

Vibrant characters spread messages in holiday books

BY ERIN HANAFY
Associated Press Writer

Advertisers make sure that everyone understands the "season of giving" during the holidays, but this year's crop of Christmas, Hanukkah and Kwanzaa books aim to help children understand the kind of giving that can't be measured in dollars.

Characters as varied as a miniature donkey named Ernest, a redheaded second-grader whose words get jumbled between his brain and his tongue, friendly aliens traveling in a spaceship and Santa Claus himself (albeit a grumpy one) show a generosity of spirit that provides an alternative to the relentless holiday marketing.

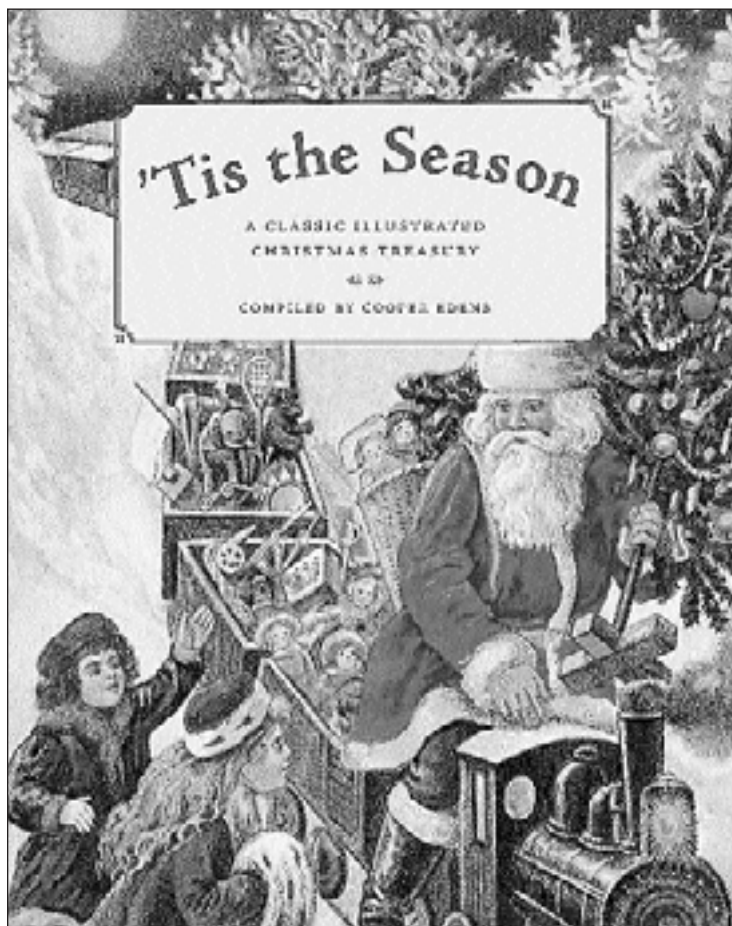
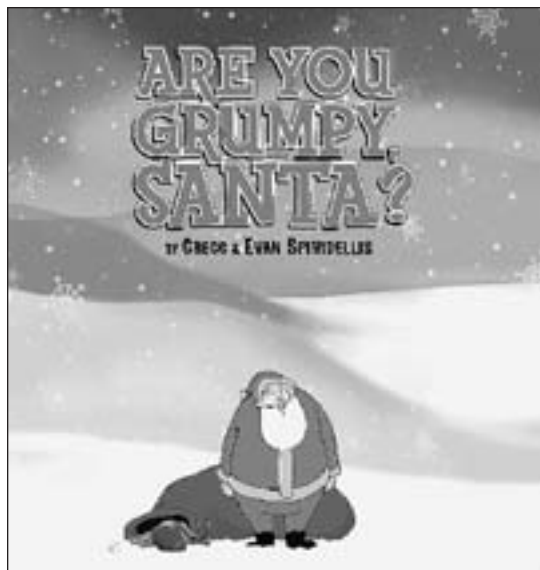
A couple of new releases offer Christmas classics wrapped up in lovely new packages. "The Nutcracker" (Running Press, \$16.95, ages 4-8), adapted from the 19th-century story by E.T.A. Hoffmann with new illustrations by Don Daily, is a handsome volume with gold trim that is meant to keep visions of sugar plum fairies dancing in children's heads for generations.

"'Tis the Season" (Chronicle Books, \$19.95, all ages) also aims to be a family keepsake, with a collection of timeless essays and stories such as "Yes, Virginia, There Is a Santa Claus," "A Visit From St. Nicholas" (also known by its opening line, "'Twas the night before Christmas") and excerpts from Dylan Thomas' "A Child's Christmas in Wales" and Charles Dickens' "A Christmas Carol."

