Treats at Christmas

Joanna Carey has sifted through the great pile of picture books and gift books published for the Christmas market. Here are her choices of the very best for Christmas giving.

Something I look out for every Christmas is a new Frog book from the Dutch author/artist Max Velthuijs. Every year, Velthuijs creates a new story about Frog and his group of friends—a charmingly odd assortment of animals who stick together through thick and thin. With gentle humour that eschews irony, and a graphic style that is eloquent in its simplicity, Velthuijs addresses matters that concern us all—from friendship, loyalty, and happiness, to loneliness, fear, discrimination, even death (that was in 1991, when Frog found a dead blackbird). His stories show the importance of respect within the community, and how mistakes and misunderstandings can usually be sorted out if we can communicate with one another. Although he is not the brainiest of creatures, Frog is an inspirational character who seems to lead from behind. He has no preconceptions and it is in a spirit of innocent enquiry that he uncovers the truth and brings out the best in everyone. In *Frog Finds a Friend*, although the artwork lacks some of its usual intensity, Velthuijs adds a powerful new dimension to the anthropomorphic magic when Frog finds a teddy bear. "He's my new friend," says Frog. "He's going to live with me." But the other animals are scornful. "It's just a toy," says Hare. "It can't even talk!" "I'm going to teach him," says Frog. And, because he believes he can, he does. Then, when Frog has invested so much in his friendship with this newcomer, Bear suddenly develops a will of his own. And there is a shocking moment when, in a double page spread, Bear sits alone on a rock staring into the distance and you just know he is planning to leave, to go back where he came from. There are ten books in the Frog series now, so get them all. The beauty of a series like this is that children get to understand the way the artist uses his graphic skills to tell the story, they learn to interpret the very subtle gestures and the way colour is used to express emotion.

*It Was You, Blue Kangaroo!* is the third of Emma Chichester Clark's stories about the relationship between a child and her favourite toy. Lily is going through a naughty phase, and blaming it all on Blue Kangaroo. Blue Kangaroo cannot speak up for himself but his frustration and his eye-swivelling anxiety is evident in eloquent close-ups. Eventually, one night while Lily is sleeping, he decides to do something about Lily's behaviour. Like Velthuijs, Chichester Clark tells a complex story with subtle humour and insight. The drawing is deceptively simple, the timing is perfect and theatrical use of colour and lighting heralds the dramatic moment when the magic kicks in, and Blue Kangaroo flies into action, to put things right.

*The Other Goose* by Judith Kerr, creator of classics like *Mog* and *The Tiger Who Came to Tea*, comes from a different era and has a charming nostalgic atmosphere. It centres round Katerina, a goose who swims on the village pond. Katerina is lonely and longs to meet the goose she sees reflected in a car door. This is an ideal world of friendly neighbours, a kindly bank manager, an eccentric dancing teacher, a toy shop and a good old fashioned burglar with a swag bag. With a comical climax, when the goose gets the better of the burglar, this is a wonderfully reassuring Christmas story in which the gentle colours of the simple crayon drawings create a real sense of warmth and generosity.
Ruggles by Anne Fine and Ruth Brown is all about a dog for whom an unlatched gate is an irresistible invitation to take
day out. There are very few naturalistic illustrators around today but, like the wonderful Shirley Hughes, Ruth Brown
really can summon up the lush green of the park in summer, the colours and textures of an autumn day, the welcoming
glow of a fireside at teatime in winter. Ruggles, a bearded collie, is a very real physical presence in these pages. You can
feel that coarse floppy fur, that damp enquiring nose, and when he comes in from the garden you can almost hear his
toenails clicking on the flagstones and when he dozes by the fire, you can smell the steam rising from his damp fur.

There are no children in this book ? the focus is entirely on Ruggles. With these vigorous, very painterly, beautifully
observed illustrations, full of detail and incident, and a lively, reflective text written from the dog?s point of view, this is
a picture book with wide appeal.

Babette Cole has used her own dog, Lady Lupin (a deerhound the size of an ironing board), as a model for her new
book. Cole, well known for a large number of ?improving? books such as Dr Dog (which gives health and hygiene tips
on things like head lice and diarrhoea), Hair in Funny Places (about the onset of puberty) and Mummy Laid an Egg
(about sex and reproduction), now explores the wilder shores of etiquette. Set in the splendour of an ancestral home
Lady Lupin explains to her rowdy puppies how to behave ?like ladies and gentledogs, so that all will love you?, how to
deal correctly with oysters, lobsters and snails, how to leave the table without getting your foot caught in the table cloth,
how to enjoy parties without resorting to showing off, how to write thank-you letters, and, importantly in their case,
after the odd slip-up, how to write a decent letter of apology. Lady Lupin?s Book of Etiquette could well be useful
over the festive season.

