



The Usual Santas: A Soho Crime Holiday Anthology

Peter Lovesey (Forward)

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Eighteen delightful holiday short stories by some of your favorite Soho Crime authors!

This captivating collection—which features bestselling, and award-winning authors—contains laughs aplenty, the most hardboiled of holiday noir, and heartwarming reminders of the spirit of the season.

Nine mall Santas must find the imposter among them. An elderly lady seeks peace from her murderously loud neighbors at Christmastime. A young woman receives a mysterious invitation to Christmas dinner with a stranger. Niccolò Machiavelli sets out to save an Italian city. Sherlock Holmes's one-time nemesis Irene Adler finds herself in an unexpected tangle in Paris while on a routine espionage assignment. Jane Austen searches for the Dowager Duchess of Wilborough's stolen diamonds. And other adventures that will whisk readers away to Christmases around the globe, from a Korean War POW camp to a Copenhagen refugee squat to the streets of Thailand.

The Usual Santas: A Soho Crime Holiday Anthology Details

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Lesya says

As it gets close to Christmas, librarians are often asked for unusual holiday books. This year, my pick may be *The Usual Santas: A Collection of Soho Crime Christmas Capers*. These aren't the typical Christmas stories. Eighteen Soho Crime authors present holiday offerings, and a few are quite twisted. Peter Lovesey introduces the collection, and ends it with his own story, a perfect Christmas ghost story.

The stories take place all over the world, "Sweden, North Korea, Thailand, Ireland, New York City, Utah, Italy, France, Denmark and England". There are dark and wicked stories in the second section called "Silent Night", in which Colin Cotterill, Ed Lin, Stuart Neville, Tod Goldberg, Henry Chang, and James R. Benn truly do write "The Darkest of Holiday Noir". In fact, Ed Lin's "Martin" was just creepy.

In "Joy to the World", Helene Tursten, Mick Herron, Martin Limon, Timothy Hallinan, Teresa Dovalpage, and Mette Ivie Harrison present "Various Acts of Kindness at Christmas". I have to admit my favorite section, though, was the final one, "I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus", which meant "And Other Holiday Secrets". I did think Lene Kaaberbel and Agnete Friis' story was dark enough to fall in the previous division. But, I loved stories here. Sujata Massey took us back to 1921 with Bombay's first woman solicitor. Gary Corby also took us to the past with a story of Machiavelli and Cesare Borgia. Cara Black's Paris is recognizable, but instead of an Aimee Leduc story, she tells a story of Irene Adler and Sherlock Holmes. There's a Jane Austen story by Stephanie Barron.

But, it's Peter Lovesey's ghost story, "Supper with Miss Shivers" that provided an answer to a mystery, and a delightful Christmas ending.

Twisted, satisfying. *The Usual Santas* was not usual at all. It's a perfect Christmas gift or pre-holiday gift for someone who wants something a little different to read this year.

Michael says

Were it not for 4 stories in this short story collection I would have given it 2 stars at the most. I found the majority of the stories to be less than thrilling and with little humor. I like my mayhem with humor, at least a bit.

Helen Tursten starts off this collection with *An Elderly Lady Seeks Peace At Christmastime*.

Maud is certainly elderly but she is also delightfully selfish and doesn't mind being evil to cater to that selfishness. When you think of an octogenarian who just wants a bit of peace and quiet to enjoy her solitude at Christmas you have to, if not chuckle out loud (yes, some of us do still chuckle and even guffaw) you have a smile on your lips. Or maybe I'm just a very twisted individual.

Next, Mick Herron gives us the title story, *The Usual Santas*.

There are 8 Santas working the oversized shopping center and there it is, Christmas Eva and they repair to a

hospitality room where they had a buffet and brandy complete with 8 brandy snifters. The only problem is that as the last Santa comes in from his rounds, finally free of those bothersome elves, there is no brandy snifter for his use. How could this be? Well, the answer comes with a headcount; there are 9. . . count them, NINE Santas! That's how this could be but. . . how could this be? Who is the imposter? And how will the Santas go about finding out who the imposter is? (This is where I find myself with a mixed message; I cannot recommend this book but in order to find out the answer one must, as I so often say in my reviews, READ THE BOOK!)

Next we have Chalee's Nativity by Thomas Hallinan.

