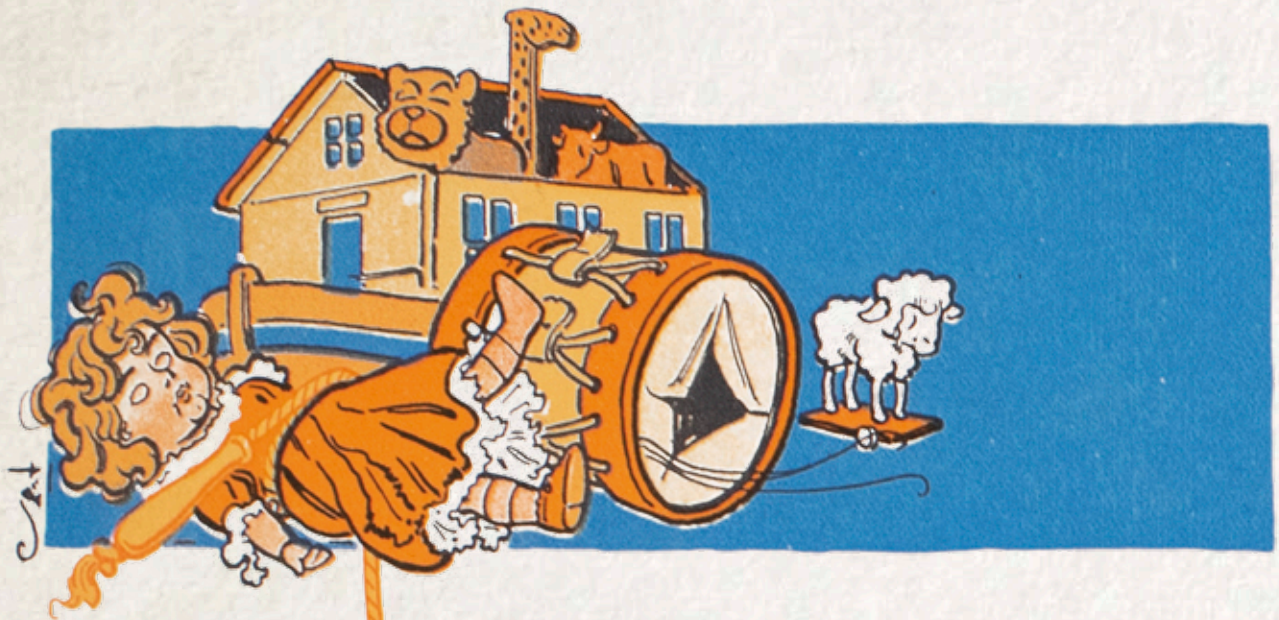




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● Those who received the book for Christmas 1908 could not know that the photographs captured a world that was soon to be utterly changed ●



**I** was the night before Christmas,  
when all through the house  
Not a creature was stirring,  
not even a mouse;

# A CHRISTMAS CLASSIC

How many of us can still recite some of the stanzas of 'The Night Before Christmas'? Curator Ian Scott guides us through one of the most beautifully illustrated editions of the poem, 'Denslow's Night Before Christmas'.

In 1902, a new edition of the classic American poem 'The Night Before Christmas' was published with illustrations by W.W. Denslow. It was a bold interpretation of the 1823 poem for a new century and would have been a much-loved gift in many households that Christmas, both in the US and here.

'The Night Before Christmas' has been called the most famous American verse ever written. It is certainly one of the most influential poems ever published as, almost two centuries after its initial publication on 23 December 1823, it still shapes our idea of Santa Claus – or St Nicholas as he is called in the poem – and what he does on Christmas Eve. Its roots are so deep in our culture that even if you think you are not familiar with the poem, you will almost certainly know its opening lines.

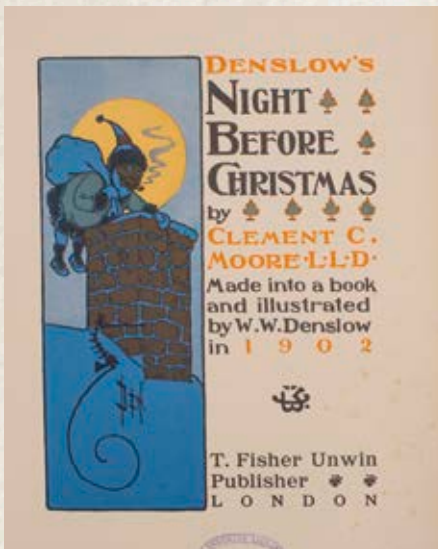
"'Twas the night before Christmas, when all through the house

