation for Christ since the mid-16th century. Hence, Xmas is often used as an abbreviation for Christmas.

For many centuries, Christian writers accepted that Christmas was the actual date on which Jesus was born. However, in the early eighteenth century, some scholars began proposing alternative explanations. Isaac Newton argued that the date of Christmas was selected to correspond with the winter solstice, which in ancient times was marked on December 25. In 1743, German Protestant Paul Ernst Jablonski argued Christmas was placed on December 25

to correspond with the Roman solar holiday Dies Natalis Solis Invicti and was therefore a "paganization" that debased the true church. In 1889, Louis Duchesne suggested that the date of Christmas was calculated as nine months after the Annunciation on March 25, the traditional date of the conception of Jesus.

Originating from Western culture, where the holiday is characterized by the exchange of gifts among friends and family members, some of the gifts are attributed to a character called Father Christmas (also known as Santa Claus, Saint Nicholas or St. Nikolaus, Sinterklaas, Kris Kringle, Père Noël, Joulupukki, Babbo Natale, Weihnachtsmann, Saint Basil and Father Frost).

The popular image of Santa Claus was created by the German-American cartoonist Thomas Nast (1840–1902), who drew a new image annually, beginning in 1863. By the 1880s, Nast's Santa had evolved into the form we now recognize. The image was standardized by advertisers in the 1920s.

Father Christmas, who predates the Santa Claus character, was first recorded in the 15th century, but was associated with holiday merrymaking and drunkenness. In Victorian Britain, his image was remade to match that of Santa. The French Père Noël evolved along similar lines, eventually adopting the Santa image. In Italy, Babbo Natale acts as Santa Claus, while La Befana is the bringer of gifts and arrives on the eve of the Epiphany. It is said that La Befana set out to bring the baby Jesus gifts, but got lost along the way. Now, she brings gifts to all children. In some cultures Santa Claus is accompanied by Knecht Ruprecht, or Black Peter. In other versions, elves make the toys. His wife is referred to as Mrs. Claus.

It is often claimed that the basis for the North American figure of Santa Claus is the Dutch holyman and bringer of gifts Sinterklaas. During the American War of Independence the inhabitants of New York City, a former Dutch colonial town (New Amsterdam) which had been swapped by the Dutch for other territories, reinvented their Sinterklaas tradition, as Saint Nicholas was a symbol of the city's non-English past. The name Santa Claus supposedly is derived from older Dutch Sinte Klaas. However, the Saint Nicholas Society was not founded until 1835, almost half a century after the end of the American War of Independence. Moreover, a study of the "children's books, periodicals and journals" of New Amsterdam by Charles Jones revealed no references to Saint Nicholas or Sinterklaas. However, not all scholars agree with Jones's findings, which he reiterated in a booklength study in 1978; Howard G. Hageman, of New Brunswick Theological Seminary, maintains that the tradition of celebrating Sinterklaas in New York was alive and well from the early settlement of the Hudson Valley on.

The current tradition in several Latin American countries (such as Venezuela and Colombia) holds that while Santa makes the toys, he then gives them to the Baby Jesus, who is the one who actually delivers them to the children's homes. This story is meant to be a reconciliation between traditional religious beliefs and modern day globalization, most notably the iconography of Santa Claus imported from the United States.