



# The Carols of Christmas: A Celebration of the Surprising Stories Behind Your Favorite Holiday Songs

*Andrew Gant*

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## **The Carols of Christmas: A Celebration of the Surprising Stories Behind Your Favorite Holiday Songs** Andrew Gant

From Oxford professor and renowned British composer, a joyous account of the history behind our favorite carols.

Everyone loves a carol--in the end, even Ebenezer Scrooge. They have the power to summon up a special kind of mid-winter mood, like the aroma of gingerbread or the twinkle of lights on a tree. It's a kind of magic.

But how did they get that magic? Andrew Gant--choirmaster, church musician, university professor, and writer--tells the story of some twenty carols, each accompanied by lyrics and music, unraveling a captivating, and often surprising, tale of great musicians and thinkers, saints and pagans, shepherd boys and choirboys. Readers get to delve into the history such favorites as "Good King Wenceslas," "Away in a Manger," and "O, Tannenbaum," discovering along the way how "Hark, the Herald Angels Sing" came to replace "Hark, how all the welkin' ring" and how Ralph Vaughan Williams applied the tune of an English folk song about a dead ox to a poem by a nineteenth century American pilgrim to make "O Little Town of Bethlehem."

A charming book that brims with anecdote, expert knowledge, and Christmas spirit, this is a fittingly joyous account of one of the best-loved musical traditions.

## **The Carols of Christmas: A Celebration of the Surprising Stories Behind Your Favorite Holiday Songs Details**

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Author : Andrew Gant

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## From Reader Review The Carols of Christmas: A Celebration of the Surprising Stories Behind Your Favorite Holiday Songs for online ebook

### Pamellia says

Okay book of information. Not exactly what I was looking for, however.

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### Mark Roberts says

An enjoyable read. After enjoying his book "Sing unto the Lord", I thought I'd follow up with this one. Andrew's writing style is breezy, he writes with a sense of humour and full of little facts that make you want to research and follow up on. My only quibble is the omission of "Silent Night"- what happened there?? It's a good book that you can read at leisure as the chapters are small so a good book to have on the bedside table to give you that satisfaction of "just another chapter before I turn off the light".

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### E. says

Another enjoyable read from Andrew Gant full of delightful wit and a passion for music.

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### June Jacobs says

This book was more technical than I expected when I requested it, but it was enjoyable and I learned a lot about my favorite Christmas carols.

The author is extremely knowledgeable about his subject, and he has done a lot of deep research into the history of the twenty-one carols of Christmas explored here. This book includes reproductions of archival material relating to many of the carols (i.e., the original charts, publications, and handwritten notes by the composers). At the end of each chapter a music chart for the carol is provided for those of us who like to 'sing' or play this beautiful holiday music.

Each chapter revealed a surprising tidbit about the particular carol being featured. For instance, 'O Holy Night', my favorite carol, became the first piece of music to be broadcast live on the radio when it was played in 1906. The author states that this carol was meant for a soloist rather than a choir or congregation.

'Away in a Manger' was written in the 15th century in German by reformer Martin Luther as a hymn for his own children. It was first published in 1884, so the author labeled this song as a 'youngster' compared to the majority of the carols featured in this book. Mr. Gant shares that in a 1996 poll in the United Kingdom, 'Away in a Manger' was chosen as the second most popular carol. {Unfortunately, I couldn't locate the name of the most popular carol in this book!}

We learn that 'Jingle Bells' was originally published in 1857 by James Lord Pierpoint under the title, 'The One Horse Open Sleigh'. It was enjoyed for its 'catchy good humor'. Once the title changed to 'Jingle Bells,

or 'The One Horse Open Sleigh' in its second edition dated 1859, the song's popularity spread. Mr. Gant made an interesting point—this song doesn't have anything to do with Christmas!

I highly recommend this book to fans of Christmas carols, music theory, music, and history.

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NOTE FROM REVIEWER: I was given a hardcover copy of this book for free from the publisher through the BookLook Bloggers review program in exchange for an honest review. The opinions expressed here are entirely my own. I was not compensated in any manner for posting my review here or on any other site.

