

For Reading Out Loud: Holiday Stories and How to Choose Them

By [Marty Layne](#)

The months of November and December bring holidays that celebrate the importance of love, family, and the rebirth of light. When my children were small, a big part of our holiday tradition was to read Christmas stories out loud. The magic, the warmth, and the re-affirmation of love that fill these seasonal stories were part of our celebration of the birth of new hope in the midst of darkness. The ritual of reading these stories at the same time each year added a sense of predictability and comfort to the holiday season.

Let me tell you about some of our favourites and tell you why we first choose them. My husband and I are both avid readers. Stories we read to our children formed a large part of their homeschooling curriculum. When my husband and I looked for read aloud books, we looked for the following:

1. positive family image
2. positive child image
3. positive humour
4. excitement
5. realistic portrayal

Positive family image

One of my all-time favorite stories about a family is contained in two books - *Ida Early Comes Over the Mountains* and *Christmas With Ida Early* by Robert Burch. The first book begins with Ida, who is "as close to six feet as seven," asking for work at the Sutton's house. The story takes place in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Georgia during the tail end of the Great Depression. Aunt Ernestine, whom Randal, the oldest son, thinks of as "a battleship," has been helping the family since the children's mother died the previous spring, but she is not used to children. When Ida comes to the door "fresh as ragweed" to ask for work, the father offers her the job of taking care of the family. The youngest children, 5 year old twins Clay and Dewey, are quite intrigued with Ida. Ida is an unusual character not only for her height but also for her skills. Rather than walking to a peg and hanging up her sweater, "she held the sweater over her head, twirled it around twice, and let it go. It sailed to the corner, landing neatly on the hat rack."

Here's one of my favorite quotes from the book. I thought of it often when my children were small and they asked me to do something with them when I wanted to finish some household task.

Dewey said happily, "Guess what, Aunt Ernestine? Ida Early's going to read us the funny papers!"

"No, she's not! Ida's going to wash the dishes." Aunt Ernestine sounded very sure of it.

"Of course I am," said Ida, sitting down between Clay and Dewey. "But first we'll just have a look at Orphan Annie."

"Oh, boy!" said Dewey. "We like Little Orphan Annie."

After Ida read the strip to them, Clay said, "We like Dick Tracy, too."

"Well ain't that a jolly coincidence?" said Ida. "So do I! In fact, I like 'em all!"

"So do we!" said Clay. "Let's read some more."

Ida started reading Dick Tracy to them, but Aunt Ernestine interrupted them. "The comic strips will wait; the dishes won't."

"Oh, no, ma'am," said Ida Early. "It's the other way around. If the funnies are not read they're liable to disappear - somebody will throw 'em out or burn them up or something. But

dirty dishes? Why I ain't never known one of them to get away!"

Christmas With Ida Early continues the story and again, Ida shows that what's in the heart is more important than the way one looks. Ida is one unique character I'd sure like to meet. This book is appropriate for ages 5 and up. You can certainly read it to a younger child, especially if you also have older children.

It's difficult to give hard and fast rules about how old a child should be before reading a certain book out loud. The main thing to watch for in any child is enjoyment of the story. What is interesting to some children might be boring or too complex for others. If you find that you have chosen a book that none of your children like, stop reading it. There is no value in making them listen when they've had enough or don't like the story. Being read to needs to be a pleasurable experience.

Positive child image

The Story of Holly and Ivy by Rumer Godden is about a little orphan girl who decides that she's going to find her grandmother this Christmas. It's lovely story of both a doll and a little girl. You can find this book in an illustrated version or as a short chapter book. Because our daughter's name is Holly, this was a favorite at our house. This story is for children 4 and up. Rumer Godden has written a number of books about dolls and children. Characteristic of her writing is the way she keeps two storylines going – one from the dolls' point of view and one from the people's point of view. Try the library for books.

Positive Humour

Jack Kent's *The Twelve Days of Christmas* is an example of illustrative humor. This is a picture book for ages 2/3 and up that depicts in illustrations what it would be like to receive all those gifts in the song *The Twelve Days of Christmas*.

Morris's Disappearing Bag by Rosemary Wells is another funny story that we enjoyed. Morris is the youngest of five children. On Christmas morning his siblings let each other play with their presents, but Morris is not allowed to because he is too small. Morris then finds a special present under the tree - a disappearing bag. I won't tell you the end; it will spoil the surprise! For children 3 and up.

Excitement keeps children's interest alive in a longer read-aloud story.

Warton's Christmas Eve Adventure by Russell E. Erickson is filled with excitement as Warton, the toad, helps a mole find his way home on the day before Christmas. As Warton and the mole search for his destination, they disturb a hibernating bear. I find the warmth and general tone of concern for others in this book delightful. There are other stories about Warton and his brother, Morton, by the same author - *Toad for Tuesday* being the first one in the series. Look for them in your library or in second hand stores.

Realistic portrayal

I'll limit myself to just one more book - *Oliver and Amanda's Christmas* by Jean van Leeuwen - for it's realistic portrayal of what Christmas can be like in a family. I especially enjoyed the story about Oliver and his huge Christmas list and his subsequent search for a stocking large enough to hold all the things he asks for. *Oliver and Amanda's Christmas* is part of a series of early reading books about this brother and sister by Jean van Leeuwen. It can be read to children 3 and up. One

advantage of reading beginning reader books to your little children is that when they are ready to read these stories will be familiar.

Explore your library's holiday collections of children's books. You'll find many others that you will enjoy. The ones that become particular favorites are the ones to purchase so that you and your children can read them again and again. Second hand shops, garage sales, and even library discard sales can be great places to find holiday and other children's books at very reasonable prices. And of course, new books from bookstores make great presents. Happy holiday reading!

Marty Layne is the mother of four adults who learned at home K-12. She is the author of *Learning At Home: A Mother's Guide To Homeschooling and Autumn Stories* and has recorded a children's music CD *Brighten the Day - songs to celebrate the seasons* available from www.martylayne.com.

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