
HOLIDAY READING FOR THE CHEERFULLY IRREVERENT

THE DECEMBER READING LIST

BY DEBORAH MARKUS

If the phrase “holiday reading” sends you running, not walking, to your battered, beloved old copy of *Little Women*, not that you need it since you have the whole first chapter memorized (“Christmas won’t be Christmas without any presents,” Jo grumbled), please go away. You won’t like it here. I promise. If, on the other hand, the very thought of Grandpa hauling out *A Christmas Carol* to read out loud as he has done every Christmas since before you were goddamned born makes you run screaming from the room — sit down! Hang out. Sounds like you could use some holiday reading, as long as it’s the right kind.

Except that now I’m going to lose everyone’s respect by admitting that, under the right circumstances, I can tolerate the occasional dose of holiday Dickens. If Patrick Stewart wants to read some out loud, as he does on the Simon & Schuster two-cassette recording of *A Christmas Carol* (abridged, but trust me, you won’t notice, and if you do you’ll only be grateful), he is more than welcome to. He is in fact more than welcome to recite anything he jolly well pleases in my hearing, at this or any time of year, and I will not only allow it but must be forcibly restrained from throwing money and underwear in what I imagine is his general direction; but that is neither here nor there. The point is that his is a most unsentimental yet feeling and deeply humorous performance of the work, and not only should you try to obtain the recording, but if you are lucky enough to actually have a chance to see him performing his *A.C.C.* one-man show, you should jump at it. Try to hang on to your underwear.

If you do feel tempted to actually read



the actual book — Wait. Let me rephrase that. It’s too easy to trash this work, too easy to treat it as the epitome of all that is eminently hateable about stereotypical Christmas jollity and touchiness. True, our culture has been saddled for over a hundred and fifty years with that icky-sticky “God bless Us, Every One!” thanks to *A.C.C.* But most of the book isn’t like that, and a lot of it is wonderfully dark and darkly funny. Catch this description of Scrooge: “Hard and sharp as flint, from which no steel had ever struck out generous fire; secret, and self-contained, and solitary as an oyster.” Cool. And I don’t think anyone hasn’t smiled when Scrooge, on being told that he’ll be visited by three spirits three nights in a row, asks coaxingly, “Couldn’t I take ‘em all at once, and have it over?” The book is the best of Dickens and the worst of Dickens, and if his worst is stickier than cotton candy, his best is a lightning bolt of brilliance into the darkness that is the human soul. So there. So read the book. There are some decent editions out there. It isn’t a very long work,

so if you feel cheated by the idea of ponying up however many dollars for a scant hundred pages, see if you can find it in an anthology. For admirers of the warmer, cozier Dickens, there is Signet’s *A Christmas Carol and other Christmas Stories*, gracefully introduced by Frederick Busch. The “other stories” in the book are the Christmas sections from *Pickwick Papers*, *Reprinted Pieces*, and *Sketches by Boz*. In one of the stories (“A Christmas Tree” from *Reprinted Pieces*), Dickens talks of winter as being the time for ghost stories, an idea that may surprise our modern minds but apparent-

ly wasn’t his own invention. He did lend his considerable writerly strength to it, though, as is discussed in Peter Haining’s introduction to *Charles Dickens’ Christmas Ghost Stories*, a creepier collection.

If you want your *Christmas Carol* straight, you might consider one of the many beautifully illustrated editions available. Quentin Blake’s is wonderfully unmawkish. For really interesting illustrations and a minimum of text to sweat, though, or as a gift for that irreverent reader on your list, you can read Dickens as seen through the eyes of the late and much lamented Edward Gorey. *The Haunted Tea Cosy: A Dispirited and Distasteful Diversion for Christmas*, is too clever and bizarre to be called exactly a parody of the Carol, but it is nevertheless loosely based upon it. Edmund Gravel, a.k.a the Recluse of Lower Spigot, is visited on Christmas Eve by the Bahhum Bug, who has come “to diffuse the interests of didacticism.” He in turn brings with him, one at a time, three “subfusc but transparent” personages. Gravel mends his miserly ways after being

shown visions by the Spectres of Christmas That Never Was, Christmas That Isn't, and Christmas That Never Will Be. He throws a huge party, at which behavior deteriorates "to the very edge of the unseemly." The illustrations to this and a (sort of) companion volume, *The Headless Bust: A Melancholy Meditation on the False Millennium*, are perhaps not as elegant and fine-lined as Gorey at his best (see the Amphigorey anthologies for that), but the text is all Gorey fans could wish for. One book rhymes, the other doesn't, and there are several cheap shots at fruitcake. Check them out.