Gillian McClure?s new book Tom Finger takes you by surprise with its otherworldliness, its un-Englishness.
Queenie?s cat has died of old age. Sadly, each day the little girl calls out for him, then one morning a strange, tall, blue-
eyed cat appears, bringing gifts for Queenie. Queenie?s little brother, the voice of reason, warns her that this is a witch?s
cat but Queenie takes no notice and follows a trail through the snowy woods. McClure?s storytelling has a strange
magical rhythm to it and her drawings, in line and wash, have a wistful delicacy reminiscent of Lisbeth Zwerger.
Queenie is a quaintly proportioned, determined little character, totally absorbed in the magic and her journey through
this fairytale, which, with needles, thorns and a bright skein of red wool that snakes across the snow, is full of
symbolism and is rewarding both for Queenie and the reader. Imaginative use of white space adds to the mysterious
charm of this story ? as do the pawprints that trail across the endpapers.

Glorious silliness

If you were to envisage a collaboration between Allan Ahlberg and Raymond Briggs you might imagine a densely
populated book with every page bursting with jokes, bristling with extravagant detail, with words and pictures jostling
for space: but The Adventures of Bert is an unexpected exercise in simplicity?skilfully boiling down the business of
writing and illustrating to a minimum with cunning page design that hustles the story along. Bert is a bumbling accident
prone buffoon with a long suffering wife (who doesn?t get much of a look-in) and a baby. It is a gloriously silly book
with huge grandiose chapter headings, minimal text and the occasional speech bubble. The story starts and finishes in
Bert?s bedroom (where there?s a running gag about not waking the baby) and involves Bert in an unfortunate tumble
down the stairs, an accidental trip to Scotland in a lorry, an adventure with a giant sausage and a heroic plunge into a
river to rescue a little puppy dog ? all in fewer than 300 words ? guaranteed to give tentative novice readers a real sense
of achievement ? and a good laugh.

In Good News! Bad News! Colin McNaughton uses the rowdy rhythm and repetition of this tried and tested formula to
chronicle the ups and downs of the turbulent everyday life of a hapless schoolboy whose optimism and joie de vivre is
constantly undermined by everyday fears. Not just imaginary fears of monsters and space aliens, but also very real fears
of bullies, schoolwork and dental appointments. Brilliantly done! McNaughton?s slapstick schoolboy humour merrily
defies political correctness with some wonderful comic book stereotypes ? beastly girls, a blowsy, busty mum, a warty
old witch and wrinkly school marm with pebble specs and iron grey hair scraped back in a bun; and Count Dracula?s
cameo role as a dentist leaves our schoolboy hero well in charge of the situation, ready for another day?

**Baloney (Henry P.)** is a book about words. Recognizing the confusion and alienation many children feel when they are expected to make sense of a row of incomprehensible words, Jon Scieszka tells the story of an imaginative schoolboy from outer space whose teacher is threatening him with detention for unpunctuality. Exuberantly illustrated with Lane Smith’s kaleidoscopic space age collages, assembled from odd bits of machinery, computer graphics, optical illusions and newspaper cuttings, and urgently told in an extravagantly entertaining mixture of anagrams, spoonerisms and an expressive smattering of foreign words, including Latvian, Swahili, Melanesian pidgin and Esperanto, this is something new indeed. It all takes a bit of unravelling, but a decoder at the end of the book helps to explain why Baloney was so late for school. Words aren’t so threatening after all.

**Poetry by heart**

When I was at school one of the worst punishments (in my case for bad behaviour on the school bus) was having to learn vast swathes of poetry, and then having to recite it word perfect standing on the punishment table. It was humiliating at the time but I am grateful now to have so many miles of poetry indelibly lodged in my head. Today poetry is FUN; there is a more humane approach to the learning thereof and an increasing number of wide ranging anthologies.