This is a story of a young orphan Thai girl living on the streets of Bangkok and who has taken an even younger street orphan under wing even if reluctantly. Chalee is an artist and is just discovering the depths of her talent while Apple, the other girl tries to interrupt her. Chalee isn't thrilled with the interruption and Apple, being a girl of indeterminate age but maybe 8, 9, wants attention as children of that age do. The result is hurt feelings, both for Apple because of rejection and shortly thereafter for Chalee who is sorry for having rejected Apple.

Yes, you will need to read the book in order to see what happens but if you are like me, have some tissues close by. I did and I needed them.

The last of these stories that I enjoyed and can recommend is When The Time Came by Lene Kaaberbol and Agnete Friis, a pair of Danish authors who give us a story of a birth at Christmas, of compassion and human frailty all in one short story. This was not a nice little story, in fact just the opposite, but that compassion does show through. It also left several unanswered questions.

In fact there were several stories that I felt left out a great deal of information. At the end you are left wondering "But. . . but. . . what about this? What about that?" Alas, we are left to our own devices to either come up with a solution or to say to hell with it and move on. I moved on for the most part.

There is one other story that deserves mention. . . NOT honorable mention but just mention; Cabert Aux Assassins by Cara Black.

When you take iconic figures such as Irene Adler; "That Woman" as Holmes referred to her as, and even Holmes himself, you should be very damn good at penning a story using them. Ms. Black was not. It's less than gracious of me to mention that but damnit, just as Jim Croce told us in his great song when he admonished us not to mess around with Jim, you don't mess around with Sherlock or even a one off character in Doyle's prose, Adler. If you do you cannot expect to let bygones be bygones. You're going to be called out for your transgressions.

Woody Chandler says

It was tough for me to rate this one. There were some stories that I really liked & others that just did not quite do it for me, especially in the latter part of the anthology. I was happy for a Martin Limon Sgts. Bascomb & Sueno story & the middle-third of the book was very noirish, but as a whole, I was bogging down towards the end. YMMV.

Ray Palen says

SOHO Crime has been publishing terrific crime/mystery stories for many years. Their lineup of writers features an international mix of authors that brought different settings and characters that allowed readers to travel without ever leaving their armchair.

THE USUAL SANTAS is not just the title of a story in this collection (that one penned by Mick Herron), but also sets the tone for a group of stories that used the Christmas season as a backdrop for great short mystery tales from all over the globe.

I thoroughly enjoyed all of these stories and will highlight some of the standouts: Mick Herron's 'The Usual Santas' features a group of Mall Santa Clauses trying to figure out which one of their team of Kris Kringle's might be a thief in red and white costume! Author Martin Limon, who pens the terrific series featuring Sueno and Bascom, where he features his two CID Investigators from their base in Seoul Korea circa 1970. 'PX Christmas' deals with the problem of suicide which seems to increase among GI's during the holiday season.

Timothy Hallinan sets 'Chalee's Nativity' amongst children. His reason for this is explained in his brief forward where he indicates that, for him, Christmas has always been about the children. Chalee is a young girl with a lot of spunk and this story is quite moving. The 'SILENT NIGHT' section of this collection features The Darkest Of Holiday Noir and there are some excellent stories here. Ed Lin's 'Martin' is set in NYC. What I enjoyed most was a reference he made that immediately reminded me of Peter Straub's classic supernatural novel, GHOST STORY. The characters play an interesting game entitled Sharing and one of them opens up a slip of paper that asks: "What was the first thing you ever did?". If you are a fan of GHOST STORY, that line will give you chills just like it did for me.

Irish author Stuart Neville pens 'Queen of the Hill', which refers to a local woman named Anne Mahon, who had quite the reputation with how she handled her men --- and not necessarily in the way you might think. A chilling tale. Tod Goldberg's 'Blue Memories Start Calling' is one of my favorite short stories in this collection. It hits you immediately over the head with a cache of bones that are dug up to reveal a murdered family that had gone missing. This one is straight police procedural with the expected CSI magic and all set against the Christmas backdrop.

