

LETTERS FROM GRANDPA # 165

Dearest grandchild,

Today's letter will deal with Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer. Understanding the man who wrote the story, and the circumstances under which it was written, will perhaps help you to relate to and understand people with problems. Maybe it will even help you to understand yourself.

Robert L. May, the man who created "Rudolph", was born a weak and delicate child. His playmates often goaded him to tears because he was so stunted and skinny. The ridicule he endured, however, forged within him many admirable qualities of character. When he graduated from college, he did not get a plush job, but instead became a lowly copy writer for Montgomery Ward's in Chicago. This too helped him to relate to and understand most Americans. At 33 years of age he faced additional hardship because his wife, Evelyn, was terminally ill with cancer. In fact, she had been bed ridden for two years. His meager salary and savings were eaten up by gargantuan medical expenses, and he was deeply in debt.

It was at this time that Montgomery Ward asked him to develop a children's booklet to give away at Christmas. Bob was hurting so much that he decided to write a story to help hurting people. His four year old daughter, Barbara, for example, had serious questions about her mother's illness, so he decided to try the story out on her. Since Bob knew what it was to be laughed at, he came up with the story of a reindeer that was ridiculed because of his shiny red nose. He thought about calling him Rollo, or Reginald, but settled at last on "Rudolph".

As the story took shape, little Barbara laughed with glee. She enjoyed the story so much that telling of Rudolph's triumph over trouble became a nightly bed time routine. Denver Gillen, a friend from Ward's art department, went to the Lincoln Park Zoo and sketched Rudolph with his delightful red nose. As Bob was putting the finishing touches on the story, Evelyn passed away. It was 1939. That Christmas, little Barbara May received the first of 2.4 million copies of Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer distributed by Montgomery Ward. Although there was a paper shortage during W.W. II, a total of 6 million copies had been given away or sold by the end of 1946.

Because May was a Ward's employee, he received no royalties. In January 1947, however, Sewell Avery, Ward's corporate president, gave the copyright to May. His first commercial printing took place immediately and was a great help in paying off his debts. The same year a nine minute cartoon was shown in theaters across the country. May's brother in law, Johnny Marks, wrote lyrics and a melody for Rudolph, but many were afraid to meddle with an established Santa tradition. Finally, Gene Autry recorded the song in 1949 and sold two million copies the first year. The song about Rudolph became one of the best selling Christmas songs ever, second only to "White Christmas". A T.V. special about Rudolf, narrated by Burl Ives, was produced in 1964 and remains a popular holiday favorite.

Robert L. May died in 1976, but his classic story of Rudolf lives on. The fact that he was laughed at as a child helped him to relate to millions of others who were laughed at as a child. The fact that his wife died of cancer helped him to understand the rest of us who face illness and

discouragement. The fact that his four year old daughter needed something to cheer her up at Christmas helped him put his finger on the pulse of countless other children who need to be cheered up at Christmas.

The original Christmas story is also shaped by "facts" that resonate with mankind. Jesus was born in poverty so He can relate to and understand the poor people of the world. Jesus was harassed by King Herod so He can understand the harsh hand of government persecution. Jesus was constantly criticized during His earthly ministry, so he can empathize with other who are unjustly criticized. Jesus gave us an example that we should follow in His steps. He ministered to the sick. He was a friend to social outcasts and sinners. He denied selfish ambition and refused an earthly crown. He devoted His life to others. He took up a cross. He died praying for the forgiveness of those responsible for His death. He was, as the Scriptures teach, tempted in all points like as we are, yet without sin.

But this story too, has a happy ending. That "man of sorrows" who was "despised and rejected of men" triumphed over it all. He conquered death and brought life and immortality to light through the Gospel. Darkness and discouragement retreat before the "brightness of His coming". Those who receive Him as Lord, will truly live happily ever after.

MERRY CHRISTMAS!

I love you,

Grandpa Boyce