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Any Holiday but Christmas - 2021



# The 2021 Christmas Book

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Lynn Maudlin

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## Columbus Heritage Day Through a Glass Darkly

Creative Nonfiction by Tom Allbaugh

“Please-a Mista Colombus, a-turn-a da ship a-round!”

That’s most of what I remember from a song my mother used to play on the HiFi in our home in the early 1960s. From an album by Lou Monte, an Italian-American singer, the song tells the story of Christopher Columbus’ journey across the Atlantic in 1492, mostly from the perspective of a sailor named Luigi looking out from the Crow’s Nest of one of the ships.

There were other songs on the album—“Pepino the Italian Mouse,” and another about George Washington crossing the Delaware—like the Columbus number, sung to a Tarantella dance rhythm. This music was popular in the early 1960s for some reason. My mother, who liked Sinatra, Harry Belafonte, and most opera, was a first generation Italian-American, and so was Lou Monte, whose limited range seemed to fit her sense of humor, at least, even as it probably resonated with her experience of growing up in a mostly immigrant culture.

This music graced our home a year or two after I received a Scholastic book club book about Columbus and read in the first grade about his discovering America.

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“Why you tell-a Isabella that the world is round?” –Lou Monte

My first grade teacher, Miss Boss, held an orange up in front of her and then showed a moth coming up over the edge of it. This was meant to show how Columbus had supposedly determined that there was a curve to the earth.

I don’t actually remember whether Miss Boss used a moth to demonstrate this. She may have used a napkin or a paper towel. The demonstration was also illustrated in my Scholastic book, which showed Columbus in his characteristic hat and slippers and holding an orange up before Queen Isabel, and showing a butterfly coming over the edge and its wings increasingly visible. This was the way that ships would appear on the horizon, he argued. First, the very tops of the sails, then the sails, then the ship would appear.

Here was the proof that the world was not flat. Here was the proof that launched the Nina, the Pinta, and the Santa Maria.

I remember reading that book and taking in the drawn, sketched pictures and then painting my picture of the Nina, the Pinta, and the Santa Maria on a blue ocean. This was also the year that John Glenn orbited the Earth, and my class joined the other two first grade classes at Mrs. Rosenberg's house to listen to this.

There was so much in those days about exploration, journeys, and travel.

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"Please-a Mista Colombus, a-turn-a da ship a-round!"

Today, Columbus Day is controversial. It is seen as the celebration of another oppressive European. Mostly, like everything I learned about in school—the settling of the American West, the battle at the Alamo—I've just simply accepted that the stories we were told as children were too simple. What we were told was wrong, and now we are getting the full story.

And objections to the canceling of Columbus Day have been coming from Italian-American communities in New York City. The Columbus Day Parade is the only Italian-American pageant still in existence, and without it, what will Italians have to celebrate?

Well, there must be plenty of things, not to mention that America is named after an Italian, Amerigo Vespucci. And there's also opera.

I've also recently read about how treacherous it was to sail the Atlantic before there was an understanding of how to mark latitude under cloudy skies. Ships often wound up thousands of miles off course without stars to follow. This is probably what happened to Columbus, though he made other mistakes.

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"Please Mista Columbus a don't turn-a do ship around."

This is the last verse, sung after the final verse about the discovery of the new world, shows Luigi, from the Crow's nest, having a change of heart as he sees land.

I'm not sure that Columbus Day needs to be stopped. At the same time, I don't know that we need to have a school holiday for it either. And I would think that in addition to the demonstration with the orange, we should talk about the testy relations with indigenous peoples.

It seems that we can have it both ways. We can have a day where the explorer is acknowledged and discussed. Perhaps the parades could go on in New York. Everyone likes a parade. I haven't seen them, but perhaps we could include all sides in it.

We should be able to talk about the other side of this, the side that my first grade class and Lou Monte never really but obliquely acknowledged. In the last verse, Luigi, from the crow's nest, says that he's ready to stay because he "sees paisans everywhere." That's fellow countrymen. Luigi is perhaps anticipating a day in the 1940s when spaghetti westerns will depict Native Americans with Italian actors. I assume that's what he means by paisans.

The Columbus heritage thing does not matter so much to me, except that I like the fuller story. After all, even Christmas has its pagan practices with trees and winter stuff that the real Jesus would never have seen.

One reason to keep talking about this, what does seem important, though, is what Columbus knew—that the world was round, and I was taught that it was with the same definitive proof that once convinced Isabel enough to send Chris off with three of her ships.

Perhaps this is what will give the story of Columbus new value for today.