For fans of classic literature there are a handful of great tales featuring famous and very recognizable literary figures. Gary Corby's 'The Prince Of Peace' stars Niccolo Machiavelli who is attempting to save a small Italian city. Cara Black, who writes one of my all-time favorite series set in Paris and featuring Aimee Leduc, this time gives us a tale that stars Sherlock Holmes himself along with his one-time protégé and sometime adversary, Irene Adler, in an interesting case set in the City of Lights. Stephanie Barron brings us 'Jane and the Midnight Clear' that utilizes Jane Austen as the central figure in a case of theft circa 1804, Bath. The final tale is by the same author who penned the Foreword for THE USUAL SANTAS, Peter Lovesey. 'Supper With Miss Shivers' finds a young couple on a Christmas jaunt to meet with a mystery woman named Miss Shivers. They will leave this meeting with a very special Christmas gift and a sense of peace.

THE USUAL SANTAS provides a great opportunity for readers not familiar with the SOHO Crime lineup to get a taste of the many fine, eclectic, international group of writers they boast. A fine Christmas present indeed!

Sue says

A very interesting collection of eighteen stories, set all over the world, and in many eras, during the holiday season. These tales are divided into three sections: "Joy to the World"- Acts of Holiday Kindness; "Silent Night"- The Darkest of Holiday Noir; and "I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus" and other Holiday Secrets. Their authors were mostly new to me but I will be happy to meet most of them again.

I enjoyed most of the stories and there was only one, really, that I felt missed the mark completely. Among those that I found very well written, very clever, or just generally quite good are "The Usual Santas" (cheeky and fun); "Queen of the Hill" (Christmas noir by Stuart Neville); the very understated "Martin" by Ed Lin; "Red Christmas" by James Benn (set in a POW camp in Korea); "When the Time Came" by Lene Kaaberbol & Agnete Friis, a timely story of troubled immigrants in Denmark; "Hairpin Holiday" by Sujata Massey, a mystery set in 1920s Bombay; and Peter Lovesey's contribution, "Supper with Miss Shivers", a holiday ghost story.

There were several others that I enjoyed just a bit less. All in all, I found this to be a very successful collection of stories and an excellent introduction to new (to me) authors. That may prove to be the same situation for you. If you enjoy mystery, crime or thriller stories, this would be a collection to choose, even if it's not the holiday season.

A copy of this book was provided by the publisher through NetGalley in return for an honest review.

Kelsea says

I enjoyed the concept behind this anthology: crime fiction short stories set in various cultures around the world. The diversity of the authors was definitely a plus.

Unfortunately, the stories themselves were often confusing. Some felt like a chapter pulled out of a larger story, without much introduction or a satisfying conclusion. Others were self-contained stories but felt like they had no point or purpose.

My favorite of the stories was The Usual Santas by Mick Herron, which was the perfect mix of cheeky, funny and magical. I loved this one and wish more of them had felt more like it.

Overall, I'm giving it three stars despite my lukewarm thoughts on the anthology as a whole, mostly because I found the diverse cultural references and settings really interesting!

Lelia Taylor says

3.5 stars

Short stories are not my usual cuppa but, for some reason, I feel differently about it during the Christmas season. Maybe their brevity appeals to me because I'm so busy with other things at this time of year and like

to sandwich in a story here and there, more satisfying than just a chapter or two of a full-length novel.

Christmasy short stories can be a lot of fun and those included in *The Usual Santas* certainly are but some of them are definitely darker and they take place around the world (as might be expected from authors from Soho Press which focuses largely on non-American work). And what a terrific group of authors these 18 are!

From Timothy Hallinan comes a story about Chalee, a street kid in Bangkok who draws a special picture for a younger child and Stephanie Barron takes us back to 1804 Bath, England, telling the tale of sleuth Jane Austen who has been invited to join Lord Harold Trowbridge's family as they celebrate New Year's Eve, not anticipating that she'll become involved in the theft of a magnificent necklace. Mette Ivie Harrison offers a look at a Mormon community just before Christmas when two families' sons are about to go out on their missions while Peter Lovesey has Fran and Jim Palmer going on a small adventure—supper with the unknown Miss Shivers—where Fran learns a secret from her past, a secret that is overshadowed by an encounter with a very special young man.

Those are just a sample of the gems in *The Usual Santas* and I highly recommend this anthology to anyone with a fondness for Christmas tales.

Eric says

Thank you to NetGalley and Soho Press for the ARC.

