

# North Country Book News

*Children's Book Reviews by Charles Sutton*

## Tales of Holiday Cheer in the Dark of the Year

The Christmas story has been told and retold for centuries now, so it is always a delightful surprise when the Christmas theme is brought to us with a new narrative and setting.

Here are the highlights of several children's books including Santa injuring himself but getting help from a young girl to make Christmas Eve toy deliveries; diverse animals singing carols when humans are too busy; and Santa rescuing a small white fox who becomes his year-long companion and joins him on the sleigh rides.

Santa Claus is usually known for making his delivery of toys with his troupe of reindeer on Christmas Eve. But have you ever seen him with any other animal? Possibly another of those animals of the Arctic?

Now thanks to *Through The North Pole Snow* by Polly Faber and illustrated by Richard Jones (\$18.99. Candlewick Press. [www.candlewick.com](http://www.candlewick.com)) Santa does have an unusual companion—a pure white fox. How did this happen?

A hapless small white fox, hungry for a meal, smells food while digging in the snow, which lands him on the roof of Santa's snow-covered house. But he gets stuck in a hole made in the ceiling trying to get in.

Santa rescues him and sees the white fox is very hungry so serves him dinner including lots of cookies. The fox notices the place is in kind of a mess with rows and rows of empty shelves and papers all over the floor. But off he goes to bed on his own blanket next to Santa.

After a long sleep they both wake up to a beautiful Spring day. The fox plays outside and finds flowers, chases insects, and follows streams. Santa is soon busy making toys to fill those empty shelves for next Christmas.

Time passes quickly and then one snowy day, thousands of letters fall down on them with Christmas wish lists for Santa. Santa and the fox are seen in a charming drawing collecting the letters while the snow falls.

On Christmas Eve Santa invites the white fox to join him while he delivers toys. We have a wonderful two-page view of the red-dressed Santa and all-white fox heading out on their journey and then coming home. Job well done!

One rarely reads about Santa injuring himself in the midst of his Christmas Eve journey of gift-giving, but in *Santarella* by Suzy Señor and illustrated by Lucy Semple (\$18.99. *Tiger Tales*. [www.tigertales.com](http://www.tigertales.com)). Santa injures a muscle in his back and can no longer lift his sack of toys. Fortunately, he's at the home of an unhappy Cinderella (who earns the name Santarella) who has been left at home to clean house while

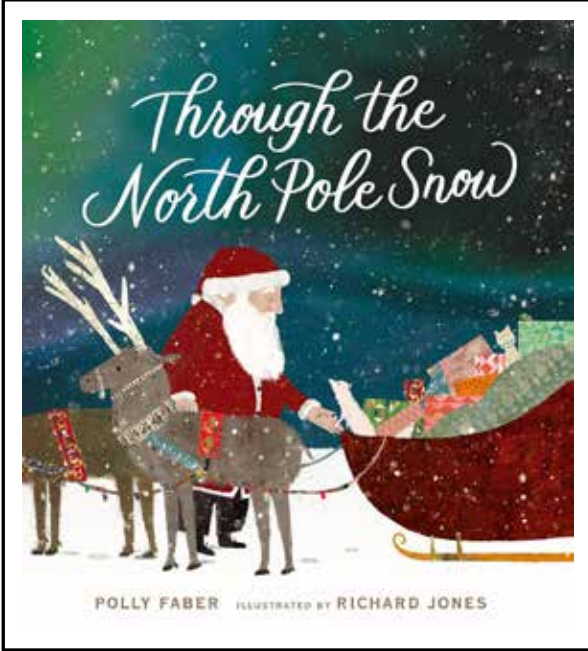
her two mean sisters are off at a dance at the prince's palace.

"I'm good with height and animals—why don't I give you a hand?" says Santarella, so off they go around the world: England, Iceland, Canada, Las Vegas and New York, through Rio to Nairobi, then the Nile and finally Kathmandu. All done in record time.

Santa leaves Santarella off at the palace roof where she shimmies down a drainpipe and looks inside to see her sisters dancing and twirling. "It's magical," she ponders, "but I rather see the World."