But for anyone wanting to learn a poem for the first time, it is difficult to know where to start. **Poetry by Heart** is edited by Liz Atttenborough who makes the poems easy to choose and easy to access by putting them in different categories with descriptive headings like ?Short and Sharp? ? which includes this from Spike Milligan:

_Said the General of the army,_

_?I think war is barmy?_

_So he threw away his gun:_

_Now he?s having much more fun._

Under ?Fur and Feathers? you find Blake’s ?The Tyger? with a glorious illustration by Steven Lambert; ?Stuff and Nonsense? has plenty of Lewis Carroll, Edward Lear and Charles Causley, and ?Love and Friendship? has work by Wendy Cope, Brian Patten and Kit Wright while ?Long and Lingering? has ?A Visit from St Nicholas? (?Twas the night before Christmas.) by Clement Clarke Moore. BUT, surprisingly, although the Poet Laureate has written the foreword here, poetry-wise, this lively anthology is Motion-less. Disappointing! Especially when you look at Adrian Mitchell’s expansive and exuberant collection **A Poem a Day** (365 poems) in which Mitchell (self styled Shadow Poet Laureate) offers no fewer than 11 of his own poems, including ?The Greatest Poem in the World?. He has also chosen work by earlier poets Laureate (Hughes, Masefield, Tennyson and Wordsworth) and many more besides ? Byron, Emily Dickinson, Walter de la Mare, Seamus Heaney, Russell Hoban, Mervyn Peake, Michael Rosen, Valerie Bloom? to name but a few, all lavishly illustrated. In full colour. But although the pictures are hugely entertaining, you cannot help wondering, SHOULD poetry be illustrated? Surely a poem’s job is to create images in the mind of the reader, without the interpretation of a third party? For this reason Michael Morpurgo’s collection **Because a Fire Was in My Head** is very satisfying ? although it has got pictures. Quentin Blake’s loose, grainy line drawings have an incidental quality ? they do not beg for attention, they simply respond to the titles here and there with a casual spontaneity ? like the scribbly toad that accompanies Norman MacCaig’s poem of that name:

_Stop looking like a purse. How could a purse_  
squeeze under the rickety door and sit,  
full of satisfaction, in a man’s house?  

_You clamber towards me on your four corners ?_
right hand, left foot, left hand, right foot.

I love you for being a toad,

for crawling like a Japanese wrestler,

and for not being frightened.

It is inevitable in popular anthologies for children that there will be a certain amount of duplication?some poems crop up again and again?all three of the above collections feature ?The Owl and the Pussy-cat? by Edward Lear, and ?I Remember, I Remember? by Thomas Hood. But it is interesting to see how the different juxtapositions affect the reading of a poem. In Mitchell?s collection Siegfried Sassoon?s moving war poem ?Everyone Sang? shares a page with

Ibbity, bibbity, sibbity, sab,
Ibbity, bibbity, canal boat.

Dictionary;
Down the ferry;
Fun! Fun!
American Gun!

Eighteen hundred and sixty one! (anon)

Liz Attenborough puts ?Everyone Sang? together with Chief Dan George, while Morpurgo puts it face to face with John Lennon?s inscrutable lines:

I sat belonely down a tree,
humbled fat and small.
A little lady sing to me
I couldn?t see at all.

A treasure trail of poems?

A Liberating collection that really does break the mould by including lots of totally unfamiliar work is James Berry?s Around the World in Eighty Poems. This is a glorious collection of poems from all along the way?from Alaska, Chile, Thailand, Iran, Russia (there?s a magical Russian poem about dead bicycles), a short, happy Zulu poem:

?Lucky Lion!?
It sleeps by day!
How blessed it is,
Lion.

a heart rending Kenyan poem, a cry for a lost mother?an Estonian Chant for a child who is hurt, a Jamaican Song from Berry himself and from Germany a thought provoking poem about a hitch hiker by Bertolt Brecht?

?Travelling in a Comfortable Car?
Travelling in a comfortable car

Down a rainy road in the country

We saw a ragged fellow at nightfall

Signal to us for a ride, with a low bow.

We had a roof and we had room and we drove on

And we heard me say, in a peevish voice: No

We can?t take anyone with us.

We had gone on a long way, perhaps a day?s march

When suddenly I was shocked by this voice of mine

This behaviour of mine and this

Whole world.

And so on?

...this is indeed a real treasure trail of poems from which future anthologies will doubtless benefit. Katherine Lucas? decorative illustrations strike exactly the right note and she includes a map to show the path of Berry?s poetical expedition which ends in England with Charles Causley?s timeless anthem ?I am the Song?.

Shakespeare Stories

With Andrew Matthews? powerful retellings of eight of the Bard?s plays, and Angela Barrett?s showstopping illustrations, The Orchard Book of Shakespeare Stories is a beautifully produced volume. Barrett?s illustrations have a visionary quality, an ethereal composure that keeps the real world at arm?s length and intensifies the theatrical experience.