Illustrations from the late 19th and early 20th century give the book a vintage feel and tastefully adorn traditional carols such as "We Wish You a Merry Christmas," "God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen" and "The Wassail Song."

With sitcom-style antics and misunderstandings, "Who'll Pull Santa's Sleigh Tonight?" and "Are You Grumpy, Santa?" boast a more humorous, and modern, take on Christmas.

"We aw hab codes!" a sniffling reindeer tells Santa in Laura Rader's "Who'll Pull Santa's Sleigh Tonight?"



(HarperCollins, \$12.99, ages 4-8), prompting him to hold auditions for reindeer substitutes. An elephant kept aloft with hot-air balloons, a pair of cows called "The Happy Hoofers" and rabbits known as "The Fly-Away

Hares" are comical, but unsuccessful, stand-ins for the reindeer, who ultimately get over the flu in time to save Christmas.

In "Are You Grumpy, Santa?" (Hyperion, \$15.99, ages 3-8) by Gregg and Evan Spiridellis, Santa's having a bad Christmas Eve. He starts the day off wearing an itchy new suit because his regular one shrunk in the dryer. He must skip his

usual breakfast of waffles, pancakes, sausage, eggs and steak because of a weight-loss regimen imposed by Mrs. Claus. And as he travels around the world delivering gifts, he slips on a rigatoni noodle in Italy and is nearly trampled by

clear. When people do nice things for you, the GRUMPIES disappear!"

Santa isn't mentioned at all in "Redheaded Robbie's Christmas Story" (Sleeping Bear Press, \$16.95, ages 4-8) by Bill Luttrell. The Christmas ideal of compassion and generosity is the star of this story of a tongue-tied second-grader who must overcome a bad case of nerves after he's picked to write a Christmas story and read it in front of his school. Redheaded Robbie personifies those ideals and gets his message across despite his verbal limitations, ending with a triumphant "Flurry Flickmas to all!"

Animal lovers have plenty to choose from with titles such as Joseph Slate's "Little Porcupine's Christmas" (HarperCollins, \$5.99, ages 3-6), Wendy Wax's "A Very Mice Christmas" (HarperCollins, \$6.99, ages 2-6), Lauren Thompson's "Mouse's First Christmas" (Simon & Schuster, \$5.99, ages 2-6)

AP Photo

A sampling of this season's holiday books. From the top: A tongue-tied little boy must overcome a bad case of nerves after he's picked to read a Christmas story in front of his school in "Redheaded Robbie's Christmas Story"; Santa needs grateful boys and girls to cheer him up after his reindeer are buried in snow, a gust of wind blows his cap off and he gets stuck in a chimney in "Are You Grumpy, Santa?"; "'Tis the Season" is an illustrated collection of favorite Christmas songs as well as essays and stories like "Yes, Virginia, There is a Santa Claus" and Dylan Thomas' "A Child's Christmas in Wales."

a bull in Pamplona, Spain.

But the book shows that no matter how many things get in the way, a plate of cookies and a note from a loving child can make it all better. "Santa smiled and took a bite: the lesson was quite

and "Ernest's Special Christmas" (Barnesyard Books, \$17.95, ages 4-8), Laura T. Barnes' story of a miniature donkey who helps rescue his friend, Chester the horse, who is trapped in the snow on Christmas Eve.

"The Puppy Who Wanted a Boy" (HarperCollins, \$14.99, ages 3-8) by Jane Thayer turns the tables on the idea of animal rescue, with Petey the puppy begging his mother for a boy, saying he's been good all year. Petey's pleas are answered, and he answers a lonely orphan's prayers when the puppy stumbles on a home for boys on Christmas Day.

Two board books offer a look at Hanukkah, the Jewish holiday that this year is celebrated from sundown Dec. 19 through sundown Dec. 27, for the youngest readers.

"Hanukkah!" (Little, Brown, \$6.99, age 3 and younger) by Roni Schotter and "Oh Chanukah!" (Price Stern Sloan, \$5.99, ages 2-5) by L.J. Goodman each feature a family having a typical holiday celebration: lighting the menorah, feasting on latkes (potato pancakes) and opening presents.

"Hanukkah: A Counting Book in English-Hebrew-Yiddish" (Scholastic, \$5.99, ages 3-6) by Emily Sper is another option for very young readers, teaching them to count things associated with Hanukkah, such as candles, dreidels and jelly doughnuts, in three languages.

"It's a Miracle! A Hanukkah Storybook" (Atheneum, \$16.95, ages 4-8) by Stephanie Spinner focuses on Owen and his Grandma Karen, who tells a different story each night of Hanukkah. The wildly varying stories — which include cowgirls, alien spaceships and, oddly, dentists — all manage to contribute to the theme of faith and family.

Kwanzaa, a holiday that celebrates African-American cultural heritage, lasts from Dec. 26 to Jan. 1.