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### **Sarah says**

This is an accessible introduction to the history of some of our favourite English Christmas carols. It's an easy and enjoyable read. It didn't go quite as in-depth musically or historically as I'd have liked. My favourite parts were being introduced to carols I didn't already know, especially 'The Fleecy Care!' I found it profoundly odd the author didn't mention 'Carols for Choirs' at any point, and he's a bit weird about Scotland if you ask me. The book itself is beautiful, very nice use of foil.

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### **Thebruce1314 says**

Let me save you some time: there are no "surprising stories" about these carols; with the exception of two or three, the story is the same: we don't, and can't possibly, know who wrote them, because they have been modified and organically evolved over the years.

I also found it fairly irritating that Gant assumes the reader has a working knowledge of liturgy and all things sacred, making references in his explanations that I, for one, didn't understand.

Aside from a few merger tidbits, this book was fairly disappointing given the title. It does include music for each of the carols, so I guess that's something.

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### **Angie Fehl says**

Being a December baby and having Christmas as my favorite holiday, I was pretty excited to dive into this and see what stories Gant had to tell! I tend to love these kind of little known background stories. Each chapter in this book covers the history behind one carol, for a total of 21 carols.

Well, the intro started out interesting but quickly turned pretty dry, a dryness that continued throughout the entire text. And I say text because this thing ended up reading like a textbook. Not what the cover would lead you to believe, but yeah, Gant's background as a music professor definitely comes through in his writing. Though his style may not be for the average casual reader, there were some cool bits that stuck with me:

\* "O Holy Night" -- turns out the original wording of this one was a little more fire & brimstone than how we sing it today! It was also the 1st song to be broadcast live over the radio. I was surprised to read of Gant's opinion that this song "doesn't work when sung by a choir" and should just be handled by solo artists instead. Really?! I've heard some gorgeous choir renditions myself!

\* "I Wonder As I Wander" has roots in Appalachia!

\* "Jingle Bells" became the first song to be broadcast from space when astronaut Wally Schirra mentioned (during a holiday broadcast) seeing a UFO in a red suit and then busted out a little bit of the song on his harmonica.

A few of the songs covered were a bit on the obscure side for the "your favorite holiday songs" bit mentioned in the title. Gant is a UK writer though, so maybe they're more well known in England. But around here -- "Angels From Realms Of Glory" and "The Holly And The Ivy" -- yeah.. not so much in the rotation. But I was happy to see him cover "I Saw Three Ships" which IS one of my favorites, but not one of the more commonly played holiday tunes.

FTC Disclaimer: BookLookBloggers.com & Nelson Books (TNZ) kindly provided me with a copy of this book in exchange for an honest review. The opinions above are entirely my own.

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### **Tim Atkinson says**

A fascinating insight into the history, mystery and sometimes intrigue surrounding many of our favourite carols... which of course needn't (as Gant points out) be about Christmas at all but which, in the case of this eponymous volume, of course are. Gant's magisterial survey of choral music (see earlier reviews) maybe raised my expectations of this volume a little too high. Or maybe the archly ironic (and sometimes very funny) turn of phrase characteristic of his writing just doesn't quite work on a smaller scale. Still, the book is both readable and listenable - the version I read has a very fine CD of the carols thrown in!

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### **Eliza says**

This was an interesting read, though it got very repetitive and I do not think I will ever read it again. I bought it four years ago in London and only got round to reading it now. It basically recounts the history of Christmas carol in general, but more particularly 22 particular ones. Though it was at times highly amusing, or really interesting because I could connect it to my general history knowledge, or my knowledge of literary and philosophical history, the stories are very similar, and often contain random changes/ happenings. Gant's writing style is really nice, smooth, and eloquent, so in that sense it was a pleasurable read.

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### **Alyssa says**

3.5 stars

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### **Mallory says**

*Our carols may not all turn out exactly as the grown-ups intended, but we can still love them for what they are.*

3.5 stars

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This was a lot more scholarly than I anticipated; half the time I felt I'd dropped into an advanced music history class! That being said there was a great deal to enjoy and even embrace about the author's quirky, decidedly British style of writing. ('Yes, I think I'll write some in French and not even bother to provide a translation.') If you decide to pick it up, you will be rewarded with fascinating knowledge on music and oral tradition throughout history and you will certainly learn something you didn't know about Christmas carol standards.

