

[PDF] Tinsel: A Search For America's Christmas Present (Playaway Adult Nonfiction)

Hank Stuever - pdf download free book

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Author: Hank Stuever

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Description:

Product Description In *Tinsel*, Hank Stuever turns his unerring eye for the idiosyncrasies of modern life to Frisco, Texas, a suburb at once all-American and completely itself, to tell the story of the nation's most over-the-top celebration: Christmas. Stuever starts the narrative as so many start the Christmas season: standing in line with the people waiting to purchase flat-screen TVs on Black Friday. From there he follows three of Frisco's true holiday believers as they navigate through the Nativity and all its attendant crises. Tammie Parnell, an eternally optimistic suburban mom, is the

proprietor of "Two Elves with a Twist," a company that decorates other people's big houses for Christmas. Jeff and Bridgette Trykoski own that house every town has: the one with the visible-from-space, most awe-inspiring Christmas lights. And single mother Caroll Cavazos just hopes that the life-affirming moments of Christmas might overcome the struggles of the rest of the year. Stuever's portraits of this happy, megachurchy, shopariffic community are at once humane, heartfelt, revealing--and very funny. *Tinsel* is a compelling tale of our half-trillion-dollar holiday, measuring what we've become against the ancient rituals of what we've always been. **A Q&A with Hank Stuever, Author of *Tinsel***

Q: Before we talk about *Tinsel*, what's your take on the economy and how it will affect Christmas 2009? **A:** Shopocalypse! In our time, the Christmas season has become a linchpin in the American and global economies--accounting for about one-fifth of all shopping purchases in the United States and even more in some sectors like jewelry, electronics, and apparel. This is important because consumer spending drives more than two-thirds of the U.S. economy. By one estimate, we spend half a trillion dollars on Christmas presents, décor, and entertaining every year--more than we spend fighting wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. A percentage point up or down in what American shoppers spend (or don't spend) at Christmas has worldwide implications, especially in Asia and Latin America, where most of our goods are made. In 2008, we actually spent less than we spent the Christmas before--down 2.8 percent according to the National Retail Federation, and the first time it decreased since the NRF started measuring it. Americans are maxed out; consumer confidence levels dropped in 2008 to the lowest ever recorded. This was the end of a shopping binge that lasted more than a decade. This year we will really see if people's attitudes and priorities have changed much at the mall. We live in a Catch-22 when it comes to Christmas: Many of us dream of simple, "down home" Christmases that involve togetherness, warmth, laughter--de-emphasizing retail purchases. But if too many of us chose to have a less commercial Christmas and cut our spending on gifts to, say, less than \$100 overall, the effect on the stock market, global trade, manufacturing, and jobs would be a downward spiral. We are stuck sustaining a consumer economy at any cost. Likewise we are stuck with a mega-Christmas. **Q:** How did you get interested in writing a book about Christmas? **A:** Christmas is the largest communal event in American life. Even people who don't celebrate it can't escape it completely. It crosses just about all forms of our culture, faith, and lifestyles. It is born of religion, tradition, commerce, and media, with some ancient roots in winter solstice celebrations that predate the birth of Christ. No matter what stories I've worked on in two decades as a journalist, they were all essentially about how we live. Christmas dominates "how we live" in one six-week bonanza. It's bigger than anything. **Q:** It's a big subject. How did you narrow your focus? **A:** I wanted to tell the story of the enormity of Christmas, but in an absolutely human way--almost in microcosm. As a backdrop to *Tinsel*, I wanted to take readers on a humorous and somewhat absurd journey deep into the center of America and the plastic heart of crowded malls, competitive holiday bazaars, collectible snow villages, Angel Trees, extravagant megachurch Nativity pageants, sweet-faced nanas and grammas wearing BeDazzled reindeer sweaters, megawatt light displays, genuinely bearded Santas, and McMansion rooms decked out in high-end artificial greenery. But ultimately Christmas is an emotional story. Some people love it deeply and some people don't, and it has this strange power to conjure up both joy and melancholia. I've always been fascinated by how people act at Christmas--how hard we seek its happiness and beauty, and how quickly the season can turn blue. I'm interested in the ways people work to preserve (or improve on) a collective myth. The retail experience is a parallel story. **Q:** You decided to follow a few families through Christmas. Why? **A:** There are a lot of Yule clichés out there in popular culture, most of them on TV or in movies. Christmas is told one of two ways fictionally: sweet, soft-focus, and sentimental (Hallmark specials, *A Christmas Story*, Thomas Kinkade paintings, *Nutcracker* ballets); or in over-the-top comedies (*National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation*, *Bad Santa*, *Fred Claus*) that emphasize its excess and ridiculousness. Christmas is most often rendered in broad, general strokes. Nearly all of American literature or cinema tells Christmas in a purely fictional or loosely historical

