

Home for the Holidays

The Depiction of Holiday Themes in Historical Children's Literature

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Collection at the University of Florida.

“Have me excused if I do not please; My will is good, and lo! my tales are these.”
—Stories of Whitminster by Ascott R. Hope, Edinburgh, 1873

Consider for a moment the holiday traditions of classic books for children. Imagine the Christmas holidays as

The collection is the product of Ruth Baldwin's forty-year collection development efforts, and this vast assemblage of literature printed primarily for children includes many English and American editions of the same work. Other strengths of the collection include “three hundred editions of Robinson Crusoe, one hundred editions of Pilgrim's Progress, as well as fables, juvenile biography, nineteenth-century science and natural history, nineteenth-century alphabet books, moral tales, fairy tales, nineteenth-century juvenile periodicals, nineteenth-century boys' adventure stories, twentieth-century boys' and girls' As the 2008 Bechtel fellow, I spent a month at the Baldwin series, Little Golden Books, and juvenile publications of the library, perusing this vast collection of historical children's American Sunday School Union and other tract societies.”



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literature. One characteristic immediately apparent is that, as years progress, the didacticism of literature for children is replaced by a more fun-loving approach. While perusing an

"When evening came, and Mr. Willard was at leisure to sit down with his children, Arthur had many funny stories to tell of the pleasant jokes which he had played through the day." ¹¹

Tricking another is not nearly the evil it was earlier portrayed, if the intent is pleasant fun. "It was such fun to see him turn it over and over and look for the hole [in the kite]!" says Arthur. ¹² One can't help but think, however, that the author of *April Fool* would be not at all amused.

By *Laura's Holidays* (1898), six-year-old Laura is told that "although there is no harm in a little fun on the first of April, it is very hard to have it without getting rude. I do not approve of All Fool's Day very much." ¹³ Nevertheless, Laura and her mother find a nice way to fool their maid. Laura offers the maid a package, knowing that the maid will refuse, thinking it an April Fool's joke. Then it really will be a joke because the present will be a real one.

Then didn't Laura laugh, and shout, "Oh, Maggie! Maggie! I've caught you sure enough! For it is a present, really and truly." . . . And Maggie said: "Sure, then, I'd be pleased to be fooled in that same way every day of the year!"¹⁴

Ethel Morton's Holidays, by Mabell S. C. Smith, is intended for an older audience, and tells the tales of teenagers celebrating throughout the year. Published in 1915, it gives only slight mention to April Fool's Day, which the teens celebrate by attending a party:

The April Fool Party might have been named the Party of Surprises. There were no practical jokes; "a joke of the hand is a joke of the vulgar" had been trained into all of them from their earliest days; but there were countless surprises. The opening of a candy box disclosed a toy puppy; a toy cat was lled not with the desired candy but with popcorn and such. ¹⁵

No pranks are pulled on any one individual, and whimsical surprise rather than intentional misdirection, is the name of the game.

The *Child Life Book of Adventure* (1948) includes the story "Archie and the April Fools" by B. J. Chute. In this story, there is no sense at all that these deceptions are negative. Instead, the tradition is presented as a good-hearted way to make fun, and the idea that one would try to fool a brother is taken completely in stride. Not only does no one end up ashamed, covered in mud, and bleeding—such as in April Fool—no one is even surprised that such foolery would occur. The story begins when Jimmy tells his brother Ted that there's a giraffe in the backyard.

His brother roused himself . . . gave Jimmy a puzzled look, then glanced at the calendar. A peaceful smile dawned upon his face. The calendar unquestionably proclaimed the fact that it was April rst. . . . You can't catch me on those old April Fool gags.¹⁶

Of course, it turns out that there is a giraffe, escaped from the local zoo, in the backyard. The story ends—after much giraffe wrangling—with Ted telling Jimmy that now "there's a rhinoceros in the backyard." As Jimmy runs out wildly screaming, Ted

Laura's Holidays by Henrietta R. Eliot was published in 1898 by the Lothrop Publishing Company.

looks "affectionately at the calendar, which still proclaimed unmistakably that it was April Fool's Day, [and] smiled again." ¹⁷

Valentine's Day

In the Baldwin Collection there are just a few books dealing with Valentine's Day. The earliest is the *Poetic Garland* (1805), and the most recent is the Tomie dePaola valentine craft book *Things to Make and Do for Valentine's Day* (1976). In this 168-year span we see a change in the attitudes toward not only the nature of the holiday itself, but also particularly how it has slowly become a holiday for children as much as for sweethearts.