"K Is for Kwanzaa" (Scholastic, \$5.99, ages 4-10) by Juwanda G. Ford offers a broad overview of the holiday's origins and its seven principles, or Nguzo Saba.

Karen Katz brings Kwanzaa's traditions to life in "My First Kwanzaa" (Henry Holt, \$14.95, ages 4-8) with vibrant illustrations and a story that follows a little girl as she and her family carry out the holiday's traditions, from the lighting of a kinara candle on the first day to the feast, or

karamu, on the last day. The African-inspired patterns along the page's borders and the family's brightly colored clothing make it a particularly festive holiday book.

The following holiday books also were released recently:

■ "Country Music Night Before Christmas" (Pelican Publishing, \$14.95, ages 4-8) by Thomas N. Turner features Santa with a cowboy hat, riding a 1956 Cadillac with country musicians on board.

■ "M is for Mistletoe: A Christmas Alphabet Book" (Price Stern Sloan, \$4.99, ages 2-5) by Tanya Lee Stone includes such essential terms as "yuletide," "jingle bells" and "ho-ho-ho."

■ "The 12 Days of Christmas" (Simon & Schuster, \$9.99, up to age 4) uses the lyrics of the traditional Christmas carol and features comical illustrations, like "three French hens" wearing berets and carrying a "joyeux noel" banner.

■ "The Christmas Ship" (HarperCollins, \$5.99, ages 5-9), by "Ship of Dreams" author Dean Morrissey, tells the story of a toymaker who Santa calls upon on Christmas to help him deliver toys.

■ "Christmas Baby" (Simon & Schuster, \$5.99, up to age 4) by Margaret Miller is one of a series of books featuring close-ups of babies' faces.

■ "Counting Christmas" (McElderry Books, \$14.99, ages 3-6) by Karen Katz uses vivid colors and geometric shapes to make counting fun — lights on the gifts under the tree, cookies for Santa and stockings hung on the hearth.

■ "Pearl's Eight Days of Chanukah" (Aladdin Paperbacks, \$6.99, ages 3-8) by Jane Breskin Zalben follows the Hanukkah traditions of a family and includes instructions for activities like making dreidels and puppets.

■ "Who'll Light the Chanukah Candles?" (Little Simon, \$4.99, ages 3 up) by Dandi Daley Mackall follows a little girl as she waits her turn to light the menorah.

Stylish accessories for holiday wear

By SHARON MOSELY
Copley News Service

Got the holiday fashion blues? With these accessories you can jazz up anything in your wardrobe. Just add a few of these special extras and you've got the secret to holiday style for any occasion:

■ **Fur collar.** It's one of the newest ways to add a touch of luxury to sweater sets, satin shells, suit jackets or coats. Real or faux, long or short, these collars, scarves and stoles will definitely give last year's sweater set a new lease on the luxe life.

■ **Spiky stilettos.** A holiday party is one time you can splurge — dress up and stand in those pointy little shoes for an hour or two. In shimmering crocodile or alligator or "metallicized" leather, these heels are stunning; in sparkling silver, they absolutely glow.

■ **Oversized jewelry.** This is not the time for shrinking violets or shrinking jewels. Bring out the big stuff and watch it shine. Scour flea markets for "paste" earrings, rhinestone pins and charming cuff bracelets. Pick up a few silver dazzlers at the costume jewelry counter. Slip on a huge cocktail ring with a colorful gemstone.

■ **Belt it.** Another excuse to buy a fabulous belt, sparkling with metal studs or chains, dripping with satin ribbons, glistening with faux jewels or wrapped with satin obi-style. Take an old jacket and make it new just by adding a festive belt.

■ **Structured handbags.** Leave your tote at the office, and spruce up your holiday outfits with smaller, boxier handbags that look like jewels themselves gleaming in colorful patent leather, glossy animal skins or soft velvet.

■ **Dressed-up boots.** Opt for a pair of shiny patent leather high-heeled boots, satin lace-ups or a pair trimmed with fur. Thigh boots are hot again, too.

Whatever you do this holiday season, go for glamour and jazz it up.

Choosing toddler-safe gifts

Selecting the right toy to give your child can be a daunting task. To help parents, Toy Manufacturers of America has released a set of guidelines.

1. Consider your child's age, interests and abilities before shopping.
2. Read package labels for age ranges and safety warnings.
3. Be especially careful when choosing gifts for kids younger than age 3. Avoid toys with small pieces or sharp edges, and pick lightweight, non-toxic items.

4. Save the warranty cards and other product information in case future questions arise.

5. Remove and discard all packaging before giving a toy to a baby.

6. Don't let children play with toys unsupervised, and remind caregivers and relatives of safety rules.

7. Choose a safe storage place for toys, but don't just leave them there. Check every few months to see if they're damaged. If they are, repair them or throw them away.

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