

ALSO BY GERRY BOWLER

The World Encyclopedia of Christmas (2000)



SANTA CLAUS



A B I O G R A P H Y



G E R R Y B O W L E R



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Contents

<i>Introduction</i>	vii
I His Long Gestation and Obscure Birth	3
II His Youth and Character Development	35
III Santa as Advocate	81
IV Santa the Adman	113
V Santa the Warrior	149
VI Santa at the Movies (and in the Jukebox Too)	179
VII Does Santa Have a Future?	213
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	251
<i>Notes</i>	253
<i>Index</i>	271

scientific assertions, such beliefs can teach much about what our cultures view as true, beautiful, or conducive to human happiness. Researchers see the Santa Claus story as the vehicle through which children can be taught a host of important social lessons. For example, one small part of the myth, the practice of leaving out a snack for Santa Claus and his reindeer, conveys the importance of generosity, tradition, and hospitality. Overall, educators expect the Santa story to give children a sense of mystery and wonder, an altered view of the passage of time, a taste of magical thinking, an exercise in imagination, and a chance to practise kindness. It is further believed that even when the child has rejected the material reality of Santa Claus, the deeper truths and moral lessons the myth has conveyed will remain powerful and active.

Nor are adults immune to the desire for mystery and fantasy. An account of Santa Claus's life would not be complete without a consideration of a little essay that appeared in the pages of the *New York Sun* on September 21, 1897, unheralded in the midst of weightier commentaries on the strength of the British Navy, chainless bicycles, and a Canadian railroad to the Yukon.

We take pleasure in answering thus prominently the communication below, expressing at the same time our great gratification that its faithful author is numbered among the friends of *The Sun*:

Dear Editor –

*I am 8 years old. Some of my little friends say there is no Santa Claus. Papa says, "If you see it in *The Sun*, it's so." Please tell me the truth, is there a Santa Claus?*

Virginia O'Hanlon

Virginia, your little friends are wrong. They have been affected by the scepticism of a sceptical age. They do not believe except they see. They think that nothing can be which is not comprehensible by their little minds. All minds, Virginia, whether they be men's or children's, are little. In this great universe of ours, man is a mere insect, an ant, in his intellect as compared with the boundless world about him, as measured by the intelligence capable of grasping the whole of truth and knowledge.

Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus. He exists as certainly as love and generosity and devotion exist, and you know that they abound and give to your life its highest beauty and joy. Alas! how dreary would be the world if there were no Santa Claus! It would be as dreary as if there were no Virginias. There would be no childlike faith then, no poetry, no romance to make tolerable this existence. We should have no enjoyment, except in sense and sight. The external light with which childhood fills the world would be extinguished.

Not believe in Santa Claus! You might as well not believe in fairies. You might get your papa to have men to watch in all the chimneys on Christmas eve to catch Santa Claus, but even if you did not see Santa Claus coming down, what would that prove? Nobody sees Santa Claus, but that is no sign that there is no Santa Claus. The most real things in the world are those that neither children nor men can see. Did you ever see fairies dancing on the lawn? Of course not, but that's no proof that they are not there. Nobody can conceive or imagine all the wonders there are unseen and unseeable in the world.

You tear apart the baby's rattle and see what makes the noise inside, but there is a veil covering the unseen world which not the strongest mean, nor even the united strength of all the strongest men that ever lived could tear apart. Only faith, poetry, love, romance, can push aside that curtain and view and picture the supernal beauty and glory beyond. Is it all real? Ah, Virginia, in all this world there is nothing else real and abiding.

No Santa Claus! Thank God! he lives and lives forever. A thousand years from now, Virginia, nay 10 times 10,000 years from now, he will continue to make glad the heart of childhood.

"Yes, Virginia, There Is a Santa Claus" became the most famous editorial in history, and was reprinted every year until the newspaper ceased publication in 1950. The

exchange between Virginia O'Hanlon and journalist Francis Pharcellus Church inspired two movies and was almost surely the only piece of editorial writing ever to be set to classical music.* In "Santa Claus: A Psychograph," the American poet and biographer Gamaliel Bradford would echo these sentiments a generation later:

So the legend of Saint Nicholas is a lovely and delectable myth, the last living relic of the vanishing world of dreams. The fairies are gone. No little children or innocent maidens watch any longer through the ardent summer nights to catch some echo of the songs. The witches are gone . . . Santa Claus alone still lingers with us. For Heaven's sake, let us keep him as long as we can. There are some excellent people who are scrupulous about deceiving their children with such legendary nonsense. They are mistaken. The children learn to see soon enough, too clearly and too well, or to think they do. Ah, leave them at least one thrill of passionate mystery that may linger with them when the years begin to grow too plain and dull and bare. After all, in

*Virginia O'Hanlon grew up to achieve a doctorate and to work as a teacher and principal in the New York school system. She died in 1971 at age eighty-one in a nursing home in Valatie, New York, still professing a belief in the power of Santa Claus. Church died in 1906, at which point the *Sun* revealed who had written the editorial. NBC commissioned a cantata based on the piece in 1932, and in 1996 a musical play was created.

this universe of ignorance, anything may be true, even our dreams.

