



# A Christmas Cornucopia

*Mark Forsyth*

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**The unpredictable origins and etymologies of our cracking Christmas customs**

For something that happens every year of our lives, we really don't know much about Christmas.

We don't know that the date we celebrate was chosen by a madman, or that Christmas, etymologically speaking, means 'Go away, Christ'. Nor do we know that Christmas was first celebrated in 243 AD on 28 March - and only moved to 25 December in 354 AD. We're oblivious to the fact that the advent calendar was actually invented by a Munich housewife to stop her children pestering her for a Christmas countdown. And we would never have guessed that the invention of crackers was merely a way of popularizing sweet wrappers.

Luckily, like a gift from Santa himself, Mark Forsyth is here to unwrap this fundamentally funny gallimaufry of traditions and oddities, making it all finally make sense - in his wonderfully entertaining wordy way.

## A Christmas Cornucopia Details

Date : Published November 3rd 2016 by Viking

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Author : Mark Forsyth

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## **From Reader Review A Christmas Cornucopia for online ebook**

### **Margaret says**

A book about Christmas traditions.

It was okay, but I much prefer Mark's books about the English language.

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### **Richard Thomas says**

This is a light hearted but learned skip through the customs we enjoy at Christmas. There's much to be learned from this book and many preconceptions challenged. It's probably not best read as a whole but dipped into and savoured.

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### **Ellie says**

Christmas is a funny old time of year, where we do some odd things and no one really knows why. Never fear, Mark Forsyth is here to explain some of our festive traditions, where they came from and why Christmas carols rarely make sense.

If you love etymology (that's the origins of words) then you really must read Mark's books. If not, well, A Christmas Cornucopia will still arm you with plenty of festive facts to arm yourself with for even the most challenging Christmas gathering. Does everyone believe modern Santa was created by Coca-Cola? Well I'll admit I thought that too, but you can whip this book out and explain why Santa is a result of anti-British sentiment in America despite the Puritans over there repeatedly trying to ban Christmas.

You'll also find out why your Christmas tree should have a snake in it (I'm working on that for next year), how the Twelve Days of Christmas is inspired by a recipe and that robins are only bold birds in Britain. I had forever thought that Christmas Day was put where it was because of the winter solstice and pagan celebrations, but turns out some madman known as The Computist spent a very long time working it out with maths. He even wrote a very boring and hard to follow book about it.

Even the index entries are a tad amusing. Jealousy towards British balls, Crackers – what the Computist was and in-laws – strangulation of. If you're looking for a festive read but don't really want anything too schmaltzy, this is the book for you.

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### **Andrew Fish says**

Christmas is, looked at dispassionately, a very strange affair. The amalgam of traditions seems to have little to do with the events which ostensibly inspired them. Some, indeed, seem positively bizarre (although not so much so as the Peruvian festival of Takankuy). Most claim that this is because they are either Victorian invention or pagan rites re-purposed, but Mark Forsyth begs to differ. In this slim volume he explores

everything from the date of Christmas to the tradition of Boxing Day, from the pulling of crackers to the eating of Turkey, revealing the often surprising origins of one and all.

There have, of course, been a number of books about Christmas traditions over the years - before the company folded, they were very much Past Times' seasonal stock in trade. Many of these volumes were dry tomes, however, popular only with people searching for topics for festive small-talk and about as enjoyable as the Oxford English Dictionary. Forsyth's is an altogether different animal: a man who first made his mark by writing a book on etymology clearly relishes the English language and this makes his volume brim with joy and colour. From the moment he presents his (unfortunately apocryphal) story of an early Japanese attempt to understand the Western Christmas, you find yourself smiling, and even when covering material which isn't intrinsically amusing, his tone carries you through.

Unfortunately, like Christmas itself, the book is quickly over and life seems a little glummer. But while it lasts, the book is an informative guide to the festive season - at least for those of us in colder climes - and a light, amusing read to chase off the winter blues.

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### **Austra says**

A Christmas must-read!

Visvair?k man š? gr?mata pat?k t?d??, ka autoram ir izdevies p?rv?rst absurdu kaudzi inform?cijas, kas uzkr?ta 2000 gadu garum?, par izklaid?jošu un uzjautriņošu gr?matu, kas ironiz? par daž?diem ar Ziemassv?tkiem saist?tiem m?tiem un trad?cij?m. S?kot ar to, kad tad ?sti ir J?zus dzimene, k?p?c tieši egl?te un ko paties?b? noz?m? "Advente", l?dz Ziemassv?tku dziesm?m, kas liel?koties tapu?as ne gluži ar t?du m?r?i, zieme?briedi R?dolfu, kura dzimums ir apstr?dams, un vis?m p?r?j?m ar šiem sv?tkiem saist?taj?m liet?m, piem?ram, Santaklausu un visu vi?a garo v?sturi, 12 putniem, sab?ztiem citcit? un izceptiem, un citiem labumiem.

Izcila gr?mata, ko palas?t sv?tku sezon?, lai apsmaid?tu sevi. Lieku 5 no 5 un piedodu, ka p?d?j? noda?a maz?k izdevusies, jo p?r?jais ir lieliski! PZ!

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### **Ludmila Marton says**

Given the reviews how funny, charming and adorable this book is, one would have naturally high hopes. And yes: writing style is funny - but to my disappointment also cynical, smartypants, even arrogant at places. I actually felt real anger sometimes because of that.

The historical facts are by no means interesting but remember one thing when you pick up this book: You will get the narrative of a smart person that is intrigued by historical background of Christmas, but most probably does not love it.