There are 18 stories in this, each with a brief biographical and bibliographical introduction. The Foreword and final story are by the well-respected Peter Lovesey and, at the end, there is a list of titles in the Soho Crime Series.

There are 3 sections, "Acts of Kindness at Christmas", "Darkest of Holiday Noir" and "I saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus", each with six stories.

The settings are international and the historical periods range from Italy at the time of the Borgias to contemporary Scandinavia.

As with most collections, especially themed ones, there are a few plums, and a few duds, but, on the whole, this is solidly interesting and good value.

The stand-out stories were, "An Elderly Lady Seeks Peace at Christmas", "The Usual Santas", "The Prince (of Peace)" and "Supper with Miss Shivers".

The middle section of "noir" stories appealed least to me.

Some of the stories were too long. One story did not appear to fit the Santa/Christmas/Holidays theme. Three of those with historic settings were marred by mistakes either of history or language.

These stories are not, in the main, for those seeking "cosiness" as many of them are very serious and some quite disturbing. However this is within tradition, as many of Dickens' and M.R. James' "Christmas" tales are very unsettling.

3.5 twinkling stars!

Jennie Rosenblum says

This is a collection of short stories ranging from cute cozy type mysteries to one that I had to stop reading because it was just too graphic for me. A couple of authors I like were included like Peter Lovesay and Stephanie Barron. All the stories have something to do with the holiday season. The great part about any good collection is you can read one story, skip the next, go back to it later etc. The last story was the perfect ending for the collection.

Susan says

There's a lot of reading in this collection, edited by Peter Lovesey and including one of his own stories, and if you're looking for new authors, it's probably a good bet. Soho Crime publishes a good share of international authors, and many of these stories are set in countries that don't even celebrate Christmas. Some of the authors switch which countries or detectives or even centuries they usually write about, for these items which combine holidays and crime. The short that gives the collection its name (by Mick Herron) is a particular favorite of mine, but every reader will have a different favorite.

Jim says

A pretty good collection, but there were some really dark stories here. Don't read it to get into the Xmas spirit.

Foreword by Peter Lovesey -

Joy to the World

"An Elderly Lady Seeks Peace at Christmastime" by **Helene Tursten** - Well put together. The character develops perfectly into a climax that almost becomes inevitable.

"The Usual Santas" by **Mick Herron** - pretty silly. No real impact.

"PX Christmas" by **Martin Limón** - is set in South Korea. Very good view of common problems.

"Chalee's Nativity" by **Timothy Hallinan** - just sad. So much talent going to waste.

"The Cuban Marquiese's Jewels" by **Teresa Dovalpage** - very well done & twisty.

"A Mother's Curse" by **Mette Ivie Harrison** - Mormons in Boston with an interesting way of dealing with crime. Hope it works out for them.

Silent Night

"There's Only One Father Christmas, Right?" by **Colin Cotterill** - I did not see that coming! Awful on too many levels. Well written, just terrible.

"Martin" by Ed Lin - what people will do for acceptance! What a truly disgusting worm. Well done!

"Queen of the Hill" by Stuart Neville - Drink, drugs, & sex in Ireland with some very tough people involved. I wasn't sure how it was going to end. Great!

"Blue Memories Start Calling" by Tod Goldberg - A policeman struggles with following the rules & the weight of his job over the years. Sad & well done.

"Bo Sau (Vengeance)" by Henry Chang - A fine piece of vengeance!

"Red Christmas" by James R. Benn - a Korean war POW story. Horrible times. Well done.

I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus & other holiday secrets

"When the Time Came" by Lene Kaaberbøl & Agnete Friis - Brave ladies in Denmark! Immigrants seeking asylum have it tough.

"Hairpin Holiday" by Sujata Massey - A gutsy, smart lawyer lady in India foils a crime. Good, but could have been leaner.

"The Prince (of Peace)" by Gary Corby - Borgia & Machiavelli square off in about 1500. Delicate intrigues ensue. Super!

"Cabaret aux Assassins" by Cara Black - I found the French pronunciations tough to understand at times, but this was a marvelous tale of Holmes & his true love.

"Jane & the Midnight Clear" by Stephanie Barron - a Victorian theft mystery. Not really my thing, but well enough done.

