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Eugene Giddens
Excerpt
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Introduction

> Where Christmas books begin publishers know best; where they end nobody will ever know. What are, and what are not, Christmas books? Who shall say? Is everything which sees the light for the last six weeks of the year a Christmas book?
>
> 'Christmas Books', *The Saturday Review*, 30 November 1867, 707

The Christmas market played a large part in the emergence of the 'golden age' of children's literature. Books became idealised as the perfect Christmas gifts for young people; that publishing culture in turn became responsible for the phenomenal sales successes of, for instance, the picture-books of Walter Crane and Kate Greenaway and the longer-form prose of Charles Dickens and Lewis Carroll. An expectation of high pre-Christmas sales made it possible to specialise, as an author, illustrator, or publisher, in children's books.

Since the invention of Christmas gifts in the 1820s, books have been seen as the most appropriate offerings for children. In 1821, the very first historical mention of Santa Claus bringing presents, for instance, places books above toys:

> Old Santeclaus with much delight
> His reindeer drives this frosty night,
> O'er chimneytops, and tracks of snow,
> To bring his yearly gifts to you . . .
> No drums to stun their Mother's ear,
> Nor swords to make their sisters fear;
> But pretty books to store their mind
> With knowledge of each various kind.
>
> *Children's Friend*, 1821, np

Equally, children's books can be said to have facilitated, if not driven, the wider cultural growth of Christmas from the Victorian period onwards. The fashions of Christmas are continually renegotiated in children's books in the nineteenth century, from the rise of newfangled Christmas trees to the loss

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of traditions such as wassailing and the boar's head. Christmas is not merely an agreed set of static family experiences, but changes dynamically because of the influence of print media, including books, periodicals, and, from 1843, Christmas cards. Christmas matures more slowly in the twentieth century, to be sure, but that change is also inspired by books and adaptations of them in other media, especially TV and film. Contemporary trends such as Carol V. Aebersold and Chanda A. Bell's *The Elf on the Shelf* (Atlanta, GA, 2005) continue to emerge out of popular works of seasonal fiction. Today 'Super Thursday' in October witnesses the launch of major children's (and adult) books for the Christmas sales period, making it one of the most important events in the publishing calendar. When children's books miss that first Thursday of the month, they often come out soon thereafter, like Philip Pullman's *La Belle Sauvage* of 19 October 2017 or the runaway bestseller of Christmas 2017 in the United Kingdom, David Walliams' *Bad Dad*, 2 November 2017. This trend of concentrating sales over a brief holiday season in fact emerged in the early nineteenth century in Britain and America.[1] By tracing the history of Christmas publishing, this short monograph examines festive books as part of children's publishing's most important season.

In order to understand the full context of children's Christmas books, I consider the earliest holiday works for children and compare that original context to contemporary trends. I primarily focus on the early Christmas market, up to 1910, as authors and publishers at that time developed a set of marketing and dissemination practices that have remained largely static: because they work. The final section examines how those publishing conventions have been retained and renegotiated in more recent books (mostly 2000–2018, but touching upon seminal developments in the twentieth century). In some respects, 'Christmas books' can define most literature for children, as books from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* to the final Harry Potter volumes

[1] If not earlier, as M. O. Grenby points out of the famous eighteenth-century children's publisher John Newbery: 'Francis Newbery suggested that the Christmas market dominated children's publishing, hyperbolically recalling that "an edition of many thousands" of his father's books could be "sometimes exhausted during the Christmas holidays"' (*Child Reader*, 2011, 172).