## 6 Great Holidays that Changed the World

Joseph Bentz

As a child, I ranked holidays from best to worst in an unspoken list, based largely on the benefits each one had to offer. Here is the list:

### 1. Christmas

Christmas was obviously the greatest, and no other holiday could even hope to come close. Christmas offered that mountain of presents! I spent most of the year waiting for and pleading for the life-changing items that arrived on that day. I could live on the fun and entertainment of that gift pile for months.

Christmas also had plenty of other benefits—the candy and hot chocolate and lights and a tree to decorate and lots of good TV shows—Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer! Charlie Brown! The Grinch!

And then there was all that time off from school. Not just one day, but an entire Christmas Break that lasted two whole weeks!

Christmas had a spiritual component too—the birth of Christ. The manger. Joseph and Mary. The angels. The Christmas carols. The sense of hope and kindness. Christmas was the best holiday ever invented.

### 2. Easter

Far behind Christmas, but still worth looking forward to, was Easter. No pile of presents with this holiday, but the Easter basket, if carefully chosen, meaning that it contained not only candy but also toys, could also be pretty good. Easter candy was also something to look forward to, especially the chocolate bunnies, the Reese's peanut butter and chocolate eggs, the malted milk ball eggs, jelly beans, and other goodies.





Easter had some fun activities too, such as Easter egg hunts and coloring eggs by dipping them into the cups of food coloring. It was also a good family holiday, with everybody dressing up in new clothes and enjoying a big meal with relatives after church.

Easter was also spiritually uplifting as we celebrated the resurrection of Christ. The first time I ever heard “The Hallelujah Chorus” sung live was on an Easter Sunday morning when I was a child. I thought it was the most beautiful song I ever heard. When everybody stood up as the choir started singing, I thought it was a spontaneous response to the beauty of the music, not knowing that standing was traditional for this song.

### 3. The Fourth of July

No gifts for this holiday, and school was already out, but this holiday still included many benefits. It was the one time of year when we were allowed to have fun with things that exploded, smoked, burned and made loud noises. We had firecrackers, bottle rockets, “snakes,” sparklers, smoke bombs, and many other incendiaries that should never be placed into the hands of children.

We also had cook-outs and friends and relatives and games and swimming. And at night, once our own fireworks had all exploded and left indelible stains on the driveway, we watched the professional fireworks exploding in the distant sky.

### 4. Halloween

Trick-or-Treating was at the center of this holiday. The idea that you could wander the neighborhood and receive candy from friends and complete strangers seemed almost too good to be true. We always used pillowcases to gather the candy. The idea was to haul in more than you could ever eat. The costumes were fun, even those sweaty plastic masks that you could hardly see through or breathe through.



This holiday offered a few other benefits, like pumpkin-carving, haunted houses, and an occasional Halloween party. A good holiday, but short, with no time off from school.

## 5. Valentine's Day

This was a minor holiday, but the chocolate was pretty good. It came in heart-shaped assortment boxes. You could buy one for your Mom and then eat most of the candy yourself. There were also those heart-shaped little candies that tasted like sweetened, compressed chalk, and that contained whatever sayings could fit the small space, like “Be Mine,” or “Cutie.”



At school, we made construction-paper containers and decorated them with hearts so that our classmates could put tiny little Valentine's Day cards in them. That's about as much as we could expect from a holiday that focused on romantic love, which was low on our list of priorities.

## 6. Thanksgiving

The food was good, and there was lots of it. Turkey. Pumpkin pie. Sweet potatoes covered in marshmallows. Rolls and butter. We gathered with relatives. We played football, and we watched it. We played games. We felt sleepy. This holiday always fell on a Thursday, which guaranteed that we would get at least two days off school, since no one would be cruel enough to make us go to school on Friday of that week. It was a decent holiday, which made us long for Christmas.

Those were the holidays that mattered, even though there were others on the calendar—Memorial Day, Labor Day, Presidents Day, Veterans Day, Columbus Day. The most you could expect from any of those was a day off school if you were lucky. That was nothing to scoff at, but if we kids had ruled the world, we would have passed a law that required each holiday come with its own set of presents.

## Miscellaneous Ninos Holiday Sharing:

### *Favourite Holidays Traditions, by way of Diana Glycer:*

**Birthday:** Share one highlight from last year and one hope for next year.

**St. Nicholas Day:** Fill a shoe with straw. In the morning, it's filled with candy.

**Losing a Tooth:** the tooth fairy leaves a trail of glittery fairy dust and a letter with excuses about why she is late.