Poetic Garland, one of the most valuable holdings in the Baldwin Collection, includes the poem "Valentine's Day," which is written in couplets and describes the joys of the holiday as felt throughout all types of bird life. The poem says little about Valentine's Day as it is celebrated by humans—instead it focuses on the joy with which all the birds of the world experience this day.

The poem begins with the admonition to "Arise from your sleep, to the meadow repair; / It is Valentine's Day, and the morning is fair." ¹⁸ The birds all flock together and sing the praises of love: "E'en the RAVEN and KITE now contend with the DOVE, And tune their hoarse throats to the music of love." ¹⁹

In chapter 10, “The Valentines,” their cousins, the Valentines, visit the Heart family on February 14. The Valentines “were a very elegant family because their Grandpa was a Saint, so Mrs. Fancy Valentine always wore white lace.”²⁸

The story is full of whimsy, and the illustrations greatly reflect this. There is no moral here, no lesson about future mates or knowledge of the self—just silly fun. In this, we see the approach of more modern interpretations of Valentine’s celebrations for children.

Another aspect of the 1939 edition, which sets it apart from the 1904 and 1905 editions, is the book jacket. A full-color (pink, no less) illustrated book jacket covers this edition, and the flaps include characteristics still seen on many modern versions. The back flap, for example, trumpets two other books for children: *The Black Cats and the Tinker’s Wife* and *The Dog, the Brownie, and the Bramble Patch*, both by Margaret Baker. *The Black Cats and the Tinker’s Wife* is described as having

62 Drawings in Silhouette by Mary Baker, A delightful, whimsical fairy tale for little children, concerning a Tinker and his wife, and very much concerning some particularly enchanted cats. Grown-ups will find themselves reading it through before the children get a chance.²⁹

The Dog, the Brownie, and the Bramble Patch, with silhouettes by Mary Baker, is described as

a deliciously whimsical fairy story, which has the same simplicity, humor and interest of a folk tale, irresistibly illustrated in silhouette. The Bakers have struck a new note in books for children, and their genius is liberally recognized by parents and librarians.”³⁰

Note the ideas employed in the reviews to grab interest: delightful, whimsical, enchanted, delicious, humor, irresistible. No heavy-handed moralizing here.

The front flap contains another marketing approach still used today: a positive review to hook readers and help sell copies. “There is just one picture book that has the feel of a lace-paper valentine” effuses Anne Carroll Moore. The front flap goes on to specify that the book is intended “for the youngest children—and their families.”³¹

The use of the term “youngest children” underscores the novelty of this approach in targeting an audience so young. For decades, children had learned to read from the Bible, from *Pilgrim’s Progress*, and from other “adult” materials. Now we see the purposeful targeting of young children as the intended audience, and the changes in format, illustration, and layout that must accompany this change.

By the 1922 publication of *Man in the Moon Stories Told Over the Radio-Phone*, romantic love had entered the scene. In “A Valentine Story,” a princess is told that it’s time for her to marry. She may choose whichever prince she likes and announce her choice at the Valentine’s Day masquerade ball: “But I don’t like

any of the princes,’ quoth the Lady Caramel. ‘You’ll have to like one of them,’ said the King firmly.”³²

The princess chooses a thoughtful, polite man, whom “every one liked at once.” When it is revealed, however, that he is a knight of a good family, but not royal, the ladies-in-waiting begin to gossip. The king allows the match because of his “kind and courteous” nature, and yes, they live “happily ever after.”³³

Modern works on Valentine’s Day focus far more on the fun of the holiday—making cards, having class parties, eating cupcakes. Having pushed the age of marriage considerably since the early nineteenth century, children are able to view questions of mating as far removed.