Wish granted. Back at her home she collects a bag tools, her pet lizard, rat and mouse and its out to travel the world helping those in need. She cleans a dragon's tooth, repairs a fairy's van, and learns other skills.

Santarella is back the next Christmas helping Santa deliver his toys. This is a happy, upbeat story with colorful, amusing drawings.



The term 'mercy' can express surprise or alarm so it's the perfect word for the title of this humorous story: *A Very Mercy Christmas* by Kate DiCamillo and illustrated by Chris Van Dusen (\$18.99. Candlewick Press. [candlewick.com](http://candlewick.com).)

We soon find out 'Mercy' is the name of a neighbor's large pig who willingly joins the girl Stella trying to recruit singers to do a round of Christmas carols. They stop at accordion-playing Eugenia Lincoln's house, but she meets them with a scowling face. "You want me to go caroling with a pig?" She slams the door.

Not discouraged, Stella recruits Eugenia's cat named General Washington but has

no luck with a boy named Horace Broom who is looking up at the sky through a fancy telescope. Stella, the cat and pig go ahead anyway and sing "Joy to the World"—a noise full of hope and wonder and melodies—almost melodies. This attracts the horse Maybelline who joins them in "Deck The Halls". Now those who had said no to the caroling all show up, including Leroy Nicker, the owner of the horse.

They go back to the accordionist Eugenia's house for a treat—a very tall stack of toast, and Eugenia plays the music for "Silent Night."

As fitting this story, the drawings are bright, humorous, and have their own take on making such a "mercy" Christmas.

Imagine how much joy, but challenging too, to create art work to go with the famous poem that begins "Twas the night before Christmas and all through the house, not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse."

The poem written by poet and scholar Clement C. Moore for his children on Christmas Eve, 1822, was first published in an upstate New York newspaper, the *Troy Sentinel*.

Over the years the poem has undergone many changes, even changing the names of Santa's reindeer, but in this *'Twas The Night Before Christmas (Account of a Visit from St. Nicholas)* by Clement C. Moore and illustrated by Matt Tavares (\$17.99. Candlewick Press. [www.candlewick.com](http://www.candlewick.com)), the poem is reproduced as it originally appeared. In this large-formatted book the Christmas story is enlightened by some remarkable black and white drawings done in the the pointillism style of small-scale dots which blend together when viewed from a distance. Among those we admired were the two-page spreads of Santa with reindeer and sleigh flying in and out of a snow-covered village.



*Book Review by Charles Sutton*

## The Smallest Snowflake

by Bernadette Watts

(\$17.95. North/South Books. [www.northsouth.com](http://www.northsouth.com))

Anyone who looks at snow closely can't help but be amazed with how each snowflake may have different designs but always six sides which lends to their shape and beauty.

In *The Smallest Snowflake* by Bernadette Watts (\$17.95. North/South Books. [www.northsouth.com](http://www.northsouth.com)) she covers page after page with hand-drawn snowflakes where we meet the "smallest" one who just wants to be warm. "Warm! Warm! Oh, no! Never warm," they muttered fearing their own inevitable melt-down come Spring.

In all her books Bernadette works in great detail creating small wild animals and birds, trees, plants and blossoms, stars, and snow.

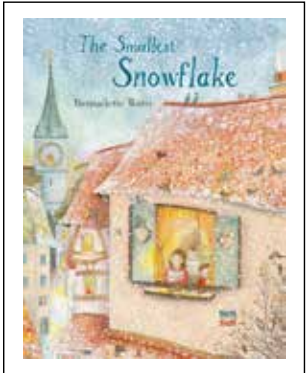
In this story after sampling life in more glamorous, foreign places, the smallest snowflake finds a home in a window box at a cheerful little village home where she enjoys the winter. But when Spring comes snow-drop flowers open all around her. She admires the tallest snowdrop—"she has never seen anyone so handsome! Love fills her heart with such warmth she melts away with joy."

Bernadette Watts (now 81) became an illustrator starting at age four while temporarily in an orphanage (her parents

had separated) where one day she climbed up and peered over a wall and told the other children what she saw: "It's wonderful, I called back full of lies. There are peacocks, flowers and magic trees, and wild animals."

