



# Books for Giving Christmas 2014

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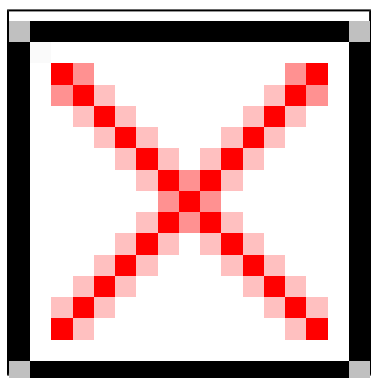
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Byline:

Our selection of the best Christmas gift books.

## Christmas Magic



No matter how old one gets, or how Bah Humbug-y about the festive season, snow somehow retains its magic. Three new picture books celebrate the wonder of snow, all in different ways. Caroline Rabei's **Snow** takes Walter de la Mare's somewhat melancholy poem and hangs a family's Christmas from it, busy happy scenes of Christmas preparations and snowy day fun depicted in warm browns, blacks and reds against a white background, with a number of wordless spreads. Her illustrations provide a rich setting for the poem. Sam Usher's latest picture book is also called **Snow**. Here a young boy, desperate to make the most of the newly fallen snow, waits impatiently for his granddad to get ready to go out. Surprises wait for them when they do get outside, but then snow is always a blank page for a story, as a double page spread beautifully illustrates. Despite the physical contrast between the boy and his granddad, delicately implied, the snow gives them both the same pleasure. There's a similar message in Richard Curtis's **The Snow Day** in which a boy and his teacher - the last person either of them would want to be stuck with - are trapped together in an empty school. All their animosity disappears when they team up to make snowmen and igloos. There's a strangely old fashioned feel to the text, but the sentiment is irresistible and Rebecca Cobb's illustrations perfectly capture first the characters' stiffness, then their growing affection for each other. Andersen Press have reissued Max Velthuijs classic **Frog** stories including **Frog in Winter**. Poor Frog finds snow altogether unpleasant, but his friends rally round and see him through. Velthuijs contrasts wintry landscapes with cosy interiors in a series of expertly designed compositions.

London sparkles in the snow in James Mayhew's wonderfully Christmassy **Katie's London Christmas**. Father Christmas has a cold and invites Katie and Jack to help him deliver presents to London households, including a special drop off at Buckingham Palace. They whirl over London in his sleigh and the city's landmarks, including the Shard, Battersea Power Station and the Houses of Parliament, look simply beautiful in the deep blues of Mayhew's night sky.

Transformation is the order of the day too in Shirley Hughes's **Daisy Saves the Day**, a Cinderella type story of a young girl starting 'in service' as a scullery maid in London 1911. It's hard work for Daisy and she misses her family very much. Her Fairy Godmother appears in the form of her employers' niece, on a visit from America, but it takes an act of heroism on Daisy's part to send her off into a happy ending. As always, every illustration tells a story; this is a book to

be read over and over.

## Collections to Treasure

Hughes's other version of the Cinderella story, **Ella's Big Chance**, features in a new collection of her work **A Year of Stories and Things to Do**, along with favourite **Alfie** stories, poems and charming suggestions of activities for the different months. There are 24 classic stories collected together in **The Nights Before Christmas**, illustrated by Tony Ross with characteristic freshness and verve. Some will already be children's favourites, such as Clement C. Moore's **A Visit from St Nicholas**, others they will likely be reading for the first time, including stories by Tolstoy, Dickens and Mark Twain. There are notes about each at the end, and a reminder that Christmas is about charity: it makes a lovely way to count down to Christmas day. Frances Lincoln have reissued three superb collections, bedtime classics all: **Greek Myths** by Sally Pomme Clayton and Jane Ray; **Tales from Hans Christian Andersen** by Naomi Lewis and Emma Chichester Clark; and **Tales from Grimm** by Antonia Barber and Margaret Chamberlain. Newly published, **Over the Hills and Far Away** is a treasure trove of words and pictures. Elizabeth Hammill has collected nursery rhymes from different countries and cultures, over 150 in all, and matched them with illustrations by the most talented illustrators working today. Buy a copy and guarantee the young recipient a good start in life!

