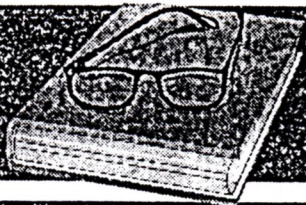
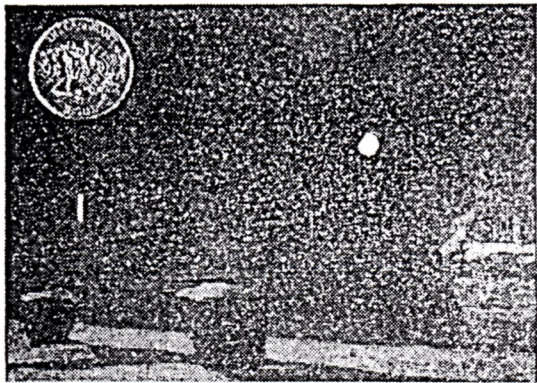


# SEASON'S READINGS



## Christmas yarns yule

### THE POLAR EXPRESS



By MICHAEL GILTZ

Every year they arrive in bookstores — dozens, sometimes hundreds of picture books and novels all about the holidays. With the hope of becoming a Christmas tradition, these tales of misfit toys, mischievous elves and wayward sleighs compete with retellings of "The Night Before Christmas."

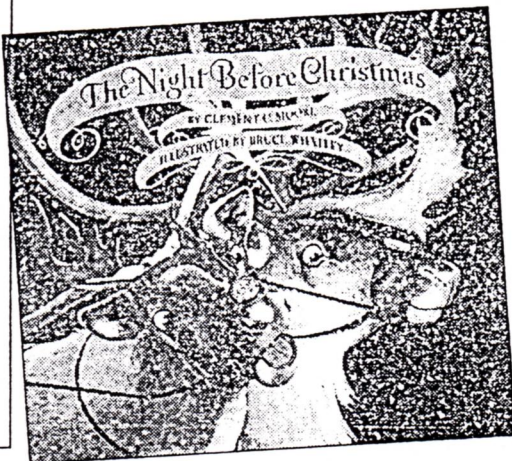
What publishers really want is a miracle akin to Chris Van Allsburg's "The Polar Express" (Houghton Mifflin; \$18.95; 29 pages), a brilliant 1985 classic that has sold millions of copies around the world and is quickly becoming as much a December mainstay

as the Radio City Music Hall Christmas Spectacular.

Here's a look at the best of the new:

It's easy to see Van Allsburg's influence on Bruce Whatley's new illustrations for "The Night Before Christmas" (HarperCollins; \$16.95; 29 pages). His New Hampshire setting for Clement C. Moore's poem positively glows, especially in the early scenes where the house is hushed and quiet. But Whatley's reindeer are rather wild-eyed and his Santa almost frightening.

What really makes this retelling work is the wordless subplot about how Santa rekindles a man's joy by offering him a gift from his childhood.



Another unexpected gift is a new story about Madeline, the wandering little girl who always manages to be missing or getting into trouble. "Madeline in America" (Arthur A. Levine/Scholastic Press; \$19.95; 109 pages) is exactly that — based on a long-lost manuscript and pencil sketches found by Ludwig Bemelmans' grandson, John Bemelmans Marciano.

It's a tad disconcerting to see the Parisian nuns and those "twelve little girls in two straight lines" cavorting about Texas. But this is no Hemingway-esque reject churned out by a greedy

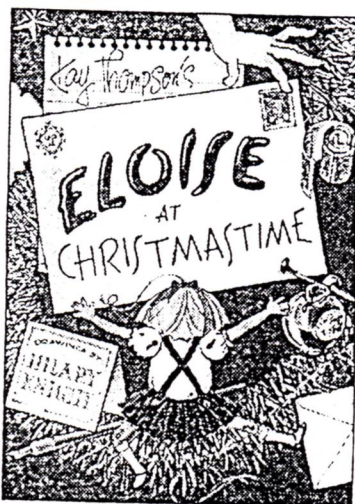
estate — it's every bit the equal of the other Madeline tales. Also in the book are rare Bemelmans holiday tales, including "The Count and the Cobbler" and the New York City-based "Sunshine." They may not feature Madeline, but they're just as delightful.

Perhaps the cleverest book this year is "Where Does Joe Go?" (Farrar, Straus & Giroux; \$16; 29 pages). While plenty of other books have characters imagining what Santa does when he's not working, this witty twist, written and illustrated with verve by Tracey Campbell Pearson, has St. Nick working at a snack bar in Vermont under the name Joe.

Of course, Joe is beloved by everyone and the townspeople can't help but wonder where he goes each winter. "I think he's on a cruise," said the woman buying shoes. "He's having tea with the Queen," whispered Molly McLeen. Naturally, no one ever gets it right. But their wild imaginings are a treat.