"Supper With Miss Shivers" by Peter Lovesey - was excellent. I never knew what was going on until it happened & then it made a lot of sense.

Lynn says

The Usual Santas includes 18 short stories from Soho Crime writers. The location for the stories are international. You can be reading a story from South Korea and then the next short story takes place in Thailand. Then you are in Cuba in the next story.

It is a good opportunity to sample different writers who may be new to you or revisit an author who you have read before. They are divided into 3 parts. Part one was Joy to the World and contained 6 stories. Part two was Silent Night and contained 6 stories. This was the noir portion of the book. Part 3 was I saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus and contained 6 stories. They were all well written. There, of course, were favorites but there wasn't any that I didn't like. It is nice to be able to pick up the book and read a short story during a busy time. I especially liked being introduced to new authors.

Marielle Armstrong says

I found out about The Usual Santas anthology because I enjoy Gary Corby's Athenian novels. On his blog, he described this book containing his Christmas-themed story as "... the perfect Christmas gift if you are murderously inclined." So naturally I went looking for it.

Sadly, I did not get my hands on it until February. It was well worth waiting for, though.

The great thing about anthologies like this is that they introduce you to authors you haven't met before. I will go hunting for other books by some of the authors in The Usual Santas, based on how well I liked their stories.

The story I was waiting for was Gary Corby's "The Prince (of Peace)." It opens with a casual discussion between Niccolo Machiavelli and Cesare Borgia about the pitfalls inherent in gift-giving at Christmas. It has a wonderful sense of the period as Machiavelli walks through the city of Cesena, where he is on a diplomatic mission, and interacts with various people he meets – a widow and her sons weeping at the gallows, Borgia's ambitious second in command, a monk in the cathedral. The conclusion seems in character for Machavelli, and yet hints at more depth of feeling.

Mick Herron's rollicking story, "The Usual Santas" gives its name to the anthology. It opens with a lengthy encomium of a mega-mall (shudder). The mall employs eight Santas, and after everything has closed on Christmas Eve the Santas gather, by their custom still in beards and uniforms and in character, for a buffet and a great deal of brandy while they exchange war stories. But it seems there are nine Santas on this particular evening.... Wonderful!

Peter Lovesey's Foreword gives the background for the collection and previews some of the joys to come, and his ghost story "Supper With Miss Shivers" concludes the anthology. I also enjoyed Helene Tursten's story about Maud, the sociopathic octogenarian, "An Elderly Lady Seeks Peace at Christmastime" and Sujata Massey's "Hairpin Holiday" set in 1920s Bombay. Cara Black adds a suitably atmospheric story about Irene Adler's daughter in "Cabaret aux Assassins."

Some of the other stories were too dark for me but I'm sure someone else will appreciate them.

Chris says

I enjoyed this collection of crime stories themed around the holidays quite a bit. Particularly because I was surprised to find a number of more international authors had lended their talents to it. The themes of Christmas are not always prevalent in each story, and some were a little boring (I disliked maybe 3 out of the many) but overall I had a good time reading this Christmas crime collection.

Sandy says

I love anthologies like this. When your schedule is crazy & you find it difficult to make any progress on a full-meal book, these provide the perfect snack. Here we have 18 stories with an interesting theme. All are set around the Xmas season. But that's about all they have in common as the authors took the brief & ran

with it.

Some are funny, some are gritty. Settings include different centuries & locales such as Seoul, Bangkok, Ireland, America & Cuba. And genres run the gamut from psychological to full on action. There are even a few names you'll recognize such as Jane Austen & Sherlock Holmes.

Like most collections some are great, most are good & a couple are meh. But what falls into those categories will vary from reader to reader. My favourites were those by Helene Tursten (do NOT mess with a Swedish granny), Teresa Dovalpage (great characters, set in Cuba), Tod Goldberg (poignant tale of a lonely sheriff's final days on the job) & Martin Limón (American military police in 1970's Korea). Two of these authors I'd never read before & therein lies the gift. It's great chance to try out new (to you) authors & editor Peter Lovesey has included each writer's back list at the end so you can easily select something meatier by whoever catches your fancy.

It's a great book to take on your daily commute or leave on the bedside table. Just keep it handy for those times when you have a few minutes to escape to another time or country.
