

# Books for a Northern Christmas

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*The Twelve Days of Christmas North.* Lois Barber. Illus. by Carl Chaplin. Northern Times Press, 1978. 30 pp. \$3.95 paper. ISBN 0-920390-01-3.

*Little Elf wanted to help.* Janice Nicolson. Illus. by Boyd Speer. Peguis Publishers Ltd., 1979. 20 pp. \$7.50 hardcover. ISBN 0-919566-66-9.

These two books will appeal to the Canadian Christmas market when books are purchased for reasons other than those which govern book-buying during the rest of the year. Children rarely buy books themselves at Christmas; it is a season when others buy for them. Hence, to those teachers, librarians, parents and grandparents who are particularly searching for Canadian content at this time of the year, these two titles may seem appropriate. Unfortunately, neither is completely satisfactory.

*The Twelve Days of Christmas North* was written by Lois Barber to provide Canadian content in her classroom. It is a rewriting of "The Twelve Days of Christmas", and it was first performed as a northern version of the carol several years ago by Ms. Barber's grade five Nisgha students. An admirable idea: it is time we had such a Christmas when the "true love" generously endows the beloved with such items as "five mountain goats, four grizzly bears, three bull moose, two porcupines, and a blue grouse in a spruce tree". There are moments however, when reading *The Twelve Days of Christmas North*, that one wishes for more humour in what is essentially a parody. Where, for instance, would one keep "nine eagles soaring"?

Nevertheless there is fun to be found in this book for its pages are cut and layered so that one can read it normally and then one can flip backwards through the twelve gifts received in order to sing the chorus. This format is ingenious and one appreciates it, combined as it is with the music of the song which is printed at the back of the book. It is a book to play with and to share.

The layered pagination has, however, caused some problems in the layout of *The Twelve Days of Christmas North*. Confusion results when the verse for the second day of Christmas is facing the illustration of the blue grouse in a spruce tree, which was the gift received on the first day. This confusion continues throughout the book. It would have been a better book had the lay-out allowed the words and pictures to correspond completely. Likewise, when flipping backwards through the book, a fun thing for

children to do, one is faced with the last page of dull-looking type-script which gives one the biographical information on the author and illustrator. This is unfortunate when there is a clever “thank you true love!” on the page opposite the illustration of twelve “whales a-playing” that would end the book much more attractively.

Despite these flaws, *The Twelve Days of Christmas North* is a worthwhile presentation of the old song, with wildlife illustrations by Carl Chaplin. These illustrations are executed with a superb blend of movement and form. The way the “eleven foxes frisking” hold their tails straight in the air is suggestive of their mischief, while the “four grizzly bears” could have been chiselled in wood they have so much depth to them. (See Figure 1) These illustrations with their green, black and fawn colouring, will appeal to the adult buyer who is looking for a book of good quality at Christmastime.

I wish I could say the same for *Little Elf wanted to help*. The illustrations dominate the book. It is a picture book with a few lines of text on each page, yet the illustrations are line drawings of uneven quality. Some are original and clever, like the ribbon effect of the Northern Lights. (See Figure 2) Others are wooden and sketchy. The hands of the characters are particularly poorly drawn throughout the book, while the littlest elf isn't that much smaller than the other elves in some drawings.



Figure 1.

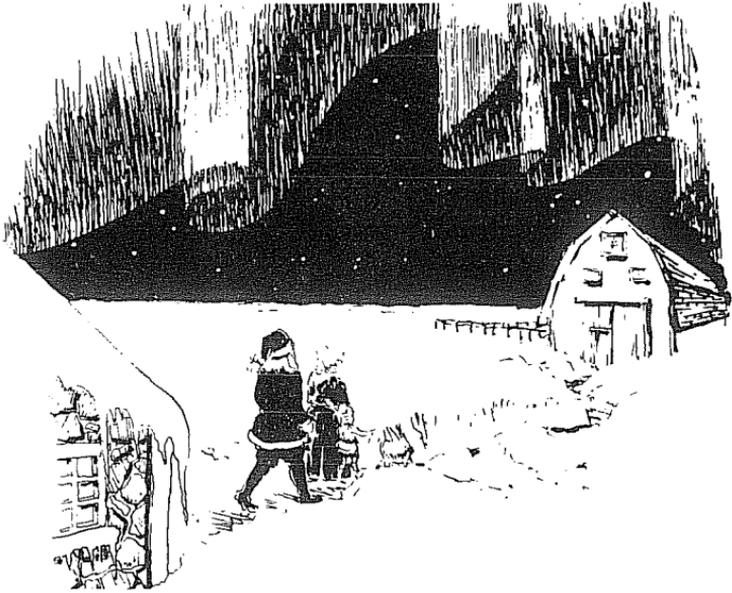


Figure 2.

The story of the littlest elf who can find no work in Santa's workshop is clearly written for children under seven years of age. They might even be able to read it themselves. Little elf can do no jobs for Santa. He cannot lift mail bags, nor can he take care of the reindeer, nor paint toys; he can only play. So he becomes Santa's toy-tester. What is wrong with the story is that this solution to the little elf's problem is not acceptable; it does not enable the child reader to identify with a figure whose need for independence is satisfied, even by a compromise. Little elf may not, for instance, be tall enough to groom a reindeer when it is standing, but why can he not feed it or groom it when it is kneeling for him? The stereotyped image of the child who can do nothing but play seems to patronize children rather than to encourage them to gain some degree of autonomy. Despite these flaws, I'm sure that *Little Elf wanted to help* will sell at Christmastime. It is a Canadian book and it is one of those hardcover volumes that librarians are always asked for. It is unfortunate that it does not present the child's position in society more thoughtfully.

Meanwhile one must relish *The Twelve Days of Christmas North* as a treat for families, classrooms and libraries. It is a book to share and enjoy.

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