

Christmas classics

With the festive season fast approaching, *Ruth Thomson* compiles a list of the best children's books

Where do you start trying to pick the best of Christmas books for young children? By asking the experts. We contacted some early years consultants and three of London's specialist bookshops for some recommendations, and here are there suggestions, old and new, along with some other firm favourites.

FAMILY CHRISTMAS

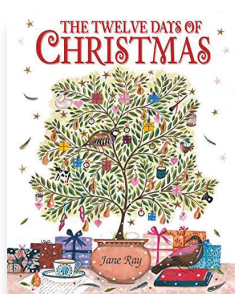
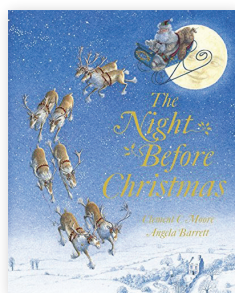
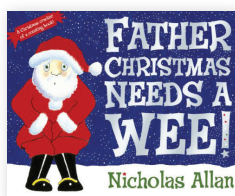
Preparing for Christmas is a theme of so many children's books, but a favourite is *Olivia Helps with Christmas* by Ian Falconer. Firmly into the Christmas spirit, Olivia sees there are presents to wrap, ornaments to hang on the tree, snowpigs to build... and mischief and mayhem to be had?

Judith Kerr's cat escapes to the roof in *Mog's Christmas* as preparations get under way and the house fills with new noises and smells. But she returns with an unexpected bump!

Read about another regular feature of Christmas in Nick Butterworth's and Mick Inkpen's *The Nativity Play* – Tracy and Sam are taking part and mum is helping with the costumes...

Reminding us that Christmas should be more about giving than receiving is *Little Robin Red Vest* by Jan Fearnley. Robin gives away all seven of his warm vests to his friends who are feeling the cold, but Father Christmas rewards him for his kindness.

Not everyone can be guaranteed a happy family Christmas, and highly recommended among this year's new Christmas books is Delia Huddy and Emily Sutton's *The Christmas Eve Tree*. A homeless boy asks the shopkeeper if he can take the ugly fir tree that nobody wants. Down by the river in a cardboard box, decorated with a



few candles, the tree finds itself at the centre of a magical Christmas Eve – 'an original Christmas tale with a classic feel but a modern theme at its heart'.

In *Merry Christmas, Ernest and Celestine* by Gabrielle Vincent, the big bear and his tiny friend set out to celebrate Christmas without having money.

Remaining a favourite is *Laura's Star* by Klaus Baumgart, in which a lonely little girl rescues a falling star and tells it all her secrets. Then in the morning it is gone.

THE NATIVITY

Simple both in text and illustrations – but still very powerful – is Dick Bruna's *Christmas*, and a 50th anniversary edition was published in 2013.

A favourite among consultants and bookshops alike as a 'child-friendly' telling of the Nativity is Brian Wildsmith's *A Christmas Story* – told through a journey made by a small girl and a little donkey. Internationally acclaimed, Wildsmith's illustrations are invariably joyous.

Jan Pienkowski's retelling of the Nativity, using words from the King

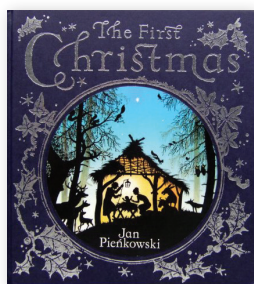
James Bible, is available in hardback (*The First Christmas*) and as a Christmas carousel (*First Noel*). Don't be deterred by the language (you can use or add your own words if you want), as these versions are recommended for the beauty of the artwork and cut-out silhouettes. The same can be said of Helen Ward's *The Animals' Christmas Carol* with its wonderful, luminous images.

For a 21st-century take on Christmas there's *Email: Jesus@Bethlehem*. Hilary Robinson imagines that Jesus was born today and explores how everyone might receive the news.

Topping the list for fun is *Jesus' Christmas Party* by Nicholas Allan. Told from the point of view of the grumpy innkeeper, the story comes with a great repetitive catch phrase: 'Round the back!'

For a retelling of the Christmas story from another part of the world – in this case, Russia – there's *Baboushka* by Arthur Scholey and Helen Cann.

Just out is *Refuge* by Anne Booth and Sam Usher, relating the aftermath of the Nativity and the Holy



MORE INFORMATION

The following bookshops all have experienced staff able to advise on books for children of all ages, run author events and have close links with schools and nurseries.

- Tales on Moon Lane, Herne Hill, south London, <http://talesonmoonlane.co.uk>
- The Alligator's Mouth, Richmond, London, www.thealligatorsmouth.co.uk
- Victoria Park Books, Hackney, east London, www.victoriaparkbooks.co.uk

Family's flight into Egypt. Publisher Nosy Crow is to give £5 from the sale of each book to War Child, which supports Syrian refugee children.

SANTA CLAUS

In *A Letter to Father Christmas* by Rose Impey and Sue Porter, Charlotte loves writing and can copy beautifully, but she is too young to read – and so sends Santa her mother's shopping list by mistake.

