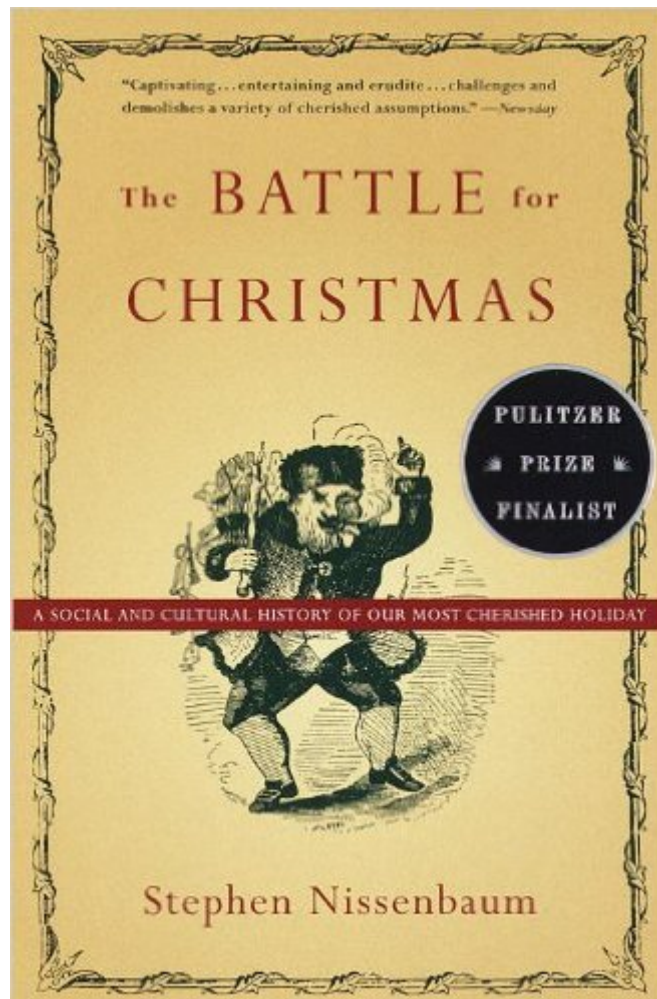


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The Battle For Christmas: A Social And Cultural History Of Our Most Cherished Holiday



Synopsis

Anyone who laments the excesses of Christmas might consider the Puritans of colonial Massachusetts: they simply outlawed the holiday. The Puritans had their reasons, since Christmas was once an occasion for drunkenness and riot, when poor "wassailers" extorted food and drink from the well-to-do. In this intriguing and innovative work of social history, Stephen Nissenbaum rediscovers Christmas's carnival origins and shows how it was transformed, during the nineteenth century, into a festival of domesticity and consumerism. Drawing on a wealth of period documents and illustrations, Nissenbaum charts the invention of our current Yuletide traditions, from St. Nicholas to the Christmas tree and, perhaps most radically, the practice of giving gifts to children. Bursting with detail, filled with subversive readings of such seasonal classics as "A Visit from St. Nicholas" and A Christmas Carol, The Battle for Christmas captures the glorious strangeness of the past even as it helps us better understand our present.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

UMass professor Stephen Nissenbaum's Pulitzer-Prize nominated "The Battle For Christmas" is an engrossing, sober look at a holiday celebration reformed from reaction to drunken revelry. Its 317 pages do not debunk so much as dissect traditions which seemed to "stand outside history." He sees larger points within about 18th and 19th century societal, racial, and cultural divides and Christmas' role in spurring American consumerist society. Nissenbaum bookends "Battle" with accounts of New England's "wassail" tradition and of Christmas celebrations in the slavery South.

He finds similar tales of pauper (peasant class, slave) trading places with prince (gentry, slavemaster) with wild costumes (German Belsnickle, African John Canoe, Boston-Philadelphia "mumming"), endorsed begging, whiskey-soaked revelry and feasting, bawdy songs, wanton sex, vandalism and violence equal parts Halloween and Mardi Gras. Nissenbaum successfully argues that this role reversal behavior was tolerated, even encouraged to reinforce traditional class roles. Nissenbaum builds his unsentimental holiday history between these pillars. He reinterprets beloved, seemingly eternal seasonal traditions (Dickens' "Christmas Carol," decorated trees, St. Nicholas) as creations to refocus the celebration on temperance, home, and family (especially children). He links their manufacture and deliberate spread to 19th century revisionist views: abolition and the role of freed blacks, new child rearing and education theories. Nissenbaum redefines "Twas The Night Before Christmas" nearly line-by-line, showing the social satire within Clement Moore's detailed descriptions and figurative redrawing of the "jolly old elf."

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