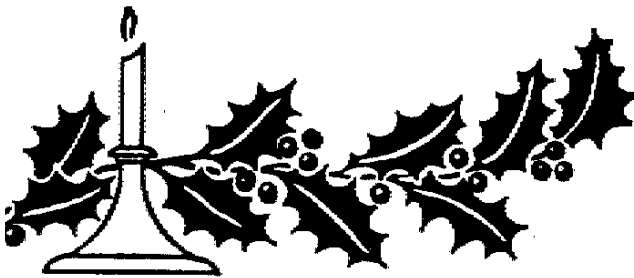
She became an illustrator that day "embroidering and over-coloring the realities, making a magic story from a little event."

Her parents reunited and kept her in drawing paper (even paper bags during shortages) and art supplies.



This enabled her to begin a long career as an artist-writer, completing 38 published works since 1960.

She has always been intrigued by folklore and fairy tales which are woven into her books. Having been in an orphanage ("the worst two years of her life," she says) several of her works include the theme of survival by orphans with strangers.



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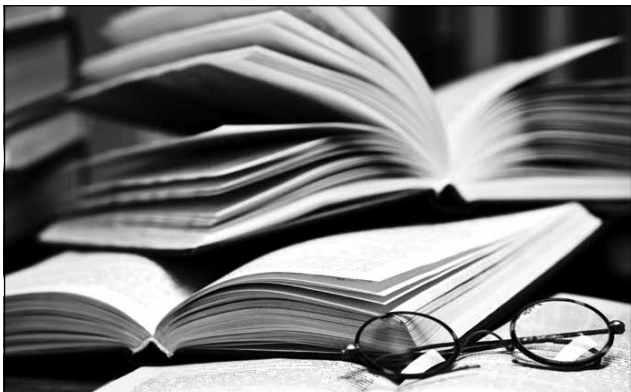
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# Winter Solstice And Beyond

With Winter Solstice, this year on December 21, comes the longest night of the year. In these few days before Christmas, the days will begin to lengthen as the Earth spins through Winter into Spring.

Every culture on Earth has tales to tell about this time when mankind's collective effort sings back the sun.

Celebrate winter with this treasury of 50 frosty stories from around the globe, ***A World Full of Winter Stories: 50 Folk Tales and Legends from Around the World*** by Angela McAllister and illustrated by Olga Baumert (\$21.85. Frances Lincoln Children's Books. [www.quarto.com](http://www.quarto.com)). Curl up beside the fire and uncover stories from all over the world with this rich resource of wintery folk tales, myths and legends.

Featuring stories of Norse gods; hibernating bears; Christmas feasts and wicked witches, there is something for everyone in this collection of winter inspired stories. The perfect anthology for any time you want to uncover chilly tales from lands near and far.

Collected and retold by award-winning author Angela McAllister, with enchanting illustrations by Olga Baumert, this is an anthology to be read when the weather turns colder and the nights draw in. Stories include: *The Spider and the Christmas Tree* (Ukraine); *Mother Holle* (Germany); *Shingebiss* (Ojibwe, North America); *The First Rabbits* (Japan); *The Girl and the Winter Whirlwinds* (Bulgaria); *The First Evergreens* (Mongolia); *The Snow Man* (Denmark); *Why the Bear Sleeps All Winter* (North America); and *The Wind, the Clouds and the Snow* (China).

Discover folktales from all around the world or be introduced to some of the world's best-loved writers with this stunning gift books, the perfect addition to any child's library.

**About the Author:** Angela McAllister earned a degree in Humanities at Middlesex College before becoming a children's book

author. To date, she has written more than 80 books for children, including Frances Lincoln Children's best-selling titles *A Year Full of Stories* and *A World Full of Animal Stories*.