Also, if you want a look at the poor and downtrodden about whom Dickens wrote surprisingly little, check out *Not In Front of the Servants: A True Portrait of Upstairs, Downstairs Life*. You'll see, among other things, what kind of Christmas was generally had by those who made it possible for the upper-classes to have their parties without lifting a finger except to raise a glass of Christmas punch. Does it bother anyone but me that by the end of *A Christmas Carol* Scrooge is all broken up about how mean he was to Cratchit for wanting that one day off a year, yet somehow it doesn't matter a bit that the maid at Scrooge's nephew's house had to work? Why couldn't Fred and his wife open their own damned door, and let their girl go home and see her family?

"No leave was given on Christmas day," one empathetic lady recalled in *Not In Front*, "but as an enormous privilege the maids were invited into the drawing room to watch our parlour games. Not to take part, of course! I can visualize them now, sitting on two upright chairs, and looking completely embarrassed." Even those servants who were given time off and gifts on the great day still had to work for part of it, and found that their gifts were usually practical, such as fabric to be made (at the servants' expense) into uniforms. "Why," asks Mrs. Powell, a former servant, "did we always have to have sensible things? I think the reason they used to give us uniforms was because they knew we couldn't buy them out of our measly wages. Besides, if we were to have perfume or silk we would go astray."

Speaking of Christmas day difficulties of the poor, John Sutherland wrote a wonderful essay entitled "How do the Cratchits cook Scrooge's Turkey?" in his book *Who Betrays Elizabeth Bennet?* Not to give too much away, but Sutherland rather mischie-

ously suggests that Scrooge's motives in giving the bird to his clerk weren't one hundred percent benevolent.

Anyway. Back to the real thing. If you prefer to have all your extraneous details and interesting sidelines under one cover, the "Eyewitness Classics" edition is annotated and gently abridged, with illustrations by Andrew Wheatcroft — good for the younger set. "The Whole Story" series is attractive, not too expensive, and has fascinating captions rather than footnotes, so you can learn a great deal about some of Dickens' more obscure references without having to flip back and forth in the book. This book mentions, for instance, that Dickens himself grew tired of his association with jolly holiday writing. "He wrote to his daughter Mamie," we are told on the very last page of this edition, "that he felt as if he 'had murdered a Christmas a number of years ago, and its ghost perpetually haunted me.'"

Perhaps in an attempt to exorcise that relentless spirit, Dickens wrote another book that starts on the day before Christmas. Unlike *A Christmas Carol*, though, the early chapters of *Great Expectations* are a tale of the Christmas from hell. Pip has spent Christmas Eve being mugged by an escaped convict and threatened into stealing food from his own family cupboard for said con, in a scene which contains some of the most terrifying dialogue in the English language. Pip sits through Christmas dinner in an agony of guilt and fear, knowing that his crime may be discovered at any moment by his sharp-tongued, heavy-handed guardian of a sister. As if this isn't bad enough, he is "squeezed in at an acute angle of the tablecloth, with the table in my chest," fed "the scaly tips of the drumsticks of the fowls, and with those obscure corners of the pork of which the pig, when living, had had the least reason to be vain," and lectured on his shortcomings — though since he doesn't move and isn't allowed to speak, one wonders how any flaws of his might have been learned of. Everyone in this viciously wonderful scene brings his worst self to the Christmas dinner table — Pip is fearful and sullen, Joe self-insistently helpless, Mrs. Joe generous to those who least deserve it, Uncle Pumblechook long-winded, Mr. Hubble self-important, and so on and on. The chapter reads like an open audition for a bad musical of the seven deadly sins, rather than the joyful merriment generally associated with a Dickensian Christmas.

There are a few good editions of *Great Expectations*. Norton recently released a critical edition that is outstanding. Background material out the wazoo. But if you want something you can pick up without sustaining permanent injury, you might want to go with the lighter but still annotated Penguin Classics edition. (Penguin Classics is always good, actually.) You will need some footnotes to get as much as you ought out of this novel, since like all of Dickens' work it's quite political and extremely of its time, so a lot of the references aren't exactly clear unless you specialized in nineteenth-century weirdness in college.

