

4 new children's books to stir the holiday spirit

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By Melissa Kim

A children's book for the holidays needs to meet some weighty criteria. Fun and wonderment, for the child, of course. And timelessness and gift-worthiness for the giver, too. But we also tend to expect more at the holidays, looking for books to carry messages of peace, goodwill, hope and renewal. It's a daunting task for a publisher, to send out a book into the holiday fray. These four books, all new for the season, rise to the top.

"Blizzard" by John Rocco

When a blizzard blankets his town and buries his home, a young boy experiences joy (no school! snow tunnels!) that slowly turns to alarm (no snowplows, no food). But having read his Arctic survival guide, he knows that he has what it takes to help the neighborhood survive the storm. Caldecott honoree John Rocco's lovely illustrations contain nostalgia, whimsy, warmth and light, and the boy finds both fun and meaning in doing for others. "I couldn't think about myself. I was on a mission," he says.

There's a wonderful gatefold spread in the center of the book showing the route of the young hero as he snowshoes his way around the neighborhood – stopping to take grocery orders, make snow angels and have snowball fights – on his way to the store with his sled. Kids will love to trace the route on these opened-out pages, though I'm not sure how durable they are. Memories of the blizzard, and how nature can both appeal and threaten, will last much longer.

"Merry Moosey Christmas" by Lynn Plourde, illustrated by Russ Cox

Islandport Press. Hardcover, picture book. 32 pages. \$17.95.

(Disclosure: I was the editor of this book)

Another Christmas Eve is coming, and Rudolph wants, just this once, to take the night off. He wants to know what it feels like to have that giddy sense of anticipation, to hear reindeer hooves on the roof, to wake up to presents under a tree. So he convinces Santa to accept a substitute, and off they go to find a worthy replacement. Their search leads them to a willing moose, and the training begins. This lighthearted tale, by Maine author Lynn Plourde with illustrations by Maine artist Russ Cox, shows that resourcefulness goes a long way. Moosey might not be able to make his nose glow, or fly, but he knows how to solve a problem. Plourde's text lends itself to great read-aloud fun, and Cox deftly manages to give Santa, the reindeer and Moosey both gravitas and comic flair at the same time.

Silliness is a great thing. It reminds us not to take ourselves too seriously, and we all need a little bit of that during the holidays. "Merry Moosey Christmas" is a lovely antidote to the earnestness of the season.

"Winter Candle" by Jeron Ashford, illustrated by Stacey Schuett

Creston Books. Hardcover, Picture Book. 32 pages. \$16.95.

It's Thanksgiving in an apartment building in the city, and Nana Clover has forgotten to get a candle for her traditional centerpiece. The only thing the building superintendent can come up with is an ugly lumpy stump of a thing, but it'll do. And so the candle's journey begins, from one apartment to the next, from one

seasonal celebration to another. This could easily get bogged down in sentimentality, but Ashford gracefully describes the little candle's power to shine through a Jewish family's havdalah ceremony, to gleam on a Scandinavian Saint Lucia crown, to dance on a kinara holder during Kwanzaa, and to glitter enough to welcome and guide a new family to the building during a storm.

Schuett's gorgeously rich and textured illustrations glow with shadows and stars.

Even the youngest children will understand that though we may have different ways to celebrate our varied faiths, if we can all share kindness and extend a hand to our neighbors, the light will shine that much brighter.

“My True Love Gave to Me: Twelve Holiday Stories,” edited by Stephanie Perkins

St. Martin's Griffin. Hardcover, YA Fiction. 321 pages. \$18.99.

There's an awful lot of kissing in these stories, and if you didn't know any better, you might think the holidays were, in fact, all about kissing (or perhaps you'd mistake love for kissing), but otherwise these 12 holiday tales charm and delight. Some of the best and bestselling young adult writers of the day, including Rainbow Rowell (“Eleanor and Park”), Laini Taylor (“Daughter of Smoke and Bone” series), Gayle Forman (“If I Stay” series), and Holly Black (“Doll Bones”), spin yarns of winter romance from the contemporary to the magical to the all-out fantastical.

Love and hope cross all borders here: rich-poor, black-white, city-country, human-mythological, even human-elf. Standouts include Kiersten White's “Welcome to Christmas, CA,” where a young chef divines the foods and tastes that connect people to happier times, and Stephanie Perkins' “It's a Yuletide Miracle, Charlie Brown.” It's about a girl who ends up kissing the boy selling Christmas trees in the parking lot, but it's really a story about the gifts – the kind you can't buy – that matter most.

Give this to a teenage girl, and she'll disappear into this anthology until she turns the last page and looks for some mistletoe.

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