framework. Very few journalists have tried to capture Christmas as it is actually lived in the present day. That was my book proposal: to move to a brand-new suburb with lots of chain retail shopping and dining (so I could look closely at the economic experience of the holiday) and focus intensely on the lives of a handful of families as they celebrated Christmas--down to every last present bought and received as well as what they eat, what they pray for, who they are. I wanted the story to be as true as it could possibly be, even if that got in the way of a standard "happy" Christmas ending. **Q:** You moved to the Dallas suburb of Frisco, Texas, to gather material for this book. How long were you there, and why did you pick Frisco? **A:** *Tinsel* follows three Christmases: The first is 2006, which seems like an eternity ago, because it was back when most Americans believed the economy was strong. I lived in Frisco, Texas, from August 2006 until February 2007. Then I went back in 2007 and 2008--a dozen more trips of various lengths, especially when Christmas came around again. By the third Christmas, the economy had changed and so had some people's lives. In 2006, Frisco was one of the fastest-growing suburbs in the country. Its population had gone from 6,000 in the early 1990s to about 90,000 when I arrived, and it passed 100,000 by the time I finished my book. Frisco has one of the highest concentrations of retail square-footage in the country--more than 5 million square feet of shopping venues in a single square mile area--almost all of which has been built since 2000. In deciding where to set *Tinsel*, I studied U.S. Census data and market demographics of several suburbs (or in the more current term, "exurbs") outside Atlanta, Charlotte, Kansas City, Denver, and Columbus, among other cities. I was drawn to Frisco for a lot of reasons: Everything there seemed brand-new--schools, infrastructure, neighborhoods, malls, huge grocery stores, highways--which has always fascinated me. Even the people seemed new, just arrived themselves, always smiling, reproducing, and spending like crazy. What's it like to live in a world that did not exist a few years earlier? Many people are turned off by such sprawl. In a strange way, I find it alluring and certainly a fascinating place to study. To me it's the twenty-first-century America, both for good and for bad. Finally, I was lured to Frisco by its churches, of which there are many. I also grew up in the Bible Belt (Oklahoma City); I knew that to find the best example of a mega-Christmas in America, I had to go where the people most love baby Jesus. **Q:** How did you find the people that you wrote about? **A:** I worked the way I always have as a reporter, which is to introduce myself to as many people as possible in town. I went to at least two different church services every weekend, and during the week went to community meetings, job fairs, and of course arts-and-crafts bazaars. I talked to waitresses, bartenders, store clerks, gym trainers, the Rotary, the Junior League--asking people whom they know who might fit the bill. I went to the big mall in Frisco, Stonebriar Centre, nearly every day and sometimes twice a day. (I even worked out once with the moms in the mall's StrollerFit morning exercise class.) I hung out in a local Christmas boutique a lot. Often, I'd approach people out of the blue (which is always weird--for both of us) or I'd call up and make an appointment for a general interview, off-the-record or on-, with a city council member, say, or a pastor, or a business owner, or a counselor who works with families. I arrived about four months before Christmas and set a goal: Tell five people a day about the project and give them my card. This took me all over Frisco and another nearby suburb, Plano. I got some great leads on potential characters, all of which I put up on a bulletin board in my rented bedroom, so I could organize them and think about who should be in the book. Of course, quite a few said NO THANKS. It's a big thing to ask. Would you let a stranger spend Christmas with your family, while he takes notes on everything? **Q:** Whom did you wind up following--and why? **A:** Finding Jeff and Bridgette Trykoski was easy, because when it comes to Christmas, they are famous in Frisco for having the house with the most amazing light show--all sorts of people told me about their house early on. I was drawn to them because of the lights but also because their personalities--how their relationship works--immediately interested me. Then there's Tammie Parnell, a busy stay-at-home wife and mother of two kids who lives in a very nice, gated neighborhood in Frisco. I lucked into her by putting the word out there--someone told me about her and gave me her e-mail address. Tammie has a small business on the side, called Two Elves with a Twist, decorating people's houses for Christmas. Tammie and I hit it off right away when we met at a church bazaar in October. Her energy level mesmerizes and