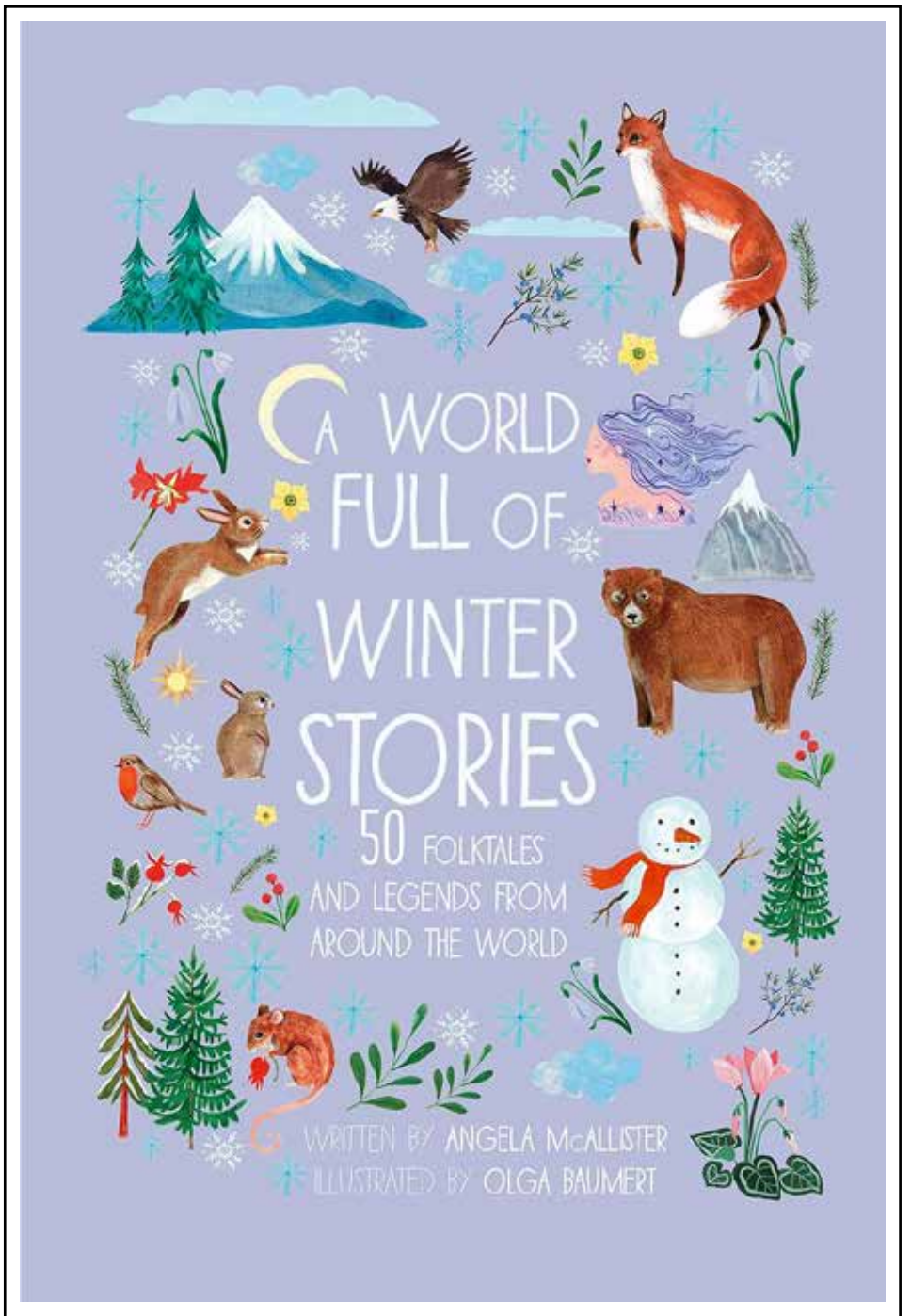
**Illustrator:** Olga Baumert is an artist and graphic designer originally from Poland. She graduated with a degree in Graphic Design and Illustration from De Montfort University and has worked for clients including Ladybird, HarperCollins and Little Bee Books. She currently lives in Leicester, UK.

*So the shortest day came, and the year died...* As the sun set on the shortest day of the year, early people would gather to prepare for the long night ahead. They built fires and lit candles. They played music, bringing their own light to the darkness, while wondering if the sun would ever rise again.

