

## The Unwrapping of Theodora Quirke

**Caroline Smailes**

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Gritty Liverpool sets the mood for Caroline Smailes's *The Unwrapping of Theodora Quirke*, a most unusual Christmas tale.

Nineteen-year-old Theodora (Theo, please), while grieving the death of her boyfriend, Gabe, lives in Dante House, “a dumping ground for all the kids the care system failed.” On Christmas Eve, while leaving for her night shift job at an old folk’s home, Theo encounters Santa Claus on her doorstep—but not the Santa of every child’s dreams. This one, who says he’s really the fourth-century saint, Nicholas of Myra, has the appearance of an alcoholic who’s about to enter rehabilitation after months of living on the streets.

Still, with the entrance of Nicholas, strange enchantments also come into Theo’s ugly, pain-ridden world. More stars twinkle in the sky than she can ever remember having seen. The usual dogs aren’t barking. And she’s not afraid of the umbrella-carrying Santa look-alike, “even though every crime drama on TV would have me killed off in the next five minutes.” This Santa—swearing, unwashed, and sweaty—says, “I fulfill the wishes of those whose hearts are pure,” and he tells Theo, “I’ve been sent to save you.” What convinces her is his magic: because she wasn’t with Gabe when he died, Nicholas takes her there. What follows is a quirky, moving, and thought-provoking Christmas story in which Theo and her implausible Santa companion revisit scenes from her past, finding the miracles in her pain—and fighting a nefarious plot to steal the true meaning of Christmas.

Sparkling wit battles against dark cynicism in *The Unwrapping of Theodora Quirke*, a novel in which a magical quest to rescue Christmas from crass materialism also aims to restore the goodness, hope, and love of the season.

KRISTINE MORRIS (September / October 2021)

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