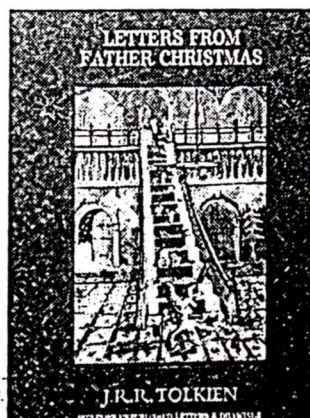
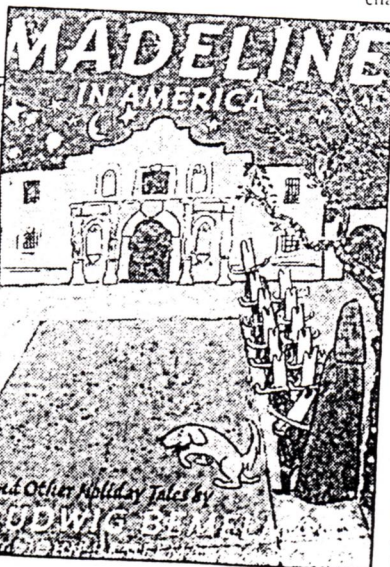
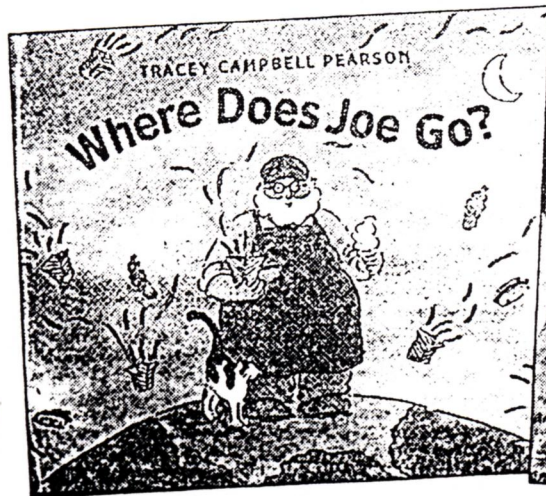
Another twist on holiday traditions is J.R.R. Tolkien's "Letters From Father Christmas" (Houghton Mifflin; \$20; 157 pages). There have been whole books devoted to

New and noteworthy books for Noel



children's letters to Santa, but here "The Hobbit" author offers responses from Father Christmas, the elves and even a polar bear. A classic in England, this new edition contains even more letters and drawings than the long out-of-print original.

Brimming with whimsy and clever detail, Tolkien's letters



# want for your kids



mirror the times in which they were published. For instance, when Tolkien was writing during World War II, Santa has to fight off goblins and runs low on supplies. As a bonus, most of the hand-written letters — in Tolkien's own, beautiful calligraphy — are reproduced alongside the typed text. This book is perfect for reading aloud.

Quieter pleasures can be had with "Mouse's First Christmas" (Simon & Schuster; \$12; 30 pages), written by Lauren Thompson and illustrated by Buket Erdogan. In this story, not a creature is stirring *except* for a mouse — and he has a grand time tasting the cookies and cocoa left out for Santa while admiring the tree.

Erdogan's bold illustrations are simple enough for the smallest child to grasp while adults will enjoy the warmth of these holiday sights, shown from a mouse's tiny perspective.

Much goofier is "The 12 Bugs of Christmas" (Little Simon; \$14.95; 24 pages), a pop-up book that jazzes up the holiday tune with "Eight Popcorn Bugs a-popping, seven Yuletide Bugs a-yodeling" and a Fruitecake Bug in a pear tree. It's silly, of course, but the pop-ups become more and more complex until the Twelve Angel Bugs are a-rising tower above the pages at the very end. "The 12 Bugs of Christmas" is both visually and vocally satisfying.

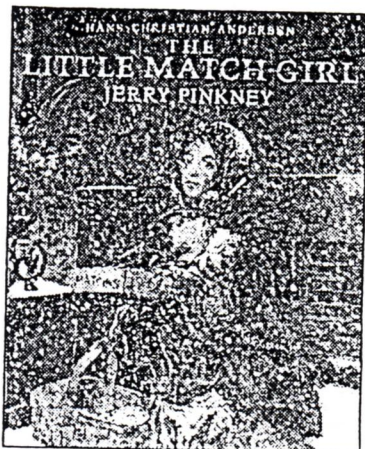
It's also satisfying to have

Eloise back. That denizen of the Plaza Hotel loves the holidays *rawther* much. Sadly, "Eloise at Christmastime" (Simon & Schuster; \$17; 45 pages), written by Kay Thompson and illustrated by Hilary Knight, was out of print for many years. Now she's back, cavorting from room to room, giving out presents and dreaming of Santa.

High spirits are a given with Eloise, who leaves exasperated adults in her wake as often as she charms them.

"An Elf for Christmas" by Michael Garland (Dutton; \$15.99; 30 pages) tells the story of Tingle, one of Santa's elves. When he's accidentally shipped off with the presents, Tingle has to commandeer a little boy's toy plane to return to the North Pole. Most of the pleasure here comes from his colorful drawings and a clever little joke at the end that makes this story very modern indeed.

Far more traditional is Jerry Pinkney's vivid, beautifully detailed illustrations for Hans Christian Andersen's heartbreaker "The Little Match Girl" (Phyllis Fogelman; \$16.99, 29 pages), set in 1920s America. The bustling city streets teem with life, but no one pays attention to the little girl who shivers in the snow. The sad story may be too much for very young ones to handle (in the end, she freezes to death)



but older children will probably appreciate the new setting of a fine old fairy tale.

A far more glamorous city can be found in "Auntie Claus" (Silver Whistle/Harcourt Brace; \$16; 36 pages). An eccentric aunt who goes away on a "business trip" every Christmas? Hmmm. Elise Primavera's whimsical tale (the theme, by the way, for Saks Fifth Avenue's holiday display this year) is enlivened greatly by her angular, utterly captivating illustrations — whether it's Auntie skating across the ice or reigning over affairs at the North Pole. Of all the new holiday books, this one seems the most likely to be around in years to come.

