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Picture Books

Firefighter's Night Before Christmas
Kimbra Cutlip
James Rice, illustrator
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The men and women at Firehouse One are trying to make the best of working on Christmas Eve, when they would rather be home with their families. They've played Santa for children in the town, police officers have stopped by to check on the "unlucky stiffs," and the cook has made some hot "firehouse chili."

The author, who has also written A Sailor's Night Before Christmas, is herself a certified emergency worker attached to a fire department. Here she provides a humorous and realistic look at life in a firehouse on an unpopular holiday shift.

As the verse continues, in the oft-imitated style of Clement Moore's "A Visit from St. Nicholas," Santa arrives-a Firefighter Santa on a truck, pumping snow instead of water, as red and green lights and the blaring of "Jingle Bells" get everyone's attention. He wears firefighter's garb, his whiskers are the color of ash, and there is soot in his wrinkles. Adults will chuckle reading that "A pipe in his pocket stuck out just a bit / And he looked at it fondly-'Been trying to quit.'"

As Santa samples the chili, the fire alarm goes off. The firefighters are relieved to learn that it is a commercial building, not a home, on fire. In a deft balance of humor and reality, the firemen get down to the serious business of fighting the blaze, losing the store but saving a warehouse. No lives are lost, not even a mouse.

When they return to the firehouse, the men and women discover that Santa has left wonderful, appropriate presents for the hard-working crew. There's a new pumper truck, socks for Louie "whose feet always stunk," laptops, games, a case of car wax, a longer bed for "Stretch," a new flat-screen TV, lounge chairs, and the cable bill marked paid for the year. The author's experience with real firefighters, including her two uncles, is evident in these touches.

The illustrator, who has written and illustrated more than sixty children's books,

including the Gaston books and Texas Night before Christmas, gives his art a gritty, industrial look, with faces based on real people (including the author's uncles).

Cutlip keeps the firefighter's version from being a trite parody. Many children know what it's like to have parents working holiday shifts. The book can open up discussion about what it's like to be one of those "unlucky stiffs," and yet, why their jobs are important, and how bonded those crews can become.

Linda Salisbury