By the 1950 publication of *The Bobbsey Twins: Merry Days Indoors and Out* by Laura Lee Hope, the celebration of the holiday by children is more familiar to modern readers: the twins save their money to buy valentines, fill a table with paper and magazine cutouts to make valentines, count the number of cards sent versus those received, and count the number they receive versus the number everyone else receives. “Some were comical, but the most of them were beautiful and contained very tender verses.”³⁴

By the 1960s, the books started to take an approach with which we are even more familiar. Clyde Robert Bulla’s *St. Valentine’s Day* (1965) gives a history of the holiday from the Greeks and Romans through Victorian England, and then to the United States. He describes how children might experience the holiday in 1965:

Once only sweethearts gave valentines to one another. Now we all give valentines to people we like. We give them at home and at school. We take them to neighbors. We send them in the mail. Some have verses like this:

“Days will all be fair and ne

As long as you’re my valentine.”³⁵

Other valentine verses are jokes, like this one from a girl to a boy:

Roses are red

Violets are blue

I pity the girl

Who marries you.”³⁶

By the 1970s we see that works for children have completely changed from earlier times. For example, *Things to Make and Do for Valentine’s Day* by Tomie dePaola has bright illustrations, easy vocabulary, and lots of white space, which combine to provide a volume clearly intended for the modern young reader. The book includes directions for making valentines, throwing a valentine’s party for young friends, baking valentine treats,

book describes ducking for apples, making jack o'lanterns, and trying to bite apples swinging from the doorway. There also is a mystery pie, which is baked with numerous Halloween favors inside, including a cap, balls and balloons, and a tiny trumpet. The book also references the night as one in which "to make merry when the elves, fairies, and goblins [sic] flitted about the mystic wood" and the party-goers use their pumpkins to scare away intruders.³⁹

The Uncle Wiggily stories, first published in the Newark, New Jersey, newspaper *The Evening News*, were still being reprinted in book form in 1939, when *Uncle Wiggily's Automobile* included the story "Uncle Wiggily's Halloween Fun." In this story, the emphasis is all on dressing in costume—an aspect of celebration missing completely in the 1924 story.

Another story in the same collection, "Uncle Wiggily's Jack-o-Lantern," incorporates step-by-step instructions on pumpkin carving, including the statement that "if you can't do it yourself, perhaps some of the big folks will help you."⁴⁰ None of the Uncle Wiggily stories includes moralizing or teaching of any kind—except, of course, how to make a jack o' lantern with an adult's help.⁴¹

Thanksgiving

The move away from didacticism in children's literature is perhaps no more obvious than when researching the Baldwin Collection's holdings on Thanksgiving. The oldest Thanksgiving work in the Baldwin Collection is "Try": A True Temperance Story. A fascinating little book of forty-two pages and only 4.7 inches published by the Massachusetts Sabbath School Society in 1842, it recounts the story of the alcoholic father who is slowly killing himself, and his family, with "demon rum."

The little boy, Johnny, has grown pumpkins, four of which he is

playing valentine games, and even a valentine's joke: "How can you tell an elephant from a valentine card? I don't know. Then don't get a job with the post office."³⁷

Even humor has now made its way in to the holiday celebration, clearing the path for such modern Valentine's Day offerings as *Froggy's First Kiss* by Jonathan London, Lillian Hoban's *Silly Tilly's Valentine*, and even Eileen Spinelli's *Somebody Loves You, Mr. Hatch*.