One might say these sentiments are quaint relics of a bygone day of steam-driven automobiles, hobble skirts for ladies, and celluloid collars for gentlemen, but consider the spirited debate by otherwise sober citizens of Salt Lake City who not long ago were debating the merits of redrafting the city's general aviation rules so as to completely ban low-flying small aircraft. To do so would have required deleting an important waiver that some whimsical legislators had earlier written into the code, to wit, a Christmas Eve exemption granted to "flying reindeer and any cargo they may be towing." Playing the role of the Grinch was a group of airport managers for whom this was a serious question of safety; defending the realm of fantasy were city councillors who declared, "I would hate to see us outlaw Santa and the reindeer on Christmas Eve. I don't think that would be fair to the children." And, "If anything goes wrong, I want them to be low enough that they will be able to make an emergency landing. Also, if they have to fly that high it may make them late in their other deliveries."

In 1999, Robert William Handley, a rotund, white-bearded male of Franklin County, Ohio, a man of jolly disposition and wire-rimmed glasses, petitioned the court to be allowed legally to change his name to "Santa Claus." He claimed that year-round he embodied the spirit of Christmas and was often stopped by families and children who hailed him as the

genuine gift-bringer. He wished to be able to say that not only did he look like Santa but that he really was Santa Claus. Judge Lawrence Belkis deliberated long and hard about this and rendered a judgment worthy of Solomon: Handley might append "Santa Claus" to the first part of his name, but he must retain his accustomed last name. To do otherwise would be to put a cultural legacy in peril. Said Belkis: "The history of Santa Claus, the North Pole, the elves, Mrs. Claus, the reindeer, is a treasure that society passes on from generation to generation, and the Petitioner seeks to not only take on the name of Santa Claus, but also take on the identity of Santa Claus." Should Handley misbehave or die, the effect on children would be too dreadful.



But to inquire what children think of Santa Claus, or to gauge the effect on them of his story, is to ask the wrong question. The future of Santa Claus is not up to children – his life rests in the hands of parents. Santa Claus in the twenty-first century is a parental project. It is they who choose (or not) to tell the story to the next generation and to buttress it in countless ways. It is parents who give flesh to Santa Claus through half-eaten cookies, nibbled carrots, deer droppings spread on snowy roofs, letters from the North Pole, songs sung to sleepy boys and girls, and hundreds of other acts of loving folly. It is they, in study after study, who report more sadness than their children do when

their little ones learn about Santa Claus, and it is today's parents who intend to play no part in telling their children the truth. Woe betide the well-meaning skeptic who untimely tells a child about Santa Claus – priests have been rebuked by angry parents, teachers fired, and lawsuits filed when busybodies have chosen to convey the news of Santa Claus to innocent and unsuspecting ears. If belief consists of investing in a proposition and acting as if it were factual, then it is parents who are the true and necessary believers.

Parents want many of those things for their children that educators and psychologists see as valuable. They want to see wonder on small faces; they want them to share in a heightened sense of excitement and expectation, and to experience a family tradition. They dismiss the likelihood of negative outcomes such as distrust of adults or religious skepticism, and they do not particularly cling to Santa Claus as an aid to inducing better behaviour amongst their offspring. The threat of a coal-filled stocking in the twenty-first century is no longer such an important component in child rearing. Few kids today will wake on Christmas morning to find a rotten potato, a horse apple, or “a long, black, birchen rod, / Such, as the dread command of God / Directs a Parent's hand to use / When virtue's path his sons refuse,” and parents who were surveyed about the possibility of withholding gifts from naughty children were shocked at the suggestion.

There are few things in life so unreciprocated as the gift-giving of North American parents at Christmas. Parents will

spend infinitely more money on their children's gifts than their children will spend on theirs (even when they have grown up). Parents will spend infinitely more time in shopping, wrapping, baking, decorating, concealing, and conspiring to bring delight into their children's Christmases than their children will ever comprehend (until at last they learn to do the same things for their own families). Moreover, for parents not to take credit for this and to attribute the gift-bringing to a magical being, Santa Claus, only serves to magnify the unconditionality and generosity of these expenditures. Santa Claus lives and will live, not simply because he represents fantasy in an impersonal, scientific universe, but because he is the incarnation of parents' love. On the cheeks and foreheads of every child are the invisible marks left by the lips of mothers and fathers who have stolen into their sleeping child's room and kissed them in the night. Santa Claus is the midnight visitor whom parents long once a year to be – silent, benevolent, and universally loved.