Written for a theatrical production that has become a ritual in itself, Susan Cooper's poem, *The Shortest Day*, illustrated by Carson Ellis (\$17.99. Walker Books, Candlewick Press. [www.candlewick.com](http://www.candlewick.com)) captures the magic behind the returning of the light, the yearning for traditions that connect us with previous generations—and the hope for peace that we carry into the future. This book evokes the joy and community found when we celebrate light, thankfulness, and festivity at a time of rebirth.

Author Susan Cooper wrote *The Shortest Day* for John Langstaff's *Christmas Revels*, where it is performed annually across the country. She is the author of the classic fantasy sequence *The Dark Is Rising*, which includes the Newbery Medal winner *The Grey King*, as well as many other books for children and adults. She lives on a salt-marsh island in Marshfield, Massachusetts.

Carson Ellis is the creator of the Caldecott Honor Book *Du Iz Tak?* and the New York Times bestseller *Home*. Carson Ellis lives outside Portland, Oregon.



## A LITANY AFTER WINTER SOLSTICE

You white sky of snow:  
*Pray for us. Pray for us. Graciously hear us.*

You deep killing freeze:  
*Pray for us. Pray for us. Graciously hear us.*

All of you seeds, scattered and longing:  
*Pray for us. Pray for us. Graciously hear us.*

All of you leaves taken from summer:  
*Pray for us. Pray for us. Graciously hear us.*

All of you shriveled colors and scents,  
Petals and blossoms and berries and fruits:  
*Pray for us. Pray for us. Graciously hear us.*

All of you ragweed, ironweed, goldenrod broken,  
blackened eunonymus,  
burdock and pokeweed,  
hollow and empty,  
sweet rocket, ragwort, celandine, poppies and thistles  
curling and waiting:  
*Pray for us. Pray for us. Graciously hear us.*

All of you frogs and all of you toads,  
Burrowed and patient, hidden and mute:  
*Pray for us. Pray for us. Graciously hear us.*

All of you silenced cicadas and katyids,  
All of you crickets still prowling the dark,  
All of you ravening mice in the cupboards:  
*Pray for us. Pray for us. Graciously hear us.*

All of you creatures gone or to come,  
All of you wings of the birds that have vanished,  
All of you mating calls still to be sung:  
*Pray for us, Pray for us, Graciously hear us.*

—BILL FELKER

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***The Solstice Badger*** by Robin McFadden (\$9.95. Green Turtle Press) tells the tale of the days when the Sun shone all day long.

In the beginning, the Sun roamed the earth filled with joy, but eventually he became terribly lonely and sad, and his light began to dim. Aware of his plight, many of the earth's creatures tried to befriend the Sun, only to find his intense heat prevented them from getting too close.

To the Sun's great joy came a creature that found a way to get close to the sun, and the two became friends.

Staying longer each day with his friend, the Sun's absence caused the skies to darken and snow to fall. All living things suffered. Would the Sun realize his impact before it was too late?

Robin's tale and illustrations bring the Sun's story to a satisfying conclusion as he learns that compromise, compassion, friendship, and wisdom will save the day.

***Winter Tales*** by Dawn Casey (\$27.65. Templar Books. [www.bonnierbooks.co.uk/imprints/templar-books](http://www.bonnierbooks.co.uk/imprints/templar-books)) is a treasury of stories celebrating the wonders of winter, and the qualities within that warm our hearts through the long cold.

This stunning book brings together a selection of wintery tales from all over the world—from North America to Siberia, Scotland, France, Russia and Norway.

Written by award-winning author Dawn Casey and with beautifully detailed artwork by illustrator Zanna Goldhawk, this is a magical book to be treasured for generations to come.

The winter solstice, the day the "sun stands still," marks the longest night and the shortest day of the year, and it comes this year in the evening of December 21st. Celebrations honoring the winter solstice as a moment of transition and renewal date back thousands of years and occur among many peoples on every continent. ***The Return of the Light: Twelve Tales from Around the World for the Winter Solstice*** (\$10.52 paperback. Da Capo Press. [www.dacapo.press.com](http://www.dacapo.press.com)) makes an ideal companion for everyone, no matter what their faith.

Storyteller Carolyn McVickar Edwards retells twelve traditional tales from North America, China, Scandinavia, India, Africa, South America, Europe, and Polynesia that honor this magical moment.

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