In contrast to Dickens, another brilliant nineteenth-century writer was too savvy to ever fall into the sentimental trap that Christmas can become. Jane Austen's only truly memorable Christmas takes place in *Emma*, a novel otherwise associated with summer. Emma, like Pip, spends an unexpectedly miserable Christmas Eve, though she is rather more responsible for her own unhappiness than he is for his. After spending the last several dozen pages trying to set her best friend up with an eligible local bachelor, she is proposed to by said guy in a carriage on the way home from a party. She coldly repulses him, and gets to go home and (again like Pip) beat herself up for her sins. It's true that he actually stole, whereas the worst Emma can be accused of is charming arrogance and willful ignorance; but somehow her sins are much less forgivable to any discerning reader. She spends Christmas thankful that the weather is too lousy to allow her to go out, even to church. No parties, no presents, no stocking by the tree. Ho ho ho.

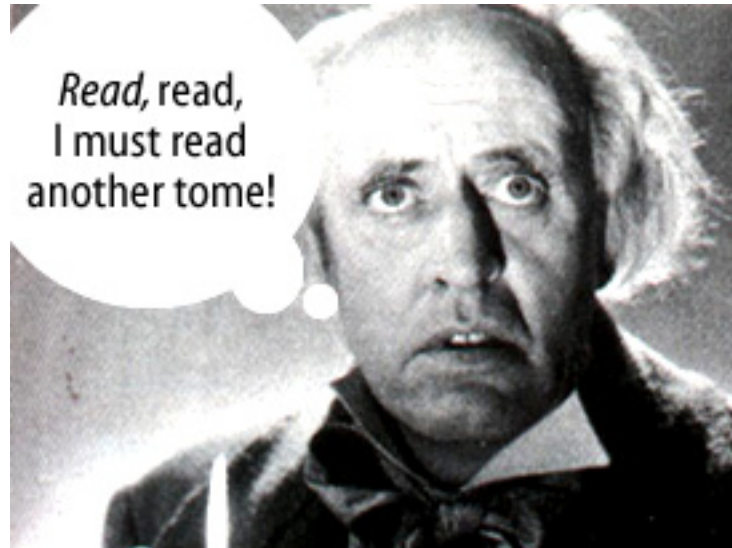
There is by the way, if you like Austen and Christmas, a recent book out entitled *Jane Austen's Christmas: The Festive Season in Georgian England*, compiled by Maria Hubert, and surprisingly stimulating reading. It does contain shortish excerpts from the novels whenever the editor could find Austen mentioning Christmas at all (mostly she passes over the holiday with few words). But there is also a letter by one of Austen's cousins describing Bullet Pudding, which is not some grim rock-hard English dessert but rather a sort of eighteenth-century version of Don't Break The Ice; a one-act play Jane Austen wrote as a teenager which makes fun of excessive exposition ("Pray, papa, how far is it to London?") "My Girl, my Darling, my favourite of all my Children, who art the

picture of thy poor Mother who died two months ago, with whom I am going to Town to marry to Strephon, and to whom I mean to bequeath my whole Estate, it wants seven Miles.”); and a charming little contemporary Christmas poem about a beautiful young bride who, bored with dancing, decides to play hide-and-seek at a holiday party and is only found decades later locked into an old chest that had closed upon her when she hid in it. Maybe this is what Papa read out loud before they had “’Twas the Night Before Christmas.”

Speaking of which, if you’re sick enough of *that* old chestnut to take pleasure in the idea of seeing it made fun of for a couple of hundred pages, by all means check out Martin Gardner’s *The Annotated Night Before Christmas: A Collection of Sequels, Parodies, and Imitations of Clement Moore’s Immortal Ballad About Santa Claus*. The subtitle pretty much says it all, but you might as well read the rest of the book anyway. Somebody out there with way too much spare time actually came up with “A Visit From Sid Vicious,” and that’s not even the strangest item in this collection, although it’s definitely in the running. (How about “A Visit From St. Nicholson,” ending with the line, “Merry Christmas to all, and I hope I never see you again as long as I live, for cryin’ out loud!”) There are actually some decent serious pieces here, though. The 1913 poem “A Department Store Christmas,” about overworked and underpaid employees and evil snarling rich people, still rings true, and not just because I worked retail for six years. Perhaps most enjoyable of all, though, at least for a certain kind of reader, is “Holmes and Watson Have a Visitor,” in which St. Nick stops by to give John Watson a fresh supply of pens and Sherlock Holmes a Stradivarius violin. The poem is riddled with references to Holmes adventures, but wittily rather than obnoxiously. As throughout the book, Gardner’s footnotes are superb.