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have had releases timed to take advantage of gift sales. Because one-third of books sold in a given year might be bought over the Christmas period, I have limited my corpus to titles that are explicitly marketed as seasonal books, usually with keywords in the title like 'present', 'gift', 'Santa', or, of course, 'Christmas'. For the most part these books signal their festive subject matter through titles, but sometimes other paratexts such as blurbs, chapter titles, or frontispieces are used to that effect. Some books, like Karina Yan Glaser's *The Vanderbeekers of 141st Street* (2017), are subtle about their Christmas subject matter; the inner dust jacket flap discloses that 'It's five days before Christmas . . . What the Vanderbeekers need now is a Christmas miracle.' Digital marketing of the book by publisher (hmhbooks.com) and author (karinaglaser.com) makes this setting more apparent. Other works do not mention Christmas in the paratexts, but do so early in the narrative, as with *Little Women* (1868), where it is famously the first word. Such subtlety is a reminder that most of the books sold for children over the Christmas holidays are not actually about Christmas. Amazon's children's bestsellers on 19 December 2017 at 7 p.m., for instance, had no Christmas titles for the US list and only one, Tom Fletcher's *The Christmasaurus*, on the UK list (at number four). Clearly, the books that are actually given to children over Christmas year by year become far too large a corpus for critical consideration – it could include almost any title – so I do not attempt to engage with that wider sense of market here.

This Element reflects the study of nearly 400 Christmas or holiday books from Mary Collyer's *A Christmass-Box* of 1746 to Michael Morpurgo's *Grandpa Christmas* of 2018. I have been lucky to consult much of the early and some of the later material at the Baldwin Library, University of Florida. Almost all of the books examined here come from either the nineteenth or the twenty-first century. I realise that this selection neglects long-standing favourites, such as John Masefield's *Box of Delights* (1935), Alison Uttley's *Little Grey Rabbit's Christmas* (1939), Raymond Briggs' *The Snowman* (1978), and even Dr Seuss' *How the Grinch Stole Christmas!* (1957). Such books will be alluded to in passing, and my temporal bias is borne out of a sense that many printed classics from the twentieth century derive their publishing frameworks and Christmassy topics from earlier periods. The 'Christmas Box' is the eighteenth-century precursor to the box of delights,

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for instance, while the Grinch humorously redeploys the Scrooge tradition. Equally, the twentieth-century market could be considered large enough to constitute an additional book by itself. By bookending the broad history of such works, I aim to give a sense of origins, innovations, and continuities.

My selection of books also reveals a geographical bias, borne in part out of my concentration on books in English. Almost all American and British Christmas books from the nineteenth century are published in Boston, New York, Philadelphia, London, or, more rarely, Edinburgh, sometimes in multiple editions across these cities. It is difficult to get a sense of a US Southern family's Christmas – in part because publishing was centred in the north-east, and even more so of a Christmas in Australia or as lived by Californian Chinese immigrants (although these experiences exist as kinds of othering 'foils' in many children's Christmas texts).[2] Early Christmas books represent the holiday as an amalgam of New England townhouse, London hovel, or English country house – a strange mixture that persists in shaping Christmas throughout the nineteenth century, as I show in what follows. More variety, including texts written in dual languages, is found in my analysis of twenty-first-century books, but by and large the Christmas market continues to be dominated by the major publishing houses operating out of New York and London, and inevitably this Element partially replicates US and UK biases. Most of the books discussed in the final section are chosen because they top bestseller lists (e.g. Amazon's dynamic lists and those published in *The Bookseller*) in the twenty-first century, or because they offer pioneering inflections to the genre.

Any work on *Christmas children's books* must engage with those key terms, across various times and places. Instead of focusing only on 'Christmas', I deliberately include books on Hanukkah, Kwanzaa, and the New Year, participating as they do not only as significant religious and cultural holidays, but also in children's seasonal book culture, particularly that of the twenty-first century. Books such as Virginia Hamilton's *Bluish* (New York, 1999) tackle wider diversity issues through children's understandings of different approaches to the holidays. Inclusivity here is part

[2] For historical, mostly adult, perspectives from the enslaved and the enslavers, see 'Christmas in the Slave South' (Restad, *Christmas in America*, 1995, 75–90).