**Boxing Day:** An endless game of Mexican Train and a honey baked ham.

**Christmas Eve:** Line the sidewalk with luminarias (paper bag, sand, and a candle) and watch NORAD Santa Tracker.

**Christmas Morning:** Guests must arrive in pajamas. Homemade waffles and lots of sausage.



**Thanksgiving Weekend:** No "Black Friday" shopping; instead, we cocoon in the family room, eat junk food, and watch old movies.

**New Year's Day:** We visit the L.A. Arboretum early in the day and enjoy blue skies, quiet walks, and hope-filled talks.

**Themed Costume Birthday Parties:** Dress like a cowboy and visit the Western Heritage Museum, etc.

***From Melissa Langdell:***

White rabbit! Our tradition on the first day of the month is to greet each other first thing with White Rabbit for good luck and then we continue with other alliterative animals.



## A Child's Garden of ~~Verses~~ Holidays

Lynn Maudlin

*There are ~~places~~ holidays I'll remember  
 All my life though some have changed  
 Some forever not for better  
 Some have gone and some remain  
 . . . In my life I've loved them all*

The process of aging brings about a form of nostalgia or reminiscence which seems to increase in strength with the passage of time; it's really rather fascinating. I lived in the same house from the age of two until I was married and moved out at the age of eighteen, so nearly all my childhood holiday memories are wrapped up in 'the Los Feliz house.'

My favorite holiday was Halloween - there was a sense of mystery to it, related in part to the revision back to Pacific Standard Time: suddenly it was dark before 5 p.m. and, unlike any other night, we would dress up in costumes and walk the neighborhood, ringing every doorbell, and crying out, "Trick or treat!" In my home, trick-or-treating was viewed as a pre-teen activity, so only my first few years of trick-or-treating included my brother, five years my senior, and my two sisters, a scant three and four-plus years younger than I was - I was sort of isolated in the middle. One parent came with us, managing my little sisters and keeping Craig from running off, usually allowing the two of us to continue for a few more blocks after 'the girls' were brought home. We would meet up in the living room and go through our haul, with any luck trading candies we didn't like for ones we preferred, delighted by how many local houses gave out full-size candy bars rather than miniatures ('snack size' didn't yet exist).

But at least as much of the magic of Halloween was the dressing-up ...and my mother *sewed*, no store-bought cheap costumes in our house. Craig had a devil costume, complete with black cape lined in red. I inherited the costume for a year, maybe two (it was the cape I really liked), but my mother was happy to sew other costumes and shortly after the school year started she would ask us what we'd like to be for Halloween - one year I chose a

pioneer-woman and the skirt of that dress had seven yards of circumference to it - *TWENTY-ONE FEET* of swirling, twirling skirt!

Once Craig had "graduated" from trick-or-treating, he took to decorating and setting up some scary stuff for when kids came to our house, using his skills as a Ham Radio operator and a professional magician quite effectively (and I do mean professional - he and his best friend did magic shows for parties and various meetings and events, making it a pretty good job for a couple of high school kids). I migrated into Halloween parties, once I was too old for trick or treating, and always had a great time carving pumpkins. Even as an adult I was fond of throwing Halloween parties; one of my favorites included an impoverished but creative couple who came as a pair of dice, wearing appropriately-painted large cardboard boxes ...these also served as their own portable surfaces for food and beverages!



I didn't lose my love of Halloween --costumes and parties and chocolate-- until discovering how horrific this 'holiday' had been for a friend, abused through her childhood and early adult years by ritual abuse, and I've never been able to restore that innocent view of All Hallow's Eve.

Truth be told, I generally appreciate holidays, specific days and times set apart for specific remembrances. Halloween was my favorite but Christmas and Easter followed close after, and all incorporated festive clothing, thanks to my mother's excellent skill, and special foods and activities. Easter also involved a lot of chocolate (See's bordeaux and walnut

fudge eggs!) and my father's creative Easter egg hunts and clever clues to lead us to his unexpected hiding locations.

But from my perspective as a selfish child, Christmas was disappointing: my parents never gave me the pony I so desperately wanted and, in fact, seemed to have no insight into my interests and instead gave me *dolls*, which I hated, rather than a pony ...or at least the Breyer model horses, for which I also longed. In fact, it wasn't until they gave me a guitar at the age of twelve that my parents gave me a present which was meaningful to me.



The up-side of those disappointments was that I came to love Christmas for its intangibles: the candles and holy songs, the 'magic' of twinkling colored lights, the smell of pine, and beautifully wrapped packages, not for their potentially-disappointing contents but for the very idea of the gift, whatever it might be - and this prepared me, in some small way, for the amazing gift of Christ Himself.