Halloween

Many of the traditions still associated with Halloween can be found in the materials at the Baldwin Collection, but it doesn't become a popular subject until the 1920s. "The Scarecrow's Hallowe'en Party" appears in Lawrence's *Man in the Moon Stories Told Over the Radio-Phone* in 1922. Numerous traditions of Halloween are highlighted in this story, in which a scarecrow throws his own Halloween party because "I've never been to one. Not one party! I've stood in the hot sun and the cold rain, in thunder-storms and winds. And no one has ever asked me to come to a party."³⁸ The story includes references to "ducking" for apples in a tub of water, pumpkin carving, blind man's bluff, and ghost tag.

The 1924 edition of *Uncle Wiggily's Apple Roast* features text by Howard R. Garis and illustrations by Lang Campbell. This picture

Pretty harrowing stuff, and certainly written for the moral lesson, not for any enjoyment by children.

Another of the earliest is the 1847 story *Kate and Charlie; Or, Thanksgiving-Day*, published by The American Sunday-School Union. When a little girl asks her teacher, “Miss C., why is tomorrow called Thanksgiving-day?” the question is a jumping off point for the tedious, didactic story of Kate, who chooses not to go to church on Thanksgiving, and of Charlie, who gives up his fun to take her punishment on himself.

Kate and Charlie often addresses the reader directly: “Think, whether you most resemble Charlie or Kate? . . . I hope you will be like Charlie.” “If you love Charlie for being willing to suffer . . . how much more ought you to love Jesus Christ for not only suffering, but dying for you!” What follows is basically a harangue against the “sinful world,” “sinful men,” that sins cannot “go unpunished” by God, and the warning that “if you continue to do wrong you can ever hope to reach heaven.”⁴⁴ Again, pretty dire offerings for a child’s psyche.

In *Winnie and Walter: Or, Story-Telling at Thanksgiving* (1861), the holiday is featured as a time of family. The children are portrayed thus:

I do not pretend that they were the best children that could be found in the world. I think they were pretty much like a great many other happy children—no better and no worse. They dearly loved to hear stories, and what bright and happy child does not?⁴⁵

The longed-for day nally arrives, and the house is lled with aunts, uncles, and cousins. “The little folks played together, and the old folks went to church—and how much they all enjoyed their Thanksgiving dinner.”⁴⁶

This image of Thanksgiving stands in sharp contrast to the 1847 *Kate and Charlie*. What follows for the rest of the 127 pages is really a story collection. Each family member tells a story from his life, and the children sit spellbound. Thus the joys of the holiday serve as a type of framing story to allow the characters each to tell his tale.

By the 1922 *Man in the Moon Stories Told Over the Radio-Phone* collection, Thanksgiving had lost its religious and moral overtones and become simply the tale of a very vain turkey. The turkey feels that he is far too special to be eaten by the family, which he describes as “such a common ordinary fate.”⁴⁷ When he realizes, however, that only the best of the best will be served for Thanksgiving—the best apples, the best corn, the best serving dishes—he amends his view, and the story ends with “I really am the largest and the plumpest and the tenderest of all the turkeys. I hope I will be eaten for the Thanksgiving Day dinner.”⁴⁸ He gets his wish.

By the more modern 1965 work *Thanksgiving Day*, written by Robert Merrill Bartlett and illustrated by W. T. Mars, the didacticism of earlier works has given way to a historical overview of the holiday. The story of the pilgrims and of the first Thanksgiving make up most of the book, with mention of ear-

Top: An illustration from *Peg-Leg Willy* by Margaret Embry (1966).
Bottom: *Kate and Charlie* was published by The American

lier harvest ceremonies by the Greeks at the shrines of Demeter and of the Romans, who “honored [Ceres] with parades, dancing, sports, and feasting.”⁴⁹ The Jewish Feast of the Booths and the Christian prayers of blessing on the planting and harvest also are mentioned: “At harvest time the farmers decorated themselves with ribbons and flowers. They sang as they walked home beside their wagons full of grain.”⁵⁰ This particular work discusses the national holiday in America, first declared by Abraham Lincoln. The book ends by clearly stating how it wants children to think of their own celebrations of the holiday:

