



Merry Christmas! Celebrating America's Greatest Holiday

Karal Ann Marling

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No matter what one's religion might be, no matter if one is in Portland, Peoria, or Phoenix, it's difficult to escape Christmas when the calendar begins flipping toward December. Images of Santa Claus, brightly wrapped presents, evergreens decked with tinsel, and steaming yuletide feasts fill magazines, television, movies, and store windows. Marling, professor of Art History at the University of Minnesota and author of *As Seen on TV* and *Graceland: Going Home with Elvis*, is an extremely adept cultural critic who dives below the wrapping paper and blinking lights to examine America's central, overwhelming holiday.

Viewing Christmas mainly through the media of mass culture, Marling examines engravings, news photos, fiction, and greeting cards and paints a compelling portrait of how Christmas has been presented and shared. She shows that although the holiday is often associated with material gain, often there's genuine goodwill, warmth, and familial tenderness behind the glitzy trappings. She writes, "Americans are sometimes accused of forgetting history, but when we honor Christmas we honor a kind of personal history compounded of images that may or may not belong to ourselves alone. American images. Bing and Elvis. Mother—a mother, any mother, a Norman Rockwell mother bearing a turkey on a big white platter."

One of the book's most fascinating contributions to the holiday is the sheer amount of explanation of why things are as they are. For example, Marling tells how the Christmas tree came from an oft-reprinted image of Queen Victoria and her family gathered around a decorated fir tree. She also breathes new life into discussions of usual holiday favorites, like *A Christmas Carol*, which she dissects expertly to get at its core social message.

No Scrooge herself, the author is usually cheery and loving in her discussions, balancing articulation and intelligence with a wry, casual tone that would make her a wonderful head of the table at any Christmas dinner.

ELIZABETH MILLARD (November / December 2000)

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