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of how holiday narratives can work. My corpus represents a variety of points on a scale from devoutly religious to entirely secular, but it must be said that nineteenth-century texts placing heavy emphasis on Jesus as 'the reason for the season' tend to show some disdain for Christmas gifts as I show in Section 2 – and therefore Christmas books, except for the Bible. I also adopt a permissive definition of what constitutes a book for *children*. Often the works under consideration here are directly marketed towards young readers or listeners, but I have been attentive to the flexible approach advocated by Marah Gubar's 'On Not Defining Children's Literature' (2011). Sometimes it is difficult to pinpoint what makes a children's book – *A Visit from St Nicholas* is a prime example of an adult text that becomes a children's poem only over time. A final word about *books*: I have concentrated here on the physical codex, not its relatives in magazines, games, apps, e-readers, and other electronic media. Children's magazines are popular over the Christmas period, of course, but their year-round publication, typically monthly, precludes them from being considered seasonal books. Digital children's books, at least in terms of sales, continue to do surprisingly poorly, as publishers' figures have shown for several years.[3] My attention to publishing history focuses on works in print as a better way of tracing continuities and departures over time across a single format.

Christmas books are a dauntingly broad category, for which I can hope only to provide a snapshot. A consideration of the beginnings of the genre and most recent developments helps to point to a trajectory without covering each divergent path and novelty along the way. Nonetheless, I aim to demonstrate that children's Christmas books, while not wavering in significance to the publishing industry in the past 200 years, have actively reshaped cultural understandings of the holiday season – being producers as much as mirrors of it.

[3] 'The steepest decline in e-book sales last year was in the children's category, where sales fell 22%', Jim Milliot, 'E-book Sales Fell 10% in 2017', *Publishers Weekly*, 25 April 2018. www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/digital/content-and-e-books/article/76706-e-book-sales-fell-10-in-2017.html

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1 The Emergence and Growth of the Christmas Book Market, 1750–1850

The Earliest Children's Christmas Books

Before there are Christmas stockings or trees, or even Christmas gifts, there are Christmas texts. Ben Jonson's *Christmas His Masque* (London, 1641), written as a royal entertainment for 1616, includes the characters of Carol, Misrule, Wassail, and New-Year's-Gift, as well as Minced-Pie and even Cupid. Father Christmas here takes the traditional English role of presiding over very adult festivities. Robert Herrick specialises in poems for the season in the 1640s, mixing topics ranging from sacred hymns to bawdy customs, including 'drink[ing] to your hearts' desiring' (*Hesperides*, 1898, 79). These seventeenth-century texts, like the Christmases they represent, are largely adult-focused, revealing communities sharing food, copious drink, and the occasional merry prank or show. Puritanical discomfort with Christmas of course points its animosity to such excesses. But whether in favour of Christmas festivities or against them, this large part of the history of the holiday has little to do with giving to children. Children's Christmas books come significantly later, and can be found to date from the very beginning of children's literature itself. M. O. Grenby has shown that 'the marketing of children's books as gifts began early. Mary Collyer's *A Christmass-Box for Masters and Misses* was published by M. Cooper and M. Boreman in 1746. By 1750 John Newbery had followed suit with *Nurse Truelove's Christmas-Box* and *Nurse Truelove's New-Year's Gift*' (Grenby, *Child Reader*, 2011, 170). As Andrea Immel notes of *Christmass-Box*: 'Although the title is most attractive, its contents disappoint by failing to reveal anything about Georgian holiday traditions' ('*A Christmass-Box*', 2009, 1). *Nurse Truelove* similarly compiles secular, moral stories that are not about the season. Children's Christmas books in this early phase, therefore, have little to do with Christmas. One of the earliest Christmas children's books is in fact a gift *from* young people: *A Christmas Offering, Humbly Presented by the Charity Children, of Christ Church* (London, 1788), contains a single song, printed to raise money for the poor.

