


**WELCOME TO
READING STREET™
CHAPTER FOUR 
CHRISTMAS TRADITIONS
AND THE EMOTIONAL
POWER OF READING**

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Christmas Traditions and the emotional power of reading

Imagine a family – Mum, Dad and children, all in their pyjamas – snuggled up together on the sofa, drinking hot chocolate and listening to Dad read a favourite Christmas story. No, it's not a flashback to the 1950s; it's what parents have told us they will be doing this year.

We recently surveyed 1000 parents and asked about their family's traditions at Christmas. They represented a cross section of UK families from all over the country, and they shared some very personal feelings with us.

We know that stories are synonymous with this time of year and we also know that book sales increase in the lead up to Christmas. We wanted to look a little deeper and find out why Christmas and stories go together, and what makes books such special gifts.

"We always sit in our PJs and read a Christmas story on Christmas Eve. We all snuggle up to help relax us and it gets us in the Christmas spirit. It's part of Christmas and reading is magical."

Emotional Resonance

This year through Reading Street™ we've been looking at the challenges facing children's reading. We found that, despite these challenges, reading thrives in some families. And, very interestingly, even in families where reading really struggles to find a place, parents told us how much they love

the idea of their children reading, or reading more. These year-round positive thoughts are magnified at Christmas time.

There are so many feelings associated with reading. The obvious one is parents' belief that it is a good thing for their children's education and academic success. But at this time of year the 'softer' feelings really come to the fore. Parents want their children to experience the magic, joy, comfort, excitement, pleasure and relaxation a good story can bring. By reading to their children they can share these feelings.

Parents told us this time of year is above all about family time. There is so much emotional investment in Christmas, and the value of spending time at home is huge. Family time, as we found from our research this year, is often idealised – largely due to it being in such short supply. Christmas offers a few days to focus on family, bonding, and comfort; almost as if families regroup after a hard year. We found that reading is a big part of that family time – stories are associated with Christmas just as much as brandy butter is with mince pies. All the parents we talked to felt a heightened sense of the emotional resonance of reading at Christmas time – regardless of whether they read to their children regularly throughout the year, or only occasionally.

Family Traditions

Enjoying a strong sense of family is a big part of Christmas, and we found that the nostalgia of continuing intensely personal family traditions is very important to many families. These shared traditions and rituals offer a sense of togetherness and belonging, taking families to the heart of things. And reading

features strongly among the individual family traditions we heard about. The power of reading to connect people is evident and it seems the act of reading reinforces a sense of family and is an expression of family love. It's also very interesting how often pyjamas are mentioned in the same breath as Christmas reading. Perhaps this is indicative of the pure and simple comfort associated with reading together.

"Getting all snuggled up in pyjamas and reading together. The Christmas lights are on. It's fantastic."

"New pyjamas for Christmas Eve and a Christmas story all wrapped to share and read as a family."

One third of parents said they have good memories of being read to themselves at Christmas, so see themselves as passing on a family tradition.

"I had 'The Night Before Christmas' read to me and I have continued this tradition with my son."

"Nice to read together without the TV on."

"Bath before bed, write note to Santa, and leave out carrots, mince pie and glass of milk. Bed, read Mr. Christmas and then hopefully sleep."

"Dad always gets the Giles annual, everyone gets at least one book, children get a new Christmas-theme book to read on Christmas Eve before bed."

One new mum told us she didn't yet have any traditions for her own family as her baby is very young, but she intends to start some, creating new rituals that will help form a personal identity for her new family, a sense of belonging together.

Why are children read to more at Christmas time?

TIME:

For many parents, Christmas brings them the opportunity and the motivation to read more to their children. As we found in Chapter One of Reading Street™, family life year-round is hectic and time is at a premium. Quite simply, at Christmas there is more time available. One third of parents said they read

more because they have more time to do it. Normal life is suspended; there are no distractions caused by work or school. We found that a quarter of 2–11-year-olds who are read to whatever the frequency (from every day to rarely) are read to more at Christmas than usual – that equates to 1.8 million children. And children aged 2–5 are particularly likely to be read to more at Christmas – almost one third of them. That’s potentially 1 million 2–5 year olds.

“We read more books at Christmas and holiday periods as we have more time.”

“At Christmas we have more time for each other so we tend to read more and do things.”

“Christmas stories are always magical and always read, mostly because we have time because we are not working!”

“We make time for reading as we have plenty of family time.”

MAGIC:

But it’s more than just having free time. There is also more motivation to read to children. We found that there is definitely an awareness of the transformative power of story and a desire to share the magical experience. Put simply, parents want Christmas to be special for their children, and reading to them contributes to this ideal. The most common reasons given for why children are read to more at Christmas were: that it helps make Christmas special (54%); and that it helps build anticipation (49%).

“Before Christmas I find twenty-four Christmas books and wrap each one up, then I number them and they open one each night from the 1st Dec through till Christmas Eve.”