As our century progresses, Santa Claus will continue to be attacked and resisted, but as the family comes increasingly under assault, he will be evermore necessary. Parents will weigh the potential harm of telling what Plato would call a “noble lie” against their desire to manifest love in the form of a myth. Weighing an arid kind of scientific truth against deeper values, they will conclude with Gamaliel Bradford that “sacred as both are, the law of love is higher than the

law of truth. For this there is a perfectly simple and unassailable reason, that truth at its best is deceiving, but love is never. We toil and tire ourselves and sacrifice our lives for the dim goddess Truth. Then she eludes us, slips away from us, mocks at us. But love grows firmer and surer and more prevailing as the years pass by.”

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For allowing me to be their Santa Claus for so many years, this book is dedicated to Amelia Jane, Catherine Christiane, and Maria Elizabeth Victoria.

Religion,” *Journal of American Culture*, vol. 10, 1987, pp. 89–90, offers a catalogue of such research. See also Bowler, *The World Encyclopedia of Christmas*, pp. 182–83, and Paul Thompson, “A Christmas Fairy Tale,” *European Journal of Psychotherapy, Counselling and Health*, 5:2, June 2002; [228] **Led by the ironically:** The best introduction to this phenomenon is Albert Menendez, *The December Wars: religious symbols and ceremonies in the public square* (Buffalo: 1993). The secularist view is expressed by Albert Feldman, *Please Don’t Wish Me a Merry Christmas* (New York: 1997) and Tom Flynn, *The Trouble With Christmas* (New York: 1993); [229] **Other Santas handed:** The many amusing aspects of this story may be followed in www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,39928,00.html; <http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/fr/593049/posts?page=11>; <http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/fr/583869/posts>; <http://www.weeklystandard.com/Content/Public/Articles/000/000/000/621taocw.asp>; [230] **Workers immediately:** http://www.catholicleague.org/catalyst/2002_catalyst/01202.htm; [231] **Minority leaders denounced:** <http://www.papillonsartpalace.com/ausMOStrali.htm>; [231] **In the holiday season:** *National Post*, December 13, 2002, p. A6; [232] **A gyno-Briton of:** Lepagnol, p. 125; Bruce Curtis, “The Strange Birth of Santa Claus: From Artemis the Goddess and Nicholas the Saint,” *Journal of American Culture*, 1995, 18(4), p. 26; [232] **The whole story seemed:** Douglas Marshall, “Classical Mythology, Day I: The Pilgrims, George Washington and Santa Claus,” *Classical World*, 84:4, 1991, p. 300; [232] **The suggestion that Santa:** Max A. Myers, “Santa Claus as an Icon of Grace,” in *Christmas Unwrapped: Consumerism, Christ and Culture* (Harrisburg: 2001), p. 188; [233] **Paganism is linked to:** Dell deChant, *The Sacred Santa: Religious Dimensions of Consumer Culture* (Cleveland: 2002), p. 195; [234] **Santa is one of those:** Lévi-Strauss, *Père Noël Supplicié*, pp. 27–29; Mottet, *Le père Noël est une figure*, p. 133; [234] **Toward the end of:** Perrot, *Noël*, p. 10; [234] **Merchants were**

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Index

- Advent, 10, 11, 157, 169
 advertising, 91, 113–46
aguilanneuf, P., 10
 alcohol, 51–54, 81–82, 109–10,
 130–32
 American Civil Liberties Union,
 228
 anti-globalization, 234–35
 Aschenklau, 25, 43
 Asterius of Amasea, 6
 Autry, Gene, 139, 145–46,
 199, 202
Bad Santa (movie, 2003), 194
 Barnum, P.T., 57
 Bass and Rankin, 184–85
 Bates, Katherine Lee: “Goody
 Santa Claus on a Sleigh Ride”
 (poem), 65
 Baum, L. Frank, 179, 185
 begging visits, 10
 Befana, 25, 168
 belief in Santa Claus, 70, 73, 76,
 91, 181–84, 204–05, 224–28,
 236–50, 270
 Belschniggle, 43
 Belsnickle, 43, 44, 54, 74, 256
 Bin Laden, Osama, 176
 “Bobby Wants a Puppy Dog for
 Christmas” (song), 204
 “Boogie Woogie Santa Claus”
 (song), 208
Book of Saint Nicholas, The, 48–49
 Boxing Day, 9
 Bradford, Gamaliel: “Santa Claus:
 A Psychograph” (story), 245–
 46, 250
 Brunhoff, Jean de, 179
 Burke, Sarah J.: “Mrs. Santa
 Claus Asserts Herself”
 (poem), 63
Call Me Claus (movie, 2001), 186
 Calvinists, 26–28, 49, 51–53, 86,
 222–23
 Cantor, Eddie, 199
 “Captain Santa Claus” (story),
 98–99
 Catherine, St., 11, 62
 Cert, 24
 charity, 94–99, 102–110
Children’s Friend, The, 35, 37, 43