Emerging as a firm favourite is Nicholas Allen's *Father Christmas Needs a Wee!*, in which greedy Santa scoffs all the goodies left out for him and before long really needs to get to the bathroom. As well as counting up and down to ten and sharing simple, seasonal fun, the rhyming text is guaranteed to fascinate and get children giggling.

James Mayhew's favourite character flies high with Santa in her latest adventure *Katie's London Christmas*. But can she help to deliver all the presents and be back in time for Christmas morning?

Time is tight too for Mrs Christmas in Penny Ives' book of that name. It

is Christmas Eve, toys are incomplete and Father Christmas and the reindeer are covered in spots! Will Mrs Christmas 'deliver'?

CHRISTMAS FAVOURITES

So many of the picture book greats have produced wonderful versions of Christmas tales, but here are some of best of the best.

The Twelve Days of Christmas

Look out for the versions by Brian Wildsmith and Moldovan artist Violeta Dabija, as well as Robert Sabuda's pop-up classic.

For Victorian street scenes packed with festive magic, there are the editions by Jane Ray and Alison Jay. Also 'traditional' is Jan Brett's version, with vibrantly illustrated gifts bordered by animals and the story of a family's Christmas preparations.

A Stork in a Baobab Tree is an African version of the rhyme by Catherine House and Polly Alakija.

The Nutcracker

Jane Ray manages 'an exquisite retelling in her often imitated but never

BOOK CORNER TREATS: NEW TITLES

A Great Big Cuddle: poems for the very young by Michael Rosen and Chris Riddell – a 'great toddlers' collection of poems that burst out like popcorn', and with two Children's Laureates under one cover, it makes it a great contemporary choice.

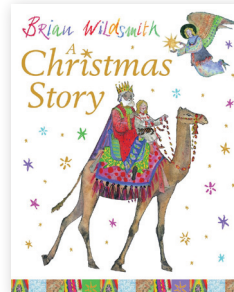
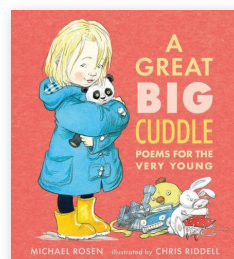
How the Sun Got to Coco's House – watch the sun traverse the world until it gets to Coco's window, whereupon they spend the day together. Bob Graham at his best.

Imelda and the Goblin King – 'Autumn bursts off the pages in this spiky and dangerous modern fairytale of a young girl who sets

out to rescue the fairy queen kidnapped by the greedy goblin king.' A great debut of Briony May Smith.

This is My Rock by David Lucas – Goat stands guard, not letting anyone else on his rock, but standing atop a mountain day and night can be lonely, especially when you have no one else to play with.

Hello, World! by Paul Beavis – Monster is bored as Mr and Mrs Mo are busy painting the house. Then he gets a grand idea: he's off to see the world! But his adventure becomes bigger than he expected...



bettered style'. Another delight is David Walser and Jan Pienkowski's version, featuring a final image of intricate silhouettes. Check out too a new version by Niroot Puttapipat, with a spectacular pop-up finale.

The Night Before Christmas

Versions are available by the likes of Michael Foreman and Angela Barrett. For cut-paper and pop-up versions, see Niroot Puttapipat and Robert Sabuda versions. Rachel Isadora sets the poem in an African Village – 'a beautiful picture book with collage-style illustrations portraying an African Santa with white dreadlocks'.

SNOW TIME

For the wonders of winter, check out two new books, *Robin Winter's Song* by Suzanne Barton and *Tree – Seasons Come, Seasons Go* by Britta Teckentrup, 'a glorious marriage of illustration, text and book design'.

Full of wit and snowy scenes are Julia Donaldson's *Stick Man* and *The Gruffalo's Child*. Still unmatched for imagination and execution is the original version of *The Snowman* by Raymond Briggs.

BABIES AND TODDLERS

Under-threes needn't miss out on Christmas book fun. *Baby's Very First Christmas Playbook* by Usborne has simple, high-contrast illustrations, touchy-feely tactile areas, fingertrails to trace and holes to peep through. It is full of festive scenes and has a sound panel for Christmas music.

Toddlers will love *Bizzy Bear – Christmas Helper* by award-winning Benji Davies. Children can join in the fun as Bizzy makes the toys, packs the sleigh and helps Santa deliver gifts.

Equally appealing are Goose and Duck, created by Tad Hill. In their seventh adventure together – *It's Time for Christmas* – Goose is more interested in having the time of his life in the snow than helping Duck decorate their Christmas tree.

Can You Say It Too? Jingle! Jingle! is part of another Nosy Crow series 'you cannot go wrong with'. The Sebastien Braun book comes with big flaps and simple text. ■

With thanks to early years consultants Opal Dunn, Anne O'Connor, Wendy Scott and Kathryn Solly for their recommendations, and also to specialist children's bookshops The Alligator's Mouth, Tales on Moon Lane and Victoria Park Books