Not a creature was stirring not even a mouse"

Originally published anonymously as 'A Visit from St Nicholas' and later attributed to Clement Clarke Moore (1779–1863), the poem brought together many existing ideas about Christmas and added some new details. It begins with the house quiet and the children snug in bed when father hears a clatter outside. Going to the window, he sees a sleigh silhouetted against the moon driven by a little old man and pulled by eight reindeer. The poem names these reindeer as Dasher, Dancer, Prancer, Vixen, Comet, Cupid,

*Continues overleaf* >





Denslow's skill as an illustrator made a bestseller of a text that was already well-known and much-loved. His pictures showcased St Nicholas before a certain soft drink gave him his trademark red attire.



From previous page>

Donner and Blitzen. (Rudolph the red-nosed reindeer was added in a book published by a Chicago department store in 1939.) Father then hears little hooves on the roof and St Nicholas emerges from the chimney, a jolly, plump little man dressed all in fur with a bundle of toys over his shoulder. He fills all the stockings and, with a nod, he disappears back up the chimney, exclaiming, "Happy Christmas to all, and to all a good-night."

Denslow (1856–1915) was a celebrated illustrator, poster designer, caricaturist, book designer and journalist. In the 1890s, he settled in Chicago where he met L. Frank Baum (1856–1919). The two collaborated on a book of nonsense verse 'Father Goose: His Book' (1899) which was a bestseller.



In 1900, they published another even more successful book 'The Wonderful Wizard of Oz', with Baum supplying the text, Denslow the pictures, and both men sharing the copyright. The lavishly designed and illustrated book was widely imitated and influential. When Baum and Denslow fell out in 1902 over royalties for a stage production of 'The Wizard of Oz', Denslow sought another text he could illustrate and design. Hence the appearance of 'Denslow's Night

Before Christmas' in 1902, with his now celebrated name in the title.

'The Night Before Christmas' would have been known by heart by many in 1902 and widely available in cheap editions. Denslow would have to bring something special to his interpretation in order to get the public to once more buy a familiar classic. Denslow uses all his skills as a poster designer, cartoonist, book designer and illustrator to create a striking and sophisticated version of the poem, which became a bestseller. The book was an early example of a 20th century North American reinterpretation of a traditional Christmas text that crossed the world and changed the way we thought of and celebrated Christmas. Later in the century North American advertising, cinema, television and popular music would retell this story and many other Christmas tales.





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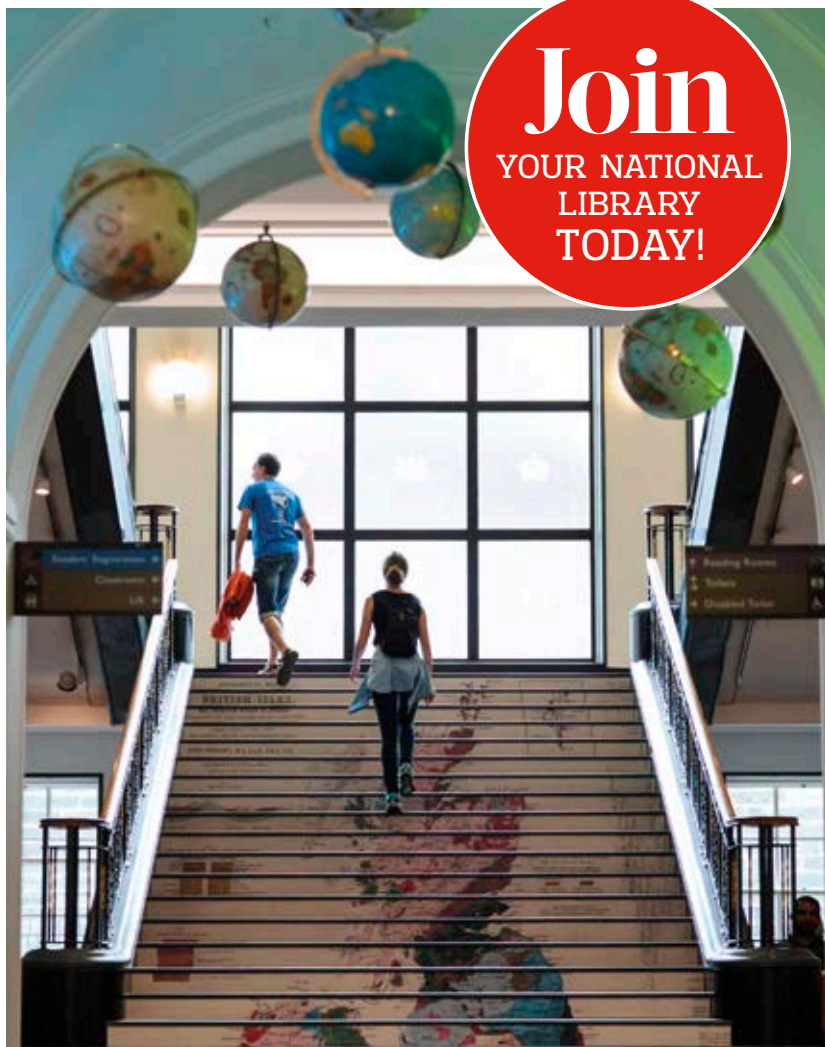