In that poem, by the way, Holmes and Watson have just finished eating the goose from “The Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle,” definitely holiday reading. Any Sherlock Holmes is good once the weather turns cold, but this piece is the only really Christmasy one I can remember. What I

like best about the Sherlock Holmes mysteries, other than that thrill of purely unrequited lust for the great detective himself that dates back to when I was a mere slip of a thing, is reading them twice: once to see how clever Arthur Conan Doyle was, and once again, with footnotes, to see how much he got wrong. “The Blue Carbuncle” is prime territory in this respect. William Baring-Gould’s *Annotated Sherlock Holmes* volumes are a blast, and really rip this particular mystery to shreds, starting with the title, since there is no such thing



as a blue carbuncle. Doyle was one of those authors who never let the truth get in the way of a good story.

So was Shirley Jackson. Her two great “autobiographical” works, *Life Among The Savages* and *Raising Demons*, stand in stark contrast to much of her other work in that they are screamingly funny rather than starkly terrifying (note the subtle difference). Both books end with Christmas episodes. In the first, Jackson is at the bank, a place “dedicated to every friendly pursuit except the swift transference of money, hoping to speak to a certain Mr. Andrews about getting an extension on her loan. While she is waiting to see him, the bank’s Santa Claus strolls merrily in and begins to make lavish Christmas promises to Jackson’s two small daughters, ignoring Jackson’s frantic waving and shaking her head. He finally leaves, and she is at last allowed to see the loan agent, whose nose “still retained a trace of jovial redness, but the jolly old elf’s eye was the familiar agate, and the faint echo of jingle bells around him sounded more like the clinking of half dollars. ‘Well,’ said Santa Claus, selecting my loan slip from the stack on his

desk, ‘and what brings you here again so soon?’”

The end of *Raising Demons* isn’t as sharply funny, though it doesn’t, thank heaven, descend into mawkishness. “When Mommy was a little girl,” Jackson’s youngest daughter confides to all present, “they used to go in sleighs and sleigh bells and bring in a Yule log, but of course that was very long ago.” Jackson starts to protest this last bit, but is drowned out. The fact that her readers have been told by now that she grew up in sunny southern California is a nice touch.

For a story more typical of Jackson and less typical of the jolly holiday season, turn to her posthumous collection *Just An Ordinary Day*, which you really ought to get anyway since it’s absolutely brilliant. It contains, among other pieces, a story called “Deck the Halls,” which starts out very sweet and innocent and Christmasy. Mr. and Mrs. Williams, a young married couple, are decorating their first tree together one Christmas Eve; “their little girl was two years old, and Mrs. Williams had thought that it was time they started making a real Christmas for her to remember when she grew up.” The tree, festooned with ornaments and joined by a teddy bear for the baby to see first thing, looks like “a dream of Christmas,” Mrs. Williams observes happily. Naturally, Jackson can’t leave such a scene well enough alone, and so the doorbell rings. Two unfamiliar little girls are waiting on the porch, with a note from their mother, a neighbor. It isn’t addressed to the Williams’ in particular, and asks whoever is reading it to please, if they can spare it, give the children some warm clothing for Christmas. This is a jarring note on such a lovely night, to put it mildly, and of course bad goes to worse when the smaller girl falls tearfully in love with the bear under the tree. All I can say at this point is that if you’re expecting a happy ending, you’d better run out to the parlor and put out an extra cookie for Santa while you’re at it.

While we’re on the subject of fictionalized autobiography, which we were a paragraph or so ago, sentimental readers may recall the wonderful Christmases delineated in the “Little House” books, set way

back in the good old days when getting a new pair of mittens and a single stick of candy in your stocking was the height of wonderfulness. Which makes one wonder just how drab and dreary life must have been the rest of the year for that to be a high point. (“Twigs for breakfast? *Again?*” “Quiet, Laura. Pa hunted all day for those.”) I actually always loved those books, especially the Christmas scenes. (There is a collection out called *A Little House Christmas: Holiday Stories from the Little House Books*, which is fun but extremely short. The Garth Williams illustrations are colorized, which looks lovely but may send purists into a tearing fury. Get over it.) Every Christmas gets a little better for Laura and Mary and the rest, meaning the kids get better presents, and the descriptions of food are enough to make you want to run out and shoot a bear just to see if it tastes as good as Laura says.

And so I was rather stunned when I read William Holtz’ fairly recent work, *The Ghost in The Little House: A Life of Rose Wilder Lane*. “Almost everything we admire about the Little House books,” Holtz insists, “the pace and rhythm of the narrative line, the carefully nuanced flow of feeling, the muted drama of daily life,” were in fact the work of Wilder’s daughter, who touched up her mother’s work to the point of rewriting it, and even writing it, entirely in many places. Examples of this — Wilder’s original writing, followed by Lane’s finally-published improvements — may be found in the appendix, and they make startling reading. Lane’s story is a fascinating one quite aside from the claim that she essentially ghost-wrote her mother’s books. I especially enjoyed this anecdote from her childhood:

When I was five years old, sitting one day in my grandmother’s parlor in De Smet...I said dreamily, “I wish I had been there when Christ was crucified.” My sincerely, deeply pious grandmother was (I now realize) deeply touched by this tender young piety; I can recall the tone of her voice saying softly, “Why, dear?” I replied, “So I could have cursed him and been the Wandering Jew.”

