

Santa: reading

Adults often look back on significant events from their childhood. These memories can be quite strong, or rather vague. People remember riding their first bike, a special birthday party or discovering their pet rabbit had died in the night. For me though, my strongest memory is the day I discovered that Father Christmas doesn't exist! Really! What a shock! For as long as I could remember my family had left milk and biscuits on the kitchen table for the old man to eat. After all, he was travelling the long, cold night on his sled delivering presents to children all round the world so he needed something to keep him going. There were also some carrots for his trusty reindeers.



One Christmas my brothers and I were very concerned that we didn't have a chimney for Santa to climb down. "If we have no chimney," we wailed together, "how can we have our presents?" Our parents took ages explaining that Santa was quite happy to come in through the kitchen door, which they would leave unlocked for that one night, and into the living room. Pacified, we went to bed, our ears straining for the sound of bells and chuckles (Ho ho ho!!) only to fall asleep secure in the knowledge that our presents would be waiting for us under the tree (which we'd spent hours decorating) in the morning.

There were also other awkward questions that my parents were made to answer. "If there's only one Santa, how come he's in two toy shops at the same time, and coming to our school too?" So our parents did start to explain that sometimes someone was dressed up as Santa because we were right, it was impossible for him to be everywhere at the same time. They did convince us, however, that on Christmas Eve it was the bona fide man in red who came into our home and left the toys. So when my older brother came home from school, boasting that he didn't believe in Father Christmas any more and accusing our parents of buying and leaving the presents under the tree themselves (and eating the biscuits!) I was astounded. But even more so when my parents felt "we were old enough to know the truth" and admitted he was right! What! No elves making toys in a workshop in the North Pole? I burst into tears and hid in my room for hours, totally inconsolable.

However, I felt much better about the disastrous news (and I would argue that discovering Santa isn't real is one of the first rites of passage into adulthood) when I found out that Santa, admittedly in the distant past, was based on a real person, or rather two real people. Nowadays Father Christmas and Santa Claus are often interchangeable but in reality they have two different backgrounds. The former is based on a custom, long before Christianity, of an old man in each town or village who knocked on people's doors asking for food and drink. The man was said to represent "Old Winter" and it was thought that if people were kind to him they would not have a bad winter. He later became known as "Father Christmas" and this name is used in the UK, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand and other Commonwealth countries.

Santa Claus, on the other hand, comes from the Dutch translation of Saint Nicholas, *Sinterklaas*. He was believed to have been a Bishop who lived in Myra (now Turkey) in

the 4th Century who gave presents to the poor. His saint day is 6 December and this day, or the day before, is the gift-receiving day for children in many countries including the Netherlands, Belgium and the Czech Republic. Dutch immigrants to the US took the custom of *Sinterklaas* with them where Santa Claus has become synonymous with Christmas although he has nothing to do with the origins of Christmas Day itself.

There is comfort, however, for those of you who think that Santa Claus and his big, bulging bag of presents has made Christmas far too commercial: Zenta Claus. Not one but many, Zenta Clauses can be found wearing the traditional red and white suit with a long, white beard outside shopping malls and department stores during the busiest shopping season of the year. However, Zentas don't persuade people to shop. Instead they sit quietly, simply meditating on the negative aspects of the consumer culture. Originally from Japan but becoming popular in other countries, Zenta Claus encourages people to consider *not* spending money on things people neither need nor really want. Have a look - their bag is empty, now that's another shock! Ho ho ho!!