



[Home](#) > Tinsel

Tinsel

Books Reviewed:

[Tinsel](#) [1]

Issue:

[245](#) [2]

Reviewer:

[Diana Barnes](#) [3]

News to Choose:

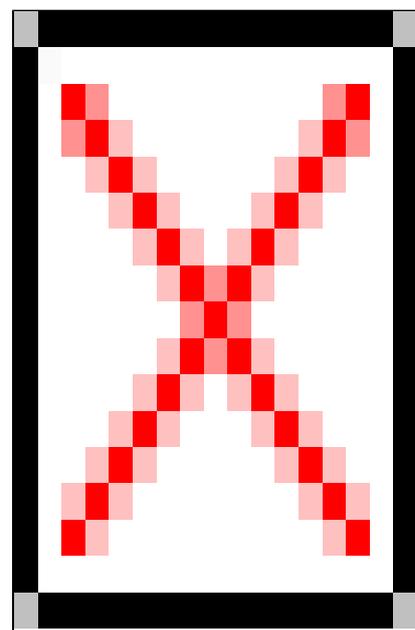
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4



Sibéal Pounder is the author of the **Witch Wars** and **Bad Mermaids** series, and also wrote the 'sequel' to Eva Ibbotson's **The Secret of Platform 13**. This book is also strong on girl power as she imagines how Christmas might have been invented by two girls, and Santa Claus was only presumed to be male because of an itchy white face warmer which does look rather like a beard?

Anyway, to begin at the beginning: in 1875, Blanche Claus, a young girl with snow-white hair, is homeless and sleeping under a bridge when she is given a magical bauble as a Christmas present by a mysterious old woman. There is a snowy world inside it, and a dancing Christmas tree, and she longs to find out where it is. She rescues a badly beaten horse whom she names Rudy, and is galloping out of control when she is rescued by a creatively dressed girl of her own age, also homeless, called Rinki. Over the first of many mince pie picnics, a lasting friendship begins, surviving as Blanche becomes a very successful carter at the docks, using Rudy, though, because girls are not allowed to be carters, she has to tuck her hair inside her cap, and Rinki is adopted by Captain Garland and Teddy (relationship unspecified). Teddy is

Head of the London Costume Society, is very well-dressed, and even designs a ballgown for Queen Victoria- eventually he is responsible for the famous red and white costume, and his work funds Captain Garland's expeditions. Realising that the present of the bauble changed her life for the better, Blanche tells Rinki that she would love to be able to give every child in the world a present, and Rinki exclaims, "Let's do it! If anyone can do it, it's us!" and Blanche, musing about chimneys, starts to wonder whether it might be possible...

That conversation happens fairly early in the story, and there are a lot of adventures still to come. An attack by jealous carter boys means that Blanche runs off and hides in Captain Garland's boat, the *Jolly Holly*, and, when it sets sail, she meets the young cook, named Santa, who readily feeds the stowaway and they become friends. She also gets the opportunity to free a fairy, Carol, from a box in the hold, and, when the Jolly Holly sinks in a storm, Carol rescues Blanche and Santa and they find themselves in the magical land of the bauble, Carolburg, complete with dancing Christmas tree. Every fairy changes his/her appearance when they are in ELF form, (Einfrieren (freezing) Little Fairy), and each is called Carol, so, like Welsh Joneses, they are distinguished by their jobs or characteristics. It's all tremendous fun- we have a Snowcus Pocus gathering, and lots of hot chocolate, and Blanche sets the bored elves to making toys, just in case her idea works. Inventor Carol devises a secret messaging service to Rinki where a note, when read, turns into tinsel. Letters to every child signed MS CLAUS get spiked by a poker when going into the magical workshop chimney en route and arrive signed S CLAUS- you can see where this is going! It only takes Blanche to shout for Santa at the moment when curious people have spotted her delivering presents, for the connection to S Claus to be made, and the wrong story catches on.

There is a subplot involving a nasty neighbour who wants to stop people having fun, and all sorts of complications, but it's a rollicking good story, however whimsical, with a definite feminist slant. Blanche challenges the carter boys, who resented her getting the best jobs, to realise that she got the work even though she was really a Girl, and Blanche and Rinki are brimful of ideas. Every part of the Santa Claus legend is worked out, even Rudy's red nose, and this is hugely enjoyable.

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Links:

- [1] <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk-www.booksforkeeps.co.uk/childrens-books/tinsel>
- [2] <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk-www.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/245>
- [3] <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk-www.booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/diana-barnes>