## Recommended Non-Fiction

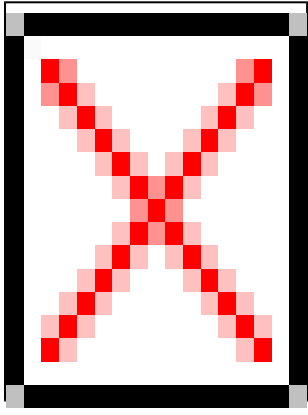
**Animalium** invites young readers to explore the animal kingdom in all its glory ? and how glorious it is! Pages ? or Galleries as they are rightly described ? are devoted to different classes of animals, and feature gorgeously detailed pen-and-ink illustrations resembling nature prints from long ago. This is a huge book, and one that should spark or feed a fascination with the natural world. **Tiny: The Invisible World of Microbes** by Nicola Davies and Emily Sutton, is a large, exciting picture book about the very tiniest living things, and will also inspire children's curiosity. Text and illustrations work perfectly together to explain mind-boggling details. Lucy Letherland's **Atlas of Adventures** sends young readers off to explore their world in the company of a pair of young travellers, and will brighten the darkest winter evening with thoughts of colourful faraway places. It is always good to see a new book from Stephen Biesty and he has provided precisely drawn, finely detailed architectural portraits for **The Story of Buildings** by Patrick Dillon. For children who want their non-fiction with knobs on, Templar's **Build a Robot** contains an intriguing book, full of robot facts and history, as well as the materials to assemble a robot of your own, motors included. Meanwhile, **Excavate! Dinosaurs** presents up to date information on twelve dinosaurs as if its readers themselves are palaeontologists, and finishes by inviting them to assemble paper models of dinosaurs ? after all it points out, reconstructing a dinosaur from its bones is very like doing a 3D puzzle.

## Novelty Fun

Maisy seems very at home in a castle in **Maisy's Castle**, and turns out to be an expert jouster. The fold out castle will provide lots of opportunities for play. In **Santa's Beard**, illustrated by Nick Sharratt, the eponymous beard can be moved from inappropriate face to face and even ? in a scene which will have little children giggling for hours ? onto Santa's bum. Great fun!

## Good Reads and Stocking Fillers

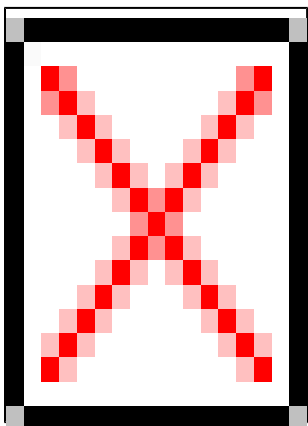
Books are as essential to a well-filled Christmas stocking as a tangerine and bag of chocolate coins. **BfK** is always



filled with reading recommendations, but here's a selection of books crying out for gift-wrapping. Steve Cole's **James Bond Shoot to Kill**, his first outing in the footsteps of Fleming and Higson, succeeds on all fronts. This is a clever piece of writing, complete with the gadgets and ruthlessness that make Bond Bond (whatever his age). It's properly gripping, and the set pieces feel fresh and original; there's a heart beating beneath the 007 tropes. **Five Children on the Western Front** by Kate Saunders stands out both as a sequel and original work. It's poignant, revealing, and beautifully written. **The Snow Merchant** by Sam Gayton also continues a tradition, in this case the fairy-tale quest, but is an extraordinarily fresh piece of story-telling. So is **The Imaginary** by A. F. Harrold and Emily Gravett, the story of Rudger, imaginary friend to Amanda. It's a tribute to the power of the imagination and friendship. Philip Kerr's **The Winter Horses** is a very unusual and appealing animal story, even more affecting because it includes real life events. There should be room in every stocking for **Mimi and the Mountain Dragon**, a properly heart-warming story by Michael Morpurgo, in a super-appealing small format, complete with charming illustrations by Helen Stephens. Edward Lear's **Nonsense Limericks** should be squeezed in too, now available in a pocket sized hardback edition with pictures by the incomparable Arthur Robbins, an illustrator who seems to have been born to partner Lear.

### Must Have Books, Whatever the Season

Returning, where we started, to picture books, here are two new works of art, created by illustrators at the very height of their powers. **Willy's Stories** by Anthony Browne is a magical celebration of stories and the imagination. Willy, wimp and champ, walks through a series of doors and into adventures that may just look familiar to young readers. Whether desert island, forest, or deck of a pirate ship, books are an integral part to every scene. Browne's words and images are always inextricably linked and here he pays tribute to the writers and illustrators who have inspired him. It's a joyful reading experience and Browne's surreal style has never seemed so apt, or so warm and inviting.



In **Once Upon an Alphabet** Oliver Jeffers invents a short story for all 26 letters. The stories are silly, or cautionary, always entertaining and the text - often in verse - a delight to read. Some stories are returned to at a later point, so that E's enigma (how many elephants can you fit into an envelope?) is picked up again at N (nearly nine thousand - sort of) and A's nervous astronaut, slowly ascending into space, is revealed to have made progress by Z, through the purchase of a Zeppelin, while visual elements reappear too. As for the illustrations, Jeffers's watercolour wash is as expressive as ever, subdued greys and blacks interrupted with splashes of colour create worlds, while the characters outlined in pen and ink are assertively alive and full of character. The fluorescent cover and handsome size makes this book unmissable. It absolutely is.

A list of all titles mentioned is [available here](#) [3].

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