



# Brian Alderson on The Jolly Christmas Postman

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Article Category:

Classics in Short

Byline:

Brian Alderson on **The Jolly Christmas Postman** by Allan and Janet Ahlberg

## Party-Time Among Old Friends for the Jolly Christmas Postman

*Each peach, pear, plum,*

*I spy Tom Thumb.*

*Tom Thumb in the cupboard,*

*I spy Mother Hubbard*

### Thus the start

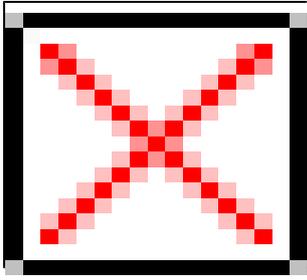
of one of the greatest of post-war picture books (Aunty Parlyment should give a copy to every child at birth) and it was pretty much the start of the Ahlbergs' engagement with the traditional characters of English nursery literature. Indeed, we have just witnessed a generational descent, for with the newly published **Goldilocks**, daughter Jessica has replaced her late mother Janet as illustrator to the playmaster Allan, at whose behest Tom Thumb and friends put on their performances.

### Some of them

were presented to us through the good offices of a jolly postman who, in 1986, had to do a round somewhere over Banbury Cross way. He pedalled along from Three Bears Cottage in The Woods, not far from Gingerbread Bungalow, and then on an up-and-down sort of route, taking in Beanstalk Gardens, the HRHs at Cinderella's Palace, a tricky visit to Grandma's Cottage, finishing up at Goldilocks's birthday party.

### With a bike, it was hardly a long round,

but since he was asked in for a cuppa at most stops (and champagne at the Palace) it took a while to accomplish. This had the happy result that Baby Bear, who was invited to Goldilocks's place in the first letter the postman delivered had actually arrived at the party by the time he got there at the end of his round with a card from Mrs Bunting and Baby (who also sent a pound note drawn on the Bank of Wonderland ? an institution today much extended in its operations).



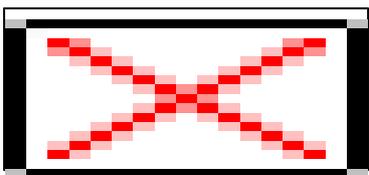
In 1986

some customers for this first account of the postman's visits were able to track him on a modest commercial gimmick: a map of his route housed in a little covered plastic tray with six silvery balls in it ? one of those infuriating puzzles where you have to lodge a ball in each hole before others rattle out of theirs. As a road map it provides evidence that, five years later, the postman has been assigned to a Christmas round in a different part of the district. In their account of this trip, in **The Jolly Christmas Postman**, the Ahlbergs watch him starting off again at what had been Three (now happily Four) Bears Cottage but he then travels via Diddle Dumpling, where Miss R. Hood now lives, to the Cock Robin Memorial Hospital to see Mr H. Dumpty, then to The Den (where Mr Wolf is playing blind man's buff with the Three Little Pigs), and finally all the way to Santa's Workshop. After (inevitably) more tea he gets an airborne ride home over the snowbound countryside, the last scene replicating in winter the summery view that is found in the earlier book.

### **The Ahlbergs' unprecedented ingenuity**

in devising not only the landscape traversed in the first **Jolly Postman**, but also the contents of the mail that is delivered there to all its ancient classic characters, is matched, if not exceeded by, its Christmas successor. Letter after letter brings to its recipient diverting entertainments: Mr Wolf sends Miss Hood ?Beware!?! a race-game which it is fun to play; the Gingerbread Boy gets a full-fledged **Toytown Christmas Annual**, which even has a ?free book? inside: (**Simple Simon's Complete Book of Knowledge**); Santa Claus gives the postman himself a peep-show with some of his householders on his route reprised down its arcade. **Postman** buffs will also know of the cunning cross references both within each book (Goldilocks's card to the Bears shows a scene in Santa's workshop which is also found in the visit paid there later in the book) and across the series, for there was a third volume in 1995, **The Jolly Pocket Postman** which really requires one to think of the adventures as a tri-partite unity.

### **As with *Each Peach, Pear, Plum***



the presence of the classic nursery characters is central to the enjoyment of the verses and especially of Janet Ahlberg's richly populated illustrations. The cards and letters which the postman carries are sent by such as Red Riding Hood to such as the Wolf, but the landscape through which he cycles has pictorial reference after pictorial reference within it, while the contents of some of the letters are stuffed with yet more. Many of them are entirely incidental: a field full of ?Enormous Turnips?, a beanstalk raking its way up to the heavens; the race-game has at least twenty-six pictures or quotations relating to nursery rhymes and stories, such as Cock Robin shooting an arrow across the track... The question is: HOW MANY SUCH REFERENCES ARE THERE IN THE WHOLE BOOK?

### **We hear from doom-mongers**

that these folk-figures are becoming oblivious to a society fed by ever-changing mechanical entertainment and subject to global influences that are inimical to the culture where they were first nurtured. (In such times there was not only no globalisation but not much sense of a nationhood extending beyond known localities.) How many child readers of **The Jolly Christmas Postman** then will recognise as old friends the people, the creatures, the settings, and the texts that are embodied in its pages and their Christmas envelopes? There are probably seventy or more and if these prove baffling then the postman (or Santa) will have to deliver some nice fat nursery-rhyme and folktale collections, either through the front-door or down the chimney.

**Brian Alderson** is founder of the Children's Books History Society and a former Children's Books Editor for **The Times**.

**The Jolly Christmas Postman** (978 0 1413 4011 1) by [Allan and Janet Ahlberg](#) [3] is published by Puffin at £12.99.

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