It’s almost enough to make you want to have a kid, just to see if your very own homegrown five-year-old might say something that cool someday, preferably in front of evil in-laws with heart problems.

Speaking of kids, children and Christmas writing are generally a toxic combination — let’s face it, Dickens only got really unbearable when Tiny Tim was on the scene. Jackson got away with writing up her kids, in the holiday season



Twigs for breakfast? *Again?*

and elsewhere, by showing them at their wittiest, their worst, and their most cheerfully destructive. So does Jean Kerr, author of *Please Don’t Eat the Daisies* and other works now lamentably out of print. Her essay “I Saw Mommy Kicking Santa Claus” (printed in *Penny Candy*) is worth a search through the used bookstores. Though she was writing several decades ago, her work still resonates. Doesn’t this sound like every Christmas morning in America?

Even before all the presents are unwrapped, the battery crisis will have begun:

“Why is he crying?”

“Because his dinosaur won’t go any more.”

“Why won’t it go?”

“Because Col took the battery for his fire engine.”

“Col, that fire engine has its own battery.”

“No, it doesn’t.”

“Then use the battery from the Marx-a-Cart.”

“That’s too big.”

“Give him back his battery.”

“It seems to be dead now.”

Kerr also laments the tendency of children, once all the batteries have died, to want to play their new Christmas games with their parents. Games of skill are fine, as “a moderately intelligent adult who is playing checkers with a six-year-old child can usually manage to lose. And in about ten minutes.” It’s those God-awful roll-the-dice-move-your-mice board games that can’t be “fixed” (her quotes) and take a million years to finish that really push her over the edge. The closest this piece comes to Christmas mush is Kerr’s delight at the discovery, one year when she sprained her ankle early in the season, of the joys of catalogue shopping.

For the best fiction about children at any time of year, but especially now, it’s best to turn to authors who never quite grew up themselves. The title may seem a little dated, but please treat yourself to James Finn Garner’s *Politically Correct Holiday Stories*, if only so that you can learn the real fate of “Rudolph the Nasally Empowered Reindeer.” And I defy anyone to tell me that I’m lowering the tone when I

enthusiastically endorse Bill Watterson, creator of the now-extremely-lamentably-defunct “Calvin and Hobbes” comic. Like Dickens, he has added his own inimitable phrase to our culture; the fact that no one quite knows what “the noodle incident” was is part of its charm.

Watterson apparently felt obligated, his first Christmas with the strip, to do the touchy-feely holiday bit, but he got over that pretty quick. “Ha ha! Acquittal on all charges! Complete exoneration! Ha ha ha!” is about as sweet as Calvin gets on more recent Christmas mornings. Anyway, this December, as someone who has never seen real snow in her life, I highly recommend Watterson’s *Attack of the Deranged Mutant Killer Monster Snow Goons*.

Bill Amend of “Foxtrot” fame (who refers in his strip to Calvin and Hobbes as “Luther and Locke”) is another comic artist who handles Christmas with admirable irreverence. (His strip is worth reading all year ‘round for his famous double and triple punchlines.) He’s also quite good at playing New Year’s resolutions for all they’re worth. It’s refreshing to find an artist who remembers that two significant holidays come in rapid succession this time of year.

The only prose treatment of New Year's Day I could find was the Edith Wharton novella of that title. And it's not really about the holiday; the main character merely finds her adulterous affair exposed to much of her social circle that day. It's worth reading, though, as most of Wharton's work is, both for the writing itself and for its portrait of a world long gone — the "self-sufficing little society of that vanished New York", which "attached no great importance to wealth, but regarded poverty as so distasteful that it simply took no account of it." This little story is about one woman who was forced most desperately to take account of her own wretchedly poor and powerless state. The surprise ending isn't necessarily much of a shock (it was to me the first time I read it, but hey, I was young and foolish then), but it's moving nonetheless, thanks to Wharton's stark, no-punches-pulled use of the language. She describes New Year's Day, winningly, as "a kind of supplementary Christmas — though to us juniors the absence of presents and plum-pudding made it but a pale and moonlike reflection of the Feast."