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These first Christmas books are part of a gift-book tradition that attempts to tap into any cause for celebration, whether birthday, Christmas, or New Year. A series of books called *A Present for Children* (Edinburgh from 1761) contains 'catechisms . . . moral songs . . . prayers and graces', but make no reference to the Christmas season. Similarly Dorothy Kilner's *The Holyday Present* (London, 1781) represents children being naughty or nice in a distinctly summer setting; J. D. Parry's *The Anthology: An Annual Reward Book for Midsummer and Christmas* (London, 1830) makes its suitability for either summer or winter apparent in the title. Elizabeth Somerville's *A Birth Day Present; or A New Year's Gift. Being Nine Day's Conversation between a Mother and Daughter, on Interesting Subjects; for the Use of Young Persons, from Ten to Fifteen Years of Age* (Boston, 1803; printed earlier in London) also cannot make up its mind as to occasion, although an editor's note shows that the book was published in time for the Christmas season by wishing readers '*A HAPPY NEW YEAR*' (np). There had long been a tradition of giving New Year's gifts, as the character of that name in Jonson's masque implies, and the full shift to Christmas giving occurs only in the early nineteenth century. Many books retain their leaning towards 'New Year' as the appropriate holiday for gifts until the 1820s. *Original Tales; Never before Published. Designed as a New-Year's Gift for the Youth of Both Sexes* (Boston, 1813) promises in its advertisement to 'blend amusement with instruction' (np). *A New-Year's Gift* (New York, 1809) is an alphabet book with each page hosting a miniature woodcut and two Bible verses, being the earliest instance I can find of a holiday alphabet. A. Selwyn's *A New Year's Gift; or, Domestic Tales for Children* (London, 1824) is a very pretty example, with marbled boards as binding, but it too selects moral tales that make no mention of Christmas or New Year.[4] Books here represent an opportunity to occupy children within the household, making Christmas a chance for independent study as much as a family celebration. These early gift books tend towards heavy moralising, or they provide games, riddles, and

[4] The copy held by the Baldwin Library, University of Florida, has a gift inscription, 'Amelia Britten Jan^{ry} – 1st – 1830 from her brother JB', suggesting that it was an actual New Year's gift.

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'pastimes' to occupy a class of child reader who is clearly home from school. All of them eschew representations of actual Christmas festivities, partially, I suspect, because such celebrations were highly varied – ranging from a semi-Puritanical avoidance of the holiday altogether, to religious celebration, to more secular, 'pagan' even, excesses of dancing and ale. Today it would be inconceivable for a children's Christmas book not even to mention the season, but in the eighteenth century it was the norm.

By the turn of the century Christmas begins to make its way into holiday books. Anna Laetitia Barbauld and John Aikin's *New Christmas Tales, Forming the Second Part of Evenings at Home* (London, *c.*1790) makes the class and educational aspirations apparent from the very beginning. The setting is: 'The mansion-house of the pleasant village of Beachgrove . . . inhabited by the family of Fairborne, consisting of the master and mistress, and a numerous progeny of children of both sexes' (1). The educational activity (and narrative framework) of the tales comes in the form of a story box, to which every child is expected to contribute: 'As some of them were accustomed to writing, they would frequently produce a fable, a story, or dialogue, adapted to the age and understanding of the young people' (1). These stories are placed in a locked box and randomly selected; they include morals, natural history, travelogues, engineering, and science. The country house location recalls an old-fashioned Christmas for the community, but here it becomes concentrated to family members, especially children, omitting the social strata of local tradespeople who would in former decades have expected to partake in the squire's bounty. The how-to-behave books for stately Christmases occupy a minor subgenre throughout the nineteenth century, most famously in Washington Irving's book of *Old Christmas* (first published 1819). Other early examples include the self-explanatory *Christmas Holidays, or The Young Visitants; a Tale; in Which Many Pleasant Descriptions of That Festive Season, Both in Town and Country, Are Given for the Benefit of the Rising Generation* (London, 1806) and Sarah Wheatly's *The Christmas Fire-Side; or, The Juvenile Critics* (London, 1806). *Christmas Holidays* demonstrates a great deal of class-based particularity, with one father willing to welcome his son's friend only when he learns his lineage: 'a gentleman of independent property, that one of his family had been high sheriff of the county, and that [his mother] was a baronet's