Favorite quotes: "The past is a foreign country - they do things differently there. Recorded versions have all sorts of different sets of lyrics... Does it matter? Not a bit. This is what an oral tradition is."

"As usual, we happily help ourselves to the riches of another culture whenever it suits us."

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## Hayden says

It seems a bit premature to be reading Christmas books in September, but when I saw this book available I couldn't help but pick it up. While I'll be the first to say I'm musically challenged, I love listening to music anyway. And one technical aspect I *can* understand and appreciate is the history behind the songs.

With this in mind, I settled down with this book, assuming it would be a quick, fun read.

Well...not exactly. At least, it wasn't a *quick* read. The book, packed with information, was a bit more...*scholarly* than I had anticipated. Not a bad thing, but it did take more time to chew on, and I found myself reading a chapter or two a day during my free time.

I was unfamiliar with a lot of the stories behind the carols, so I felt like I learned a lot. My favorite chapters were probably those later in the book, on carols such as "Away in a Manger," "Good King Wenceslas," "I Wonder as I Wander," and "We Three Kings."

Overall, a book full of well-researched information and a good resource for anyone who wonders about the familiar carols we sing every year.

I received this book for free from the publisher in exchange for my honest review.

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## Sarah says

The Carols of Christmas by Andrew Gant goes through various popular carols of Christmas and tells some of their intricate, and often confusing, history. You may not come out of the book wiser than when you started it about who wrote such and such a carol but Gant himself warns of this in the intro: "...if you occasionally get to the end of a chapter in this book slightly unsure about who wrote words or tunes or bits of either, me too...." Apparently we don't know exactly who wrote some of the songs, and many of them were revised from their original written form.

One of the histories I found particularly interesting was that of Hark the Herald Angels Sing, originally Hark How all the Welkin Rings' by Charles Wesley. Apparently George Whitefield was one of the people who revised the song, one of the verses he changed was "universal nature say 'Christ the Lord is born today!'" to "With th'Angelic hosts proclaim, Christ is born in Bethlehem!" I found it interesting that Mendelssohn, the man who composed the music that was eventually used for the words, didn't think that the tune was fit for

religious songs and that it would "never do for sacred words. There must be a national and merry subject found out..." Nowadays it would be hard for me to picture it put to secular words!

Gant's style of writing is a bit confusing at times, he strikes me as trying too hard to be casual, which doesn't always flow very well in my opinion. Also some of his statements were a bit weird, for instance, his comment, "the most potent force in the shaping of human destinies: luck", and then again, when speaking of the original lines of Wesley's hymn, cited above, "universal nature say..." he declares that , "...there is something gloriously inclusive, almost pantheistic...in Wesley's lines...much better than Whitefield's replacement." Statements like that seem a bit odd for a Christian to say. There were several songs where I had wished that he would have dealt more with the history of the wording and meaning of the words but he focused on the development/ evolution of the commonly used tune (or tunes) for the carol instead.

All in all it was a bit confusing, and I think it could have been written a lot better than it is, but it did have interesting tidbits of carol history in it, and the cover is pretty and feels neat!

I received a complimentary copy of this book from the BookLook blogging program in exchange for my review, which did not have to be favorable.

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### **Ruth says**

This was an utterly delightful little book. I wish I hadn't waited a year to read it! It's scholarly and well researched, but also written with so much wit and humor that I found myself laughing aloud. I love carols, having grown up singing in church choir and listening to old folk songs, so this was kind of the perfect book for me. I thought I would enjoy it when I picked it up, but I didn't realize I would love it as much as I did. I highly recommend it!

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### **Janelle says**

I told my husband not to buy this book, even though it was only selling for a buck, as I had already read so many books on the origins of carols.

But this book really is something different. It's far more detailed, and supplies much information on the history, music and poetry of the carols. And I've never read a Christmas carol anthology written with such amusing and creative language, or with such affection.

It was an enjoyable read and I'm glad my husband ignored my suggestion not to buy it.

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