A few more winter stories are featured in a more recent writer's collection of stories: *The Shoplifter's Apprentice*, by Ellen Lesser. If the title alone doesn't make you want to read it, you're past my help. The title story features a nameless young woman who is buying some wine one winter's day and is startled to notice a young man stealing a bottle of champagne. Rather than

turning him in, she follows him outside, goes home with him, spends the night. Spends a couple of nights. Is invited to "come around" with him one Saturday. The tips on shoplifting are worth the price of the book — heck, read this story in the bookstore and you might not have to pay for it after all — but better still is Lesser's attention to sensual detail. This passage seems particularly appropriate to the season:

Fingering garments she could never hope to buy on store racks, daydreaming over pictures in magazines, eating spaghetti and rice while she saved for the season's one extravagant purchase — she was as much prey to disproportionate material longings anyone. But after the night at the shoplifter's, what had been idle desires took on a tangible urgency. When she picked up her bar of Ivory, she imagined a shelf full of luxury soaps — honey-almond, green apple, lime oil, wild lavender — so real she could practically smell them....Almaden Mountain Chablis, long her staple, had a sour new bite on her tongue. Having to wait for books to come out in paperback suddenly seemed an injustice. And she thought about him, the way his eyes in their purple shadows had shone in the dark, the way he had taken her clothes off and touched her as if she belonged to him.

"Sara's Friend" from the same collection is a first-person story about a young woman living in New York, a proofreader by trade, who finds herself invited to the

Christmas party at a neighboring group home by Sara, a retarded resident. Her experiences there almost make the *Great Expectations* dinner look inviting. "For some reason," the main character recounts, "I'd imagined them playing games, like at a kids' party, but this was it: the decorations, the cookies and punch, the stilted imitation of social life and the carols, pumped out metallic and monotonous from some invisible source like a nightmare of Christmas. At the far end of one of the couches a man sat alone, rubbing his hand back and forth in slow motion over his crotch, his eyes placid, elsewhere." Oh what fun it is. Good book. Go get it, and make a special point of reading "Eating Air," which isn't seasonal but is probably the best story in the collection.

As long as I'm talking about holiday reading I've got to mention food-writer (and novelist and short-story master) Laurie Colwin and her recipe for Black Cake, which I resolve to try every year but never quite manage to find time for. Which is easy to understand, since you really ought to start it a month or so in advance. From everything Colwin says, though, it's worth the wait. In "Black Cake," an essay included in her collection *Home Cooking*, she writes thus temptingly:

There is fruitcake, and there is Black Cake, which is to fruitcake what the Brahms piano quartets are to Muzak. Its closest relatives are plum pudding and black bun, but it leaves both in the dust. Black Cake, like truffles and vintage Burgundy, is deep, complicated and intense. It has taste and aftertaste. It demands to be eaten in a slow, meditative way. The texture is complicated, too — dense and light at the same time.

Even if you aren't ambitious in the kitchen, catch some of Colwin's writing — *Home Cooking* and *More Home Cooking* should be cherished by everyone who's ever been tempted to flip Martha Stewart the bird. "No matter of what persuasion you may be," she writes in "How to Face the Holidays," "the idea of Hanukkah or Christmas with New Year's Eve to follow is enough to fill the most cheerful heart with dread." Martha would never say anything that reassuring. Colwin's food is real food, her writing is real writing, and reading her work you really feel like you could actually make something edible with your own two hands and a minimum of byzantine ingredients.

Colwin's fiction is enjoyable as well. I

prefer her short stories to her novels, and recommend her collection *The Lone Pilgrim*, in which you will find, just right for this time of year, “An Old-Fashioned Story.” The heroine of the story breaks all of what she refers to as “A Mother’s Ten Commandments,” including “Thou shalt confide thy troubles in thy mother so that thy mother may become hysterical.” Elizabeth decides to use her own methods to induce hysteria: she gets drunk at the family Christmas party, tells her mother’s oldest friend to go to hell, and vanishes for an indiscreet period of time with James, the black sheep bad-boy brother of the man everyone is hoping she’ll marry. “She had decided,” Colwin tells us gleefully, “that a little public bad behavior was exactly what she needed. It was time to get her mother off her back, outrage the Rodkers, and put to rest once and for all her imitation of a well-composed young woman.” You’ll just have to read the story yourself to see if she succeeds or not.