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daughter' (8). Interestingly the book keeps some of the old festive master-servant relations that are more slowly released in Britain than the United States. The young boys venture

> into the servant's hall, where many of the good people of the village had been invited with their families to partake of a Christmas dinner; and where, while the nut-brown ale was cheerfully passing round, a band of morrice [*sic*] dancers were displaying their agility, while the low humour and buffoonery of their clown, drew peals of laughter and applause from the merry hearted company. (15–16)

Their country holiday includes shooting and singing. When they reverse the exchange into the city they find a much more sombre table:

> Not a word of conversation passed during the time of dinner, except what was merely necessary for helping each other to eatables; as Mr. Pierpoint would have deemed it an unpardonable offence, had any pleasantry, which might have escaped him or any of his family, excited a smile on the features of any of his attendants. (37)

They do, however, get to attend the theatre. Wheatley uses a round-robin storytelling framework, like Barbauld and Aiken, and, like them too, she carefully vouches for the quality of the family who retell the stories: 'At Holly Hall, in the county of Devon, the family of Arborfield had resided for several centuries; and had always been remarkable for maintaining the true English character of integrity, benevolence, and hospitality' (1). Propriety is retained at all costs in these earliest representations of Christmas holidays.

Many of the stories from this period are not what we would today regard as child-friendly, some deliberately so. Solomon Sobersides, the moral pseudonym for the author of *Christmas Tales for the Amusement and Instruction of Young Ladies and Gentlemen in Winter Evenings* (New York, 1794), offers an instructive framework on the title page: 'The cheerful Sage, when solemn

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dictates fail, / Conceals the moral Counsel in – a Tale.'[5] He continues by admonishing parents and teachers in the Preface: 'There is nothing, in reality, where people are so very wrong as in the education of children' (5). Sobersides' attempts at education are highly adult-centric. The first story, for instance, is about a wicked daughter-in-law who convinces a son 'under the sole dominion of his wife' to be cruel to his father (7). The final story features an execution, complete with a woodcut of a man hanging from the gallows, with the moral: 'so he fell a sacrifice to his own folly, and died unpitied, because unknown' (125). Christmas and death have a powerful connection in this period, one that continues for the next 100 years.

A greater sense that children need to be entertained, as well as warned, as part of their instruction emerges from the turn of the century. *Mince Pies for Christmas, and for All Merry Seasons* (London, 1807; 1805), for instance, notes in the Preface that children are becoming tired of pure pedagogy in the holidays: '"What a trick!" will mammy's pampered darling exclaim, "I was expected to have found something that was pleasant to my palate, and not a mess of things to puzzle my brains"' (v). As if to show that the rebuses in the pages to follow will not suit everyone, the frontispiece has three ebullient children alongside one who appears to have a headache.

Mince Pies, despite its didactic nature, is one of the few early Christmas books to be aimed at child readers, as opposed to repackaging stories for adults:

> [T]he good boys and girls of this kingdom . . . value an intellectual treat, as much as you do solid pies and pastry; and . . . while they are spending their Christmas holidays at home, would find some hours lie heavy on their hands, if they had not a new book to take up, when other festivities grew insipid. (vi)

Occasionally the riddles are a little ribald – ' . . . a virgin, a bawd, and a Franciscan friar . . . ' (93) – but generally the puzzles connect to classroom themes: 'A word of three syllables, seek 'till you find, / That has in

[5] This work is printed earlier in Edinburgh, and later in Worcester, Massachusetts, as *A Pretty New Year's Gift*.

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