

Make Reading a Holiday Tradition

By Janet Lawler

Consider creating a new family tradition during those crazy weeks between Thanksgiving and the New Year. Often, parties, shopping, and hectic scheduling reduce meaningful family time and make everyone cranky. A tradition centered on holiday books can provide an oasis of sanity. It may even serve to meet your child's daily "reading requirement" at school. Depending on your family's beliefs, you can fashion a tradition for Christmas, Hanukkah, or Kwanzaa.

Every year since my children were toddlers, I have purchased holiday picture books. Starting right after Thanksgiving, we read one, two, or maybe even three every evening. At the end of December, our "Christmas collection" gets relegated to a bottom book shelf and remains there for eleven months. When we pull them out again in late November, we feel like we are greeting old friends. We laugh once more at the cow posing as a Christmas tree in *When Cows Come Home for Christmas*, by Dori Chaconas. We rejoice as Patricia Polacco's *Christmas Tapestry* weaves a story of a boy's Christmas with the reunion of an elderly couple separated long ago in Nazi concentration camps. We sympathize with a little mouse who can't decide what to put on his wish list for Santa, in *Truffle's Christmas* by Anna Currey.

Our family literary tradition has extended far beyond picture book age. We will be reading our stack of books again this year, though my youngest child is now twelve. As the years have

passed, I have acquired longer books, many with deeper meaning. Parents of toddlers may choose shorter books, as I did when my children were young. During early school years, moms and dads can encourage beginning readers to read part of easier stories. Older children can read picture books or chapter books to parents. In our house, we now negotiate who will read each night. Who is the least tired? Who would rather sit back and gaze at the lovely art of a picture book?

Families can customize their book reading tradition in many ways. If you are on a tight budget, or your children prefer constant variety, your routine might involve trips to the library to take out different books each time. Surprise your kids with choices, or have them help select. If you've picked the books, you can ask your child (or children) to choose the ones to read each night. "Do you want to read about Santa, or a story about a child giving a special gift?"

Your selections may reflect a strong personal faith and focus on the birth of Christ, religious celebrations, and stories that emphasize sharing and giving. Or you may look for humorous holiday books, or non-fiction about holiday celebrations around the world. If your child is enamored with a particular licensed character, most likely you can find a related holiday picture book. Of course, you could create a collection that includes all of the above. My choices are often guided by the allure of beautiful illustrations.

Each year, bookstores set up tables offering the current year's selection of holiday releases. Browse these tables and see what catches your eye. Most local libraries gather their holiday books, as well, and your children's librarian can make informed recommendations. If you are too busy to get to the library or store, shop on-line. You might start with a key word search for "children's Christmas books" or "children's Hanukkah books". The results will include multiple sites with book covers displayed and related recommendations and reviews. Several web-based booksellers also provide an opportunity to "browse" pages of the book before purchase. Finally, close family and friends may give you the best suggestions.

It is very difficult to recommend which books to include in your collection, though I have listed several you may wish to consider. The books you might choose are as varied as parents' and kids' personalities and personal preferences for topics and art. But any Christmas collection should include one of the many versions of the classic, *The Night Before Christmas*, by Clement C. Moore. This brief text, read and shared by families since it was first published anonymously in 1823, provides the foundation for our nation's common idea of St. Nicholas - what he looks like, his visit via sleigh, and his annual delivery of gifts for good boys and girls.

So start your holiday literary tradition this year. You will get hooked on some favorites and when you snuggle down to share a book, even with a gangly twelve-year-old, you will feel the contentment that only comes with a special family tradition.

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Sidebar - Suggested Christmas Books

Baby-Preschool

Counting to Christmas by Nancy Tafuri
Spot's First Christmas by Eric Hall
My First Christmas by Tomie DePaola
Christmas in the Manger by Nola Buck
Max and Ruby's Christmas Tree
What Is Christmas? By Michelle Medlock Adams

Ages 3-8

Mouse's First Christmas by Lauren Thompson
Jan Brett's Christmas Treasury, by Jan Brett
Christmas Cookies: Bite Size Holiday Lessons by Amy Krause Rosenthal
Christmas Alphabet by Robert Sabuda (pop-up)
The Night Before Christmas by Robert Sabuda (pop-up)
Truffle's Christmas by Anna Currey
Tyrannoclaus by Janet Lawler

Ages 6-10

How the Grinch Stole Christmas by Dr. Seuss
Olive, The Other Reindeer by Vivian Walsh
When Cows Come Home for Christmas by Dori Chaconas
Polar Express by Chris Van Allsburg
Christmas Around the World (World Book series, different countries)
Christmas Tapestry by Patricia Polacco
The Gift of the Magi by O. Henry
Amahl and the Night Visitors by Gian Carlo Menotti

9 and up

The First Christmas Stocking by Elizabeth Winthrop
The Christmas Miracle of Jonathan Toomey by Susan Wojciechowski
A Christmas Carol by Charles Dickens
The Promise by Jackie French Koller
A Child's Christmas in Wales by Dylan Thomas
Kringle by Tony Abbott