Laurie Colwin is an example of that interesting phenomenon, the Jewish-American who loves Christmas. Stephen Nissenbaum, author of *The Battle for Christmas*, is another. Although for him it’s not so much love as fascination, dating back to his Orthodox childhood. “I can remember, one Christmas day,” he recalls in his preface to the book, “putting some of my own toys in a sack and attempting to distribute them to other children who lived in my Jersey City apartment house: If I couldn’t *get* presents, at least no one stopped me from giving them away.” Which is one of the few Christmas anecdotes I’ve ever heard that genuinely qualifies as poignant, and so it’s a good thing the book doesn’t continue in such a fashion or I couldn’t discuss it here.

The Battle came *this* close to winning a Pulitzer when it came out five years ago, and the only thing you can’t understand reading it is how it could possibly have lost, because it’s brilliant. It’s one of the few works out there on any subject that manages to be at once erudite (look it up) and utterly enjoyable, and explores aspects of Christmas you won’t hear much about elsewhere. The history of it as a holiday, of course, and why early Christmas celebrations were anything but child- and family-oriented. Nissenbaum notes, as a for-instance, that a seventeenth-century “Lord of Misrule” was mock-married to a woman who then happily consummated the relationship with him on the spot. Ho ho ho.

More recent spectacles were even more shocking, at least to my own jaded sensibilities. In a chapter titled “Tiny Tim and Other Charity Cases,” we are treated to the spectacle of the poor being treated as a spectacle:

Beginning in 1898, [the Salvation Army] organized immense public dinners for impoverished New Yorkers, held at Madison Square Garden. These dinners were great public spectacles, expertly organized. As the hungry and homeless were fed at tables on the arena floor, under the glare of electric lights, more prosperous New Yorkers paid to be admitted to the Garden’s boxes and galleries, where they observed the gorging. . . . They were to furnish the lighter shade to the pleasure, with their air of contentment, and prosperity, and perchance sympathy” [the press later reported].

For a lighter look at why we should be troubled by *all* Christmas celebrations, past and present, turn to Tom Flynn and his 1993 book *The Trouble With Christmas*. To quote from the back cover, “Tom Flynn is associate editor of *Free Inquiry* magazine and coeditor of the *Secular Humanist Bulletin*. He has been Yule-free since 1984.” ‘Nuff said about his credentials. His book is a lot of fun to read, though I disagree with him on some points. Like his main one, which is that Christmas should not be celebrated either by Christians (since it’s not really a “holy” day but only a pagan celebration with religious trappings thrown on for PR purposes) or by non-Christians (since it’s a celebration of the birth of someone who isn’t their savior). Bummer. Looks like nobody gets to party this year. (As an atheist, I tell people who ask what’s with the tree that they’ll take my presents when they pry them from my cold, dead hands.)

Agree or disagree with him, Flynn’s book is on my own personal annual reading list. He’s got some good history in there, and points out just how recent most of our holiday traditions really are. He does take the idea that Clement Clarke Moore didn’t write “The Night Before Christmas” way too seriously, though. His passionate insistence that Santa Claus should not be represented to children as a “real” person is riveting reading, and his reprinting of the original “Yes, Virginia” letter alone is worth the price of admission. Just don’t sweat it too much when he urges you to give up Christmas and other superstitious holdovers. Mellow out, Tom.

A less passionate work by the same publisher (Prometheus Books) is *The December Wars: Religious Symbols and Ceremonies in the Public Square*, by Albert J. Menendez. Not the same breeze of a read as Flynn's work, but factual and fascinating. No matter how often one hears it, it's always a kick to read about how much the Puritans hated Christmas, and how so many of the objects we think are so Christmasy are merely borrowed from past cultures, religions, and winter celebrations having nothing to do with peace on earth. Menendez covers such territory with thoroughness and aplomb, and offers tidbits such as this quote from T.G. Crippen's *Christmas and Christmas Lore*: "There is an Irish superstition that the gates of Paradise are always open on Christmas Eve; so that anyone dying at that moment enters at once, without going to Purgatory. Grim stories are told of persons who were obviously dying, and were kindly helped out of this world just at the critical moment." The chapters covering court battles over public school and public property participation in Christmas celebrations are cool, evenhanded reporting, and the book as a whole is required reading for anyone remotely interested in the separation of church and state.