“In the run up to Christmas we tend to read to them a little bit more every night.”

Who is reading?

Mostly it’s parents doing the reading, as you might expect, but for the really young ones grandparents get involved – 21% of 2–3-year-olds have stories read to them at Christmas by their grandparents. 75% of 2-11 year olds who are read to during the year are most likely to be read to at Christmas by their parents, with over half of children read to most by Mums. Grandparents, (mainly grandmothers) are the most common readers

at Christmas for 15% of children, while an older sibling is the main reader for 4%.

We also asked parents to name a celebrity they would choose to come and read to their children, given the opportunity. Justin Fletcher was the most popular choice for preschoolers, Ant and Dec for 6–9-year-olds and David Tennant for 10–11-year-olds. Mylene Klass was the most frequent suggestion from the dads! Interestingly, a large number of parents declined to name a celebrity. Perhaps this is because overwhelmingly, according to the parents we spoke to, Christmas is about family and the focus is more on a parent or grandparent reading to the child.

“Just after Christmas lunch and presents have been opened, then the youngest child picks out a favourite Christmas book and dad reads it out for all...”

What do they most want to read about?

Because Christmas time is family time it's really no surprise that parents most commonly think that 'Family' is the most important theme for a Christmas story for children (65%). That equates to 4.8 million UK households. 'Father Christmas' (58%) and 'Magic' (57%) follow to make the perfect ingredients for a good Christmas story.

In terms of specific books, there was a huge list of family Christmas favourites. The top ten are as follows:

1. *The Night Before Christmas* by Clement Clarke Moore
2. *The Snowman* by Raymond Briggs
3. *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* by Dr. Seuss
4. *The nativity story*
5. *The Polar Express* by Chris Van Allsburg
6. *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* by C. S. Lewis
7. *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens
8. *Father Christmas* by Raymond Briggs
9. *Mr. Christmas (Mr. Men series)* by Roger Hargreaves
10. *The Jolly Christmas Postman* by Janet and Allan Ahlberg

And the story most likely to be read on Christmas Eve is, perhaps unsurprisingly, "The Night Before Christmas", with 18% choosing this.

“A week before Christmas we start reading the Christmas stories that he already has and then on Christmas Eve the last book we read before sleeping is 'The Night before Christmas'.”

“Always read 'The Night before Christmas' on Christmas Eve and read stories throughout December.”

"Every year we get all the Christmas books out and read them, and also read 'The Night Before Christmas' on Christmas Eve."

"In the week before Christmas my husband loves to read 'The Night Before Christmas' to both our children (age 12 and 9). They love to hear this story."

On the gift list

If families are reading old favourites – books they have had and treasured for years – then they are also buying plenty of new ones. Books are clearly imbued with emotional associations, so they make a perfect special gift. There is a huge peak in children's book sales in the lead up to Christmas. Data from Nielsen tells us that in 2012 61 million children's books were sold. Nielsen divides the year into thirteen sales periods, which – if sales were evenly spread – would equate to an average sale of 4.7 million books sold per period. But in period 13 in 2012 there were 8.1 million children's books sold.

We found that, according to parents, over 50% of children expect to get a book at Christmas because it is their family tradition to give books as presents. 75% of parents said that their children love receiving books as Christmas presents. 2 in 5 children receive an annual every year, and half of the parents we spoke to said that their children love receiving annuals as Christmas presents.

"Hardback book for Christmas to keep, rather than a paperback, which they will not necessarily keep."

"Children always read their new annuals on Christmas day, along with the adults, who flick through their new books too."

"We read our new books and annuals on Xmas day night after supper."

"A Christmas story for the three children all together in one of their beds; reading their Christmas books with them on Christmas morning; small books in stockings; hardback /gift style books as well as requested ones."

We also asked parents if they planned to buy a tablet for their child for Christmas, 30% said they were likely to do so and 19% said they were likely to buy a dedicated e-reader, rather than a multi-use tablet. However, half of those

parents thinking of buying a multi-use tablet thought it would be used most for entertainment, and just 20% thought the use would be mostly for reading. This further confirmed our findings from earlier this year, where we saw that multi-use devices are most likely to be used for entertainment and less so for reading. When we analysed the numbers further we found that there was a striking difference of opinion about boys' likely use of a multi-use device compared to girls': amongst parents of 5-7s, 31% thought their daughter would use a tablet for reading, while only 12 % thought their son would do so.

Happy Reading

This year we've followed the reading lives of families throughout the UK. We know that there are challenges to reading for pleasure: hectic family life, target-driven schooling and the rise of screen time. However, when families want to create a feeling of magic and comfort, stories are still at the heart of their traditions. How lovely it would be if the time could be found and this love of stories and reading could be replicated, even a little bit, more than once a year.



Merry Christmas and Happy Reading in 2014 from Egmont UK.

DATA SOURCES

- Nielsen Bookscan
- Office for National Statistics 2012
- Egmont Reading Street™ study
November 2013

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