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### **Steven says**

At-times hysterically funny but always engaging, interesting, and full of holiday insight. Highly recommended!

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## **Imaan Tamimi says**

I loved it! The writing style was entertaining!

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## **Anne says**

A Christmas Cornucopia by Mark Forsyth was published in hardback and ebook by Viking on 10 November 2016, priced £9.99

‘Picture a man sitting beside a dead tree. He is indoors and wearing a crown.

From the ceiling hangs a parasitical shrub that legitimates sexual assault.

Earlier, he told his children that the house had been broken into during the night by an obese Turkish man. That was a lie, but he wanted to make his children happy’

I absolutely love books like A Christmas Cornucopia, not only is it beautifully presented as a small hardback with an exquisite cover, it is jam packed with witty and fascinating facts and stories about Christmas. This really would make the perfect stocking-filler, I've already bought two copies!

Mark Forsyth doesn't just churn out the stories that he has discovered, his writing is an absolute delight. From the biography of Santa Claus to why is it 25th December? He is hilarious, and does actually make the reader realise just how crazy some of our Christmas traditions really are.

Who knew that Advent Calendars were invented by a German housewife who was fed up to the back teeth of hearing her children whinge during the run up to Christmas.

Amongst other Christmas nuggets, you will learn:

- \* A ‘true’ Christmas tree should feature a snake as decoration (it’s actually a reference to Adam and Eve)
- \* Good King Wenceslas was in fact Duke Vaclav of Bohemia, a man so at war with his mother that he exiled her
- \* A truly traditional Christmas Day includes ‘wassailing’ i.e. knocking on your neighbours’ doors with a large bucket and demanding that they fill it with booze

A fascinating and interesting collection of little known facts about one of our biggest traditions. Quiz players will love this book.

A real treasure of a book!

<http://randomthingsthroughmyletterbox...>

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## **W says**

Delightful short book which aims to give the reader a better understanding of all the things that people do during Christmas and their origins.

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### **Eric Rietveld says**

I cannot highly recommend this erudite short romp through the history of Christmas enough. It's funny, informative, and a quick read. Do yourself a favour and learn why Rudolph is a transgender reindeer.

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### **Krist?ne says**

"(..) for all of us, the perfect Christmas is the one of our childhood that will not come again. An annual feast will always have something missing: the empty chair at the Christmas table where somebody used to sit, who is now missing. And one day, I suppose, I shall be missing too, and you, dear reader, will be missing. And the feast will continue.

For children, Christmas is everything they might be given, for an adult, Christmas is everything we have lost. This is a truth that was as clear to Charles Dickens as it was to George Michael."

P?ri visiem smiekl?gajiem faktiem un centieniem saprast laika rata trad?ciju malumu - sirds.

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### **Margaret Madden says**

Laugh out loud blend of history and humour. Full review to follow...

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### **Ashleigh says**

Entertaining, interesting and enjoyable book detailing the origins of all things Christmas. Will definitely read again. Enjoyed Mark Forsyth's dry sense of humour which made me laugh out loud in places.

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### **TheRavenking says**

A witty little book about the history and origins of Christmas, A Christmas Cornucopia is the perfect gift for anyone who always wondered how exactly our Xmas traditions came about.

The book is divided into chapters on 25th of December, the Christmas Tree, Advent, the Christmas Carols, Santa Claus, Christmas Dinner and Boxing Day.

Even if you are already a pretty knowledgeable chap, you can learn something new. Did you know that it was part of the good old English Christmas, that noblemen opened their houses to the poor on Christmas Day, who received a large meal and were generally treated well during the festive period? This was before Ollie Cromwell and his Puritan cronies took over and banned Christmas. Or that contrary to popular belief it wasn't Coca Cola which gave Santa Claus his red outfit?

There is even a bit where the author explains, why he doesn't say anything about foreign Christmas traditions. (Clue: Because of globalisation Christmas is becoming the same everywhere.)

It is very entertaining, perhaps almost too entertaining. Occasionally I got the impression, that this book was trying a bit too hard at times being funny, which made it exhausting to read. Mr. Forsyth is the literary equivalent of a hysterically funny stand-up comedian who packs so many jokes into each of his lines, that it becomes just a bit too much. Yet underneath all this hyperactive style there is real content and heart.

Unexpectedly the ending really got to me in an emotional way. I tend to get awfully sentimental around Christmas time, and without exaggerating I almost had tears in my eyes reading these final passages:

“The truth is, that for all of us, the perfect Christmas is the one of our childhood that will not come again. An annual feast will always have something missing: the empty chair at the Christmas table where somebody used to sit, who is now missing. And one day, I suppose, I shall be missing too; and you, dear reader, will be missing; and everyone we sit down with this year, old and young will one day be missing. And the feast will continue.

That is how it always has been and must be. Things disappear, like pieces being slowly removed from a jigsaw. For children, Christmas is everything they might be given; for an adult, Christmas is everything we have lost. This a truth that was as clear to Charles Dickens as it was to George Michael.

But even when we have exchanged our annual truths for eternal ones, Christmas will continue, because we need it, because underneath all that wrapping paper we are doing something important, however we choose to do it. Most things in life can be said. If you ask me any simple question – “What’s the capital of France?” “When does the last train leave?” “Would you like a drink?” – I can answer Paris, midnight and whisky. But that is all dross. There is Something Else, something much more important, and I cannot tell what that Something Else is; and if I could tell you, it would not be worth the telling. We cannot say it, but we can somehow do it. And we do it at Christmas.”

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