All this nonfiction nattering about the holidays may be putting you off your feed. Perhaps, like the hero and heroine of John Grisham's recent novella *Skipping Christmas*, you're tempted to blow it all off and spend the money you would have poured into presents and party food on a cruise instead. Just be careful. This book (not brilliant by any means, but a pleasant evening's diversion) is a not-so-grim reminder that the best-laid plans...well, you know the rest. The characters aren't particularly deep, but they don't have to be. I haven't read anything else by Grisham, so I can't say how this work measures up to his other stuff, but some of the writing here is laugh-out-loud, like when Luther Krank (hey, I didn't name him) finds a "FREE FROSTY" sign planted on his lawn when his is the only house on the block not to have a big plastic snowman decorating the roof. Some of the book isn't as funny as it wants to be, and the revealed racism of the Kranks toward the end was a jolt. Also, how does Mr. Krank's being tired of meaningless Christmas spending fit in with his refusing to give a holiday tip to his service people? Especially when he and his wife had agreed early in the book that they'd give their usual charitable donations this

year, as always? Doesn't quite gel. But, hey, judge for yourself. It'll take you an hour tops to read.

As will the second Bridget Jones diary, *The Edge of Reason* by Helen Fielding, and you'll wish it had lasted longer. It's as brilliant as Fielding's first book, and I can write it up here because it's shamelessly irreverent (without being unkind) and the Christmas portions, though brief, are hilarious. Who but Bridget Jones would get plowed and then sit down to write her Christmas cards? And only later find out, since she has no memory of it, that she'd addressed one to her "dearest, dearest Ken," and signed it "With real love," when Ken is not her boyfriend but an accountant she has only met once "and then we had row about sending my VAT in late. Oh my God." I won't even tell you what else she wrote to whom, or what she did to her Christmas tree while she was, ah, indisposed. Just read the book. AFTER you read the first one. You won't be sorry.

Fiction writers do seem to be at their best with the big C when they're properly irreverent. (Part of my disappointment with the Grisham book was the "real meaning of Christmas" ending — God help us, every one.) Fay Weldon, who has never to my knowledge wasted a moment being reverent about anything, handles the holidays well in her writing. *Moon Over Minneapolis*, one of my favorite collections of short works, has two "Stories for Christmas" (and one for Thanksgiving, which is a rare holiday read indeed). They both have happy endings, where the heroine sees the errors of, and mends, her ways; but you never feel like you're being preached at. They're just good stories.

"Who Goes Where?" features Adrienne, who adores to have her own way and never says yes when she can say no, "exercising the power of the much-loved over the one who loves and is thus humiliated. Except that Adrienne was thirty-four, not four, and still doing it, as only the really beautiful can, but nearer to running out of people who loved her than she knew." And in "The Search for Mother Christmas" we have Ruby, who has a "special relationship" with Father Christmas. And what does that mean? "'It means,' said Ruby, 'Father Christmas may put the presents down the chimney on New Year's Eve rather than Christmas Eve because I don't get paid till the last Friday of every month.'" Poor Ruby, who "wants her life back": widowed with four children,

because "the house just felt empty without a baby in it. Good God, why do women have such feelings: and worse, having them, why do they then act upon them?" Weldon at her sharpest, Thackerayan best.

Weldon also has a fine holiday piece in my other favorite of her collections: "Christmas Lists — A Seasonal Story," in *Polaris and other stories*. Louise, an upper-middle-class British housewife, finds that Christmas has stopped being a day and begun to take up an entire season. "Finally, Louise opened an actual Christmas file, which would start in the first week of September." Just like the Christmas decorations in the department stores. Weldon is ruthlessly funny in this story — I'm always jolted with laughter reading about Louise waiting grimly for her husband to fall out of love with another woman. She makes a list of all the symptoms that he is illicitly in love, including "5) intensive fault-finding alternating with maudlin over-appreciation" and "8) making love twice as long and twice as often as usual." Not your usual holiday fare, but this isn't even the main event of the story — just one of those "bad, bad Christmases, well, you only know if you're happy if you have something extreme to set it against."

Delia Grinstead, the heroine of Anne Tyler's *Ladder of Years*, takes a while to figure out that she is in fact desperately unhappy, but when she does she acts on it with a vengeance, walking away from her family (the cause of her grief) while they're frolicking on the beach on their annual summer vacation. Instead of going home, Delia, a timid housewife, hitches a ride to a small town nearby and makes a quiet, lonely, but peaceful life for herself, taking menial jobs that allow her to live in a peculiarly satisfying, frill-free manner. Her first Christmas away from her family is a dream I confess I'd love to live sometime: she gets to stay home all day, alone, and read. "Not until she was drinking her tea did she consider the fact that it was Christmas. Christmas, all by herself! She supposed that would strike most people as tragic, but to her the prospect was enjoyable."

As it would be to me, with a stack of my favorite books at my side and a pot of tea at hand. Maybe someday when my four-year-old is more like thirty-four.

May your holidays grant you all the reading time you desire. As you can see, there's no lack of decent material out there to keep you pleasantly occupied. ~