One of the first delights here is the design of the endpapers, with exquisite miniatures symbolizing each play, and an additional bonus is the section where Angela Barrett talks about her work, and how she arrived at her own interpretations of these oft-illustrated stories, all so very different in atmosphere. Much of her inspiration comes from architecture and paintings contemporary with the plays? settings ? Juliet?s ball dress, for example, is an exact copy of a dress in a portrait by the Florentine painter Domenico Ghirlandaio. Barrett has extensive knowledge of shoe design through the ages ? indeed her illustrations are full of historical footnotes ? in Twelfth Night she focuses on Malvolio?s extravagantly pointed yellow shoes with their comical cross gartering; in Midsummer Night?s Dream, we see the lovers ? from the knees down ? scampering through a lyrical landscape in sandals copied from pictures on Greek vases; and in Henry V a tragic battle scene is zig zagged with the cruel diagonals of broken limbs and lances amongst which you can see the intricate construction of the armour that encases the foot of a dead soldier.

But although Barrett has an astonishing eye for detail, and the technical skill of a miniaturist in suggesting the feel of intricate embroidery and the subtle luminosity of the fabrics, she can also make eloquent use of understatement ? as in Romeo and Juliet where, in an empty courtyard, just a red stain on the cobbles bears witness to the killing of Mercutio.

There are some ravishing ? and romantic ? images here; the principal characters tend to fix you with a very direct, penetrating gaze which, especially in the case of Hamlet, is hard to forget. And even Bottom, peering solemnly from behind a tree has an unexpected dignity.

Novelty and quality
Novelty and quality do not always go hand in hand but here they do in three books that are every bit as visually rewarding as they are entertaining and inventive.

Lauren Child has an illustration style that relies on cut out shapes and extravagant, spontaneous outlines so her artwork lends itself perfectly to the demands of paper engineering. My Dream Bed is an engaging bedtime fantasy which, with a moveable sleeping figure, shows how elegant, surprising and robust a pop-up book can be.

In Elmer’s Concert by David McKee the famous patchwork elephant gets all his noisy jungle friends to join in. With vibrant singing colours and a touch-sensitive panel to set off the soundbites, these are the best and loudest sound effects you could ever expect to find in a book.

There is no electronic sound in Jane Ray’s Noah’s Ark but the text, straight from the King James Bible, has a music all its own. And in this pop-up version of her 1990 picture book, there’s an intricate 3-D tableau with lots of moving parts and a multitude of freestanding animals including a pair of dodos.

Joanna Carey is a writer and illustrator.

The Books

Frog Finds a Friend, Max Velthuijs, Andersen Press, 1 84270 043 X, £9.99

It Was You, Blue Kangaroo!, Emma Chichester Clark, Andersen, 1 84270 023 5, £9.99

The Other Goose, Judith Kerr, Collins, 0 00 712119 9, £9.99

Ruggles, Anne Fine, ill. Ruth Brown, Andersen, 0 86264 895 5, £9.99

Lady Lupin’s Book of Etiquette, Babette Cole, Hamish Hamilton, 0 241 14096 X, £10.99

Tom Finger, Gillian McClure, Bloomsbury, 0 7475 5277 0, £10.99

The Adventures of Bert, Allan Ahlberg and Raymond Briggs, Viking, 0 670 89329 3, £9.99

Baloney (Henry P.), Jon Scieska and Lane Smith, Viking, 0 670 91143 7, £12.99

Good News! Bad News!, Colin McNaughton, Collins, 0 00 198418 7, £9.99

Poetry by Heart, compiled by Liz Attenborough, various illustrators, Chicken House, 1 903434 27 0, £14.99

A Poem a Day, chosen by Adrian Mitchell, ill. Russell Ayto, Peter Bailey, Lauren Child and Guy Parker-Rees, Orchard, 1 84121 741 7, £14.99

Because a Fire Was in My Head? 101 poems to remember, edited by Michael Morpurgo, ill. Quentin Blake, Faber, 0 571 20583 6, £12.99

Around the World in Eighty Poems, selected by James Berry, ill. Katherine Lucas, Macmillan, 0 333 90382 X, £12.99

The Orchard Book of Shakespeare Stories, retold by Andrew Matthews, ill. Angela Barrett, Orchard, 1 86039 161 3, £12.99

My Dream Bed, Lauren Child, Hodder, 0 340 77913 6, £12.99

Elmer’s Concert, David McKee, Andersen/Red Fox, 0 09 950321 2, £9.99