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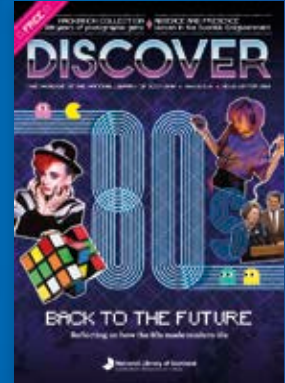
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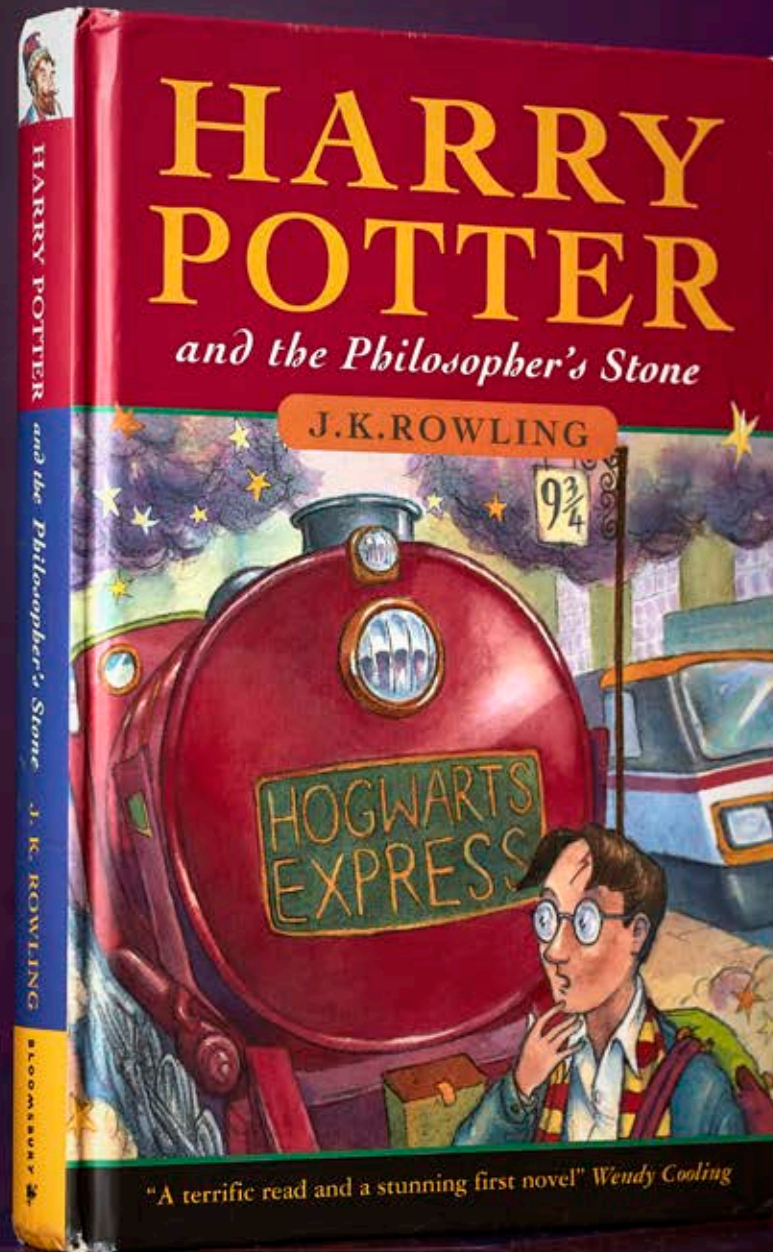


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