Chapter 2, "A Merry Christmas," relates stories we now know well. "Jo was the first to wake in the gray dawn of Christmas morning. No stockings hung at the fireplace, and for a moment she felt as much disappointed as she did long ago, when her little sock fell down because it was so crammed with goodies." ⁵⁵

Each girl receives a Bible under her pillow, which she determines to read every day. They give their Christmas breakfast to a poor family as a Christmas present:

That was a very happy breakfast, though they didn't get any of it; and when they went away, leaving comfort behind, I think there were not in all the city four merrier people than the four hungry little girls who gave away their breakfasts, and contented themselves with bread and milk on Christmas morning. ⁵⁶

The rest of the day is filled with putting on a play for a dozen neighborhood girls and then receiving a surprise luxurious dinner from the neighbor next door. The day has been filled, then, with neighbor treating neighbor, and Beth's parting thought in the day is that "I wish I could send my bunch [of owners] to father. I'm afraid he isn't having such a merry Christmas as we are."⁵⁷

Not surprisingly, most holiday works at the Baldwin Collection deal with Christmas. There also are many more early picture books covering this holiday. Some, like *The First Christmas for Our Dear Little Ones* by Miss Rosa Mulholland and with pictures painted by Leonhard Diefenbach, are completely religious in nature. This particular volume, published in the 1870s, tells the story of Jesus' birth through illustrations. No mention whatsoever is made of children celebrating the holiday other than to "pray, That you will be like Him!" ⁵⁸

A Christmas Party for Santa Claus is the charming 1912 book by Ida M. Huntington in which a young girl, Dremia, who is friends with the fairies, decides to host a party for Santa Claus.

"Who ever heard of such a thing!"

"I don't 'spect any one ever did, Fairy Godmother. And that is why I thought it would be fun." ⁷⁰

Once the Fairy Godmother is convinced, it is the work of a moment to get all the help they need: Jack of the Beanstalk cuts down the Christmas tree for the party, Mother Hubbard takes care of refreshments, and Puck and Ariel fly to deliver invitations.

All the inhabitants of Fairyland, Toyland, Dreamland, Make-believe Land, and Santa Claus Land are to be invited, so it should be a heck of a party! In Peter Pan fashion, Titania, Queen of the Fairies, touches Dremia with her scepter so that Dremia "may'st ever be able to see [the fairies] as we play in the forests or among the flowers, and never grow too old to care for us. Forget not through thy whole life this visit to the fairyland of childhood." ⁷¹

Dremia flies with Puck through Broken Toyland, "where all the good broken toys go after they leave Mortal Land." I love that the toys are "very sensitive, so if thou dost notice anything peculiar in their appearance, do not speak of it." Dremia promises to be careful, saying, "I know I don't like to have people notice my pug nose and freckles." In Broken Toyland, the military hospital cares for "valiant tin soldiers by the dozens . . . lying on the white beds, battered and forlorn." There are "Jacks-in-the-, vainly trying to find their boxes" and all the "balloons that got away" fly overhead. These toys are especially invited to the party as "reminder of happy Christmases gone by, when [Santa Claus] was the giver of happiness." ⁷²

The party, of course, is a huge success, with presents in the

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He always wants to please you and Santa always tries

And if you're disappointed I'm going to advise

That next year when you're writing

you'll try your very best,

To write a nice neat letter, and he

will do the rest.⁷⁶

Parents also can hope for behavior modification through the idea that "When looking in the play-rooms Santa Claus repeated, "I want to see how the toys left last year are treated."⁷⁷

Chapter 7 of *Man in the Moon Stories Told Over the Radio-Phone* is titled "A Christmas Party." This story begins much like the Laura Lee Hope series of books, the *Make-Believe Stories*. In the *Make-Believe Stories*, toy animals like the *White Rocking Horse*, the *Bold Tin Soldier*, the *Monkey on a Stick*, and the

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28. Virginia Gerson, *The Happy Heart Family*, 10th ed.
(New York: Dodd & Mead, 1939): n.p.
29. *Ibid.*, back cover ap.
- 30.