exhausts me. Even luckier was finding Carroll Cavazos. I was trying to find a family that loves to get up early on Black Friday and hit the sales. I was also still looking for a family where someone is employed at a big-box store. And I was looking for a single mother to follow. None of my leads had panned out quite right. I got up early on Black Friday and was interviewing people in the Best Buy parking lot before dawn--and that's where I met Carroll and her daughter Marissa. As we talked, Carroll told me her son Ryan works at Best Buy. I stuck with them because Carroll struck me as utterly genuine in her feelings and beliefs. To my everlasting gratitude, all three families let me in for the next two years, in an intimate way. **Q:** You seem to walk a fine line between making fun of people and portraying them in a tender way. How do you expect them to react to reading about themselves? **A:** My approach to this kind of nonfiction is to listen, listen, listen. To sit still in a room and try not to draw attention to myself, but just listen, observe, take good notes, and, with permission, make occasional tape recordings. I like to go wherever the people I'm writing about are going and do whatever they're doing. (I decorated a lot of trees with Tammie!) That's the fun part, but eventually you have to write a book, as true as it can be but also as entertaining as it can be. Life really is funny at times, and I like to portray people's behaviors, thoughts, quirks, and idiosyncrasies as best I can--along with some of my own hang-ups and thoughts. This is a risky and even subjective kind of journalism. I don't try to be mean or snide, but I also want to tell it as I see it. *Tinsel* is my version of our time together and my take on this particular world of malls, churches, and big houses. The risk is that people will dislike the way you've portrayed them. I can't predict how Jeff and Bridgette, Tammie, or Carroll will react to the book, nor can I predict how it will be received in and around Frisco. I think you can tell that I like all of these people very much. I worked hard to get the tone right. **Q:** What was the most surprising thing you learned about Christmas while researching and writing *Tinsel*? **A:** I don't think I'd ever stopped to think how much of what we consider to be very old ways of Christmas are in fact rather recent. Our hearts are deeply devoted to the Christmas traditions that evolved in America in the early-to mid-nineteenth century up through the late twentieth century--Santa Claus, the chimney, the stockings, the presents, Charles Dickens, wrapping paper, decorative tastes, lights, meals, Black Friday sales, football on TV, the Charlie Brown special. Aside from the religious aspect, our biggest legends and social norms of Christmas are not much more than a century old. Of course, much of it has trace origins in events and customs that are much older, going back millennia, but so much of it is manufactured myth. This idea leads me to think of Christmas as a metaphor for so much in our lives, the realities that we convince ourselves of, which are really just mythological. A lot of the economic boom in the 1990s and 2000s turned out to be make-believe. The emptiness that we feel sometimes as a shopaholic culture is definitely rooted in a sense of pretending that new stuff makes us feel better. That's a lot like being a kid on Christmas morning--with euphoria, disappointment, and eventual ennui, all rolled into one. I always knew Christmas was pretty complicated stuff, deep down. I try to deal with my own mixed feelings about it in the book as well. What surprised me most is that Christmas can still make me cry.

(Photo © Michael Wichita)

Photos Taken While Researching *Tinsel* **(Click on Images to Enlarge)**

'Tis the Season in Frisco, TX A rainy Yuletide night in Frisco, Texas The Trykoski's annual Christmas lights display Santa and Stuever: Frisco's "Merry Main Street Merchants" night **The Families Featured in *Tinsel*** Carroll Cavazos and her daughter Marissa Bridgette and Jeff Trykoski Tammie Parnell (third from left) and her family

(Photos © Courtney Perry)

--This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

From Publishers Weekly Stuever, a *Washington Post* staff writer and two-time Pulitzer Prize finalist, has appeared on *The View*, *The Today Show* and NPR with his incisive commentaries. Following *Off Ramp*, he returns for another heartland safari, this time to observe Christmas celebrations in Frisco, Tex. He explains: This book takes place over three holiday seasons (2006, 2007 and 2008) among three unrelated families who live in a new megaworld north of Dallas, a place that often seemed to have surrendered its identity to the shopper within. His seasonal survey begins with Tammie Parnell, who runs a business decorating other people's homes. In the chapter *There Glows the Neighborhood*, he describes the Trykoski lights, a house decorated with 50,000 lights, and traces this holiday history back to 2004 when Carson Williams scored a million-plus Internet hits after synchronizing 16,000 lights to music. Stuever watches the 1.1 million-square-foot Stonebriar Centre mall being decorated at midnight. While single mom Caroll Cavazos shops with her family at Best Buy, the author has an epiphany (I see it as Caroll sees it. Real lives are being lived here), and later he goes with her to church and a potluck dinner gift-swap. With impeccable research and solid reporting, Stuever has written the gift book that keeps on giving—Christmas consumerism wrapped together with traditional family values. (Nov. 12)

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