

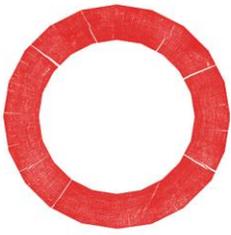
Such Stuff podcast
Season 7, Episode 4: The Such Stuff Audio Christmas Cracker
Bonanza

[Music plays]

Imogen Greenberg: Hello and welcome to another festive episode of Such Stuff and our final episode of the year. It has been the longest and strangest of years in recent memory, and with all the promise of a new year and the renewal it brings on the horizon we wanted to spend a few weeks cosying up against the dark nights and the frosty mornings and take a look at the stories that bring us together at this time of year. There are so many wonderful people who work to bring you Such Stuff so in this episode we'll hear from a few of them, offering up readings, poems and stories that bring joy and contemplation at this time of year. We're calling this our very own Such Stuff audio Christmas cracker bonanza, pull the cracker and who knows what you'll find inside.

I'm going to kick things off with a reading from a man who might as well have invented Christmas. Aside from **A Christmas Carol**, Charles Dickens wrote endless stories and musings on Christmas time and what it meant, so here's Mr Charles Dickens on the simple joys of Christmas decorations from his story **A Christmas Tree**. Aptly enough it's about an old man reminiscing on Christmases past, and in this strangest of years it's hard not to think about the nostalgia and comfort this time of year brings.

I have been looking on, this evening, at a merry company of children assembled round that pretty German toy, a Christmas Tree. The tree was planted in the middle of a great round table, and towered high above their heads. It was brilliantly lighted by a multitude of little tapers; and everywhere sparkled and glittered with bright objects. There were rosy-cheeked dolls, hiding behind the green leaves; and there were real watches dangling from innumerable twigs; there were French-polished tables, chairs, bedsteads, wardrobes, eight-day clocks, and various other articles of domestic furniture, perched among the boughs, as if in



preparation for some fairy housekeeping; there were jolly, broad-faced little men, much more agreeable in appearance than many real men--and no wonder, for their heads took off, and showed them to be full of sugar-plums; there were fiddles and drums; there were tambourines, books, work-boxes, paint-boxes, sweetmeat-boxes, peep-show boxes, and all kinds of boxes; there were trinkets for the elder girls, far brighter than any grown-up gold and jewels; there were guns, swords, and banners; there were witches standing in enchanted rings of pasteboard, to tell fortunes; there were teetotums, humming-tops, needle-cases, pen-wipers, smelling-bottles, conversation-cards, bouquet-holders; real fruit, made artificially dazzling with gold leaf; imitation apples, pears, and walnuts, crammed with surprises; in short, as a pretty child, before me, delightedly whispered to another pretty child, "There was everything, and more." And flashing back the bright looks directed towards it from every side made a lively realisation of the fancies of childhood; and set me thinking how all the trees that grow and all the things that come into existence on the earth, have their wild adornments at that well-remembered time.

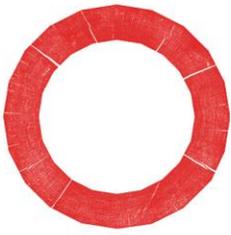
Being now at home again, and alone, the only person in the house awake, my thoughts are drawn back, by a fascination which I do not care to resist, to my own childhood. I begin to consider, what do we all remember best upon the branches of the Christmas Tree of our own young Christmas days, by which we climbed to real life.

[Music plays]

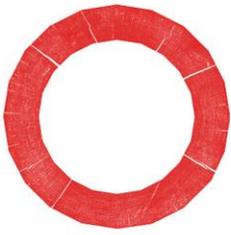
IG: That was from Charles Dickens **A Christmas Tree**.

Up next the wonderful Paul Ready. Pretty soon after lockdown hit Paul was roped into the Such Stuff family and has been an incredible part of the team ever since. His Shakespeare Diaries, answering audience questions and musing on Shakespeare plays with the wonderful Michelle Terry has been the unexpected joy of this year for us, so here's Paul's Christmas offering for you.

Paul Ready: Christmas Eve by Liz Berry



Tonight the Black Country is tinselled by sleet
falling on the little towns lit up in the darkness
like constellations – the Pigeon, the Collier –
and upon the shooting stars of boy racers
who comet through the streets in white Novas.
It's blowing in drifts from the pit banks,
over the brown ribbon of the cut, over Beacon Hill,
through the laploved chimneys of the factories.
Sleet is tumbling into the lap of the plastercast Mary
by the manger at St Jude's, her face gorgeous and naive
as the last Bilston carnival queen.
In the low-rise flats opposite the cemetery,
Mrs Showell is turning on her fibre-optic tree
and unfolding her ticket for the rollover lottery
though we ay never 'ad a bit o luck in ower lives
and upstairs in the box-rooms of a thousand semis
hearts are stuttering and minds unravelling
like unfinished knitting.
And the sleet fattens and softens to snow,
blanking the crowded rows of terraces
and their tiny hankies of garden, white now, surrendering
their birdfeeders and sandpits, the shed Mick built
last Autumn when the factory clammed up.
And the work's gone again
and the old boys are up at dawn to clock on nowhere
except walk their dogs and sigh
at the cars streaming to call centres and supermarkets
because there ay nuthin in it that's mon's werk,
really bab, there ay . . .
But it's coming down now, really coming
over the stands at the Molinuex, over Billy Wright
kicking his dreams into the ring road
and in the dark behind the mechanics
the O'Feeney's boy props his BMX against the lock-ups
and unzips to piss a flower into the snow
well gi me strength Lord, to turn the other cheek
for we'm the only ones half way decent round ere



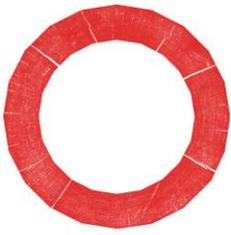
and the tower blocks are advent calendars,
every curtain pulled to reveal a snow-blurred face.
And it's Christmas soon, abide it or not,
for now the pubs are illuminated pink and gold
The Crooked House, Ma Pardoes, The Struggling Mon
and snow is filling women's hair like blossom
and someone is drunk already and throwing a punch
and someone is jamming a key in a changed lock
shouting fer christ's sake, Myra, yo'll freeze me to jeth
and a hundred new bikes are being wrapped in sheets
and small pyjamas warmed on fireguards
and children are saying one more minute, just one, Mom
and the old girls are watching someone die on a soap
and feeling every snow they've ever seen set in their bones.
It's snowing on us all
and I think of you, Eloise, down there in your terrace,
feeding your baby or touching his hand to the snow
and although we can't ever go back or be what we were
I can tell you, honestly, I'd give up everything I've worked for
or thought I wanted in this life,
to be with you tonight.

IG: That was **Christmas Eve** by Liz Berry read by Paul Ready.

[Music plays]

IG: Now we cover a fairly eclectic mix of subjects on the podcast as we circle the transformative impact of Shakespeare on our world, from 90s rom-coms to long lost Jacobean texts, but through it all our fabulous research team, where there's my sometimes ridiculous requests, to bring us extraordinary insights into worlds and texts that might otherwise be lost, forgotten or misunderstood. If you're a regular listener of Such Stuff you'll surely recognise the voice of the lovely Dr Will Tosh, our voice of reason, our guiding historical light. Here he is with a 17th Century festive poem for you.

[Music plays]



Dr Will Tosh: Robert Herrick, **Ceremonies for Christmas**

Come, bring with a noise,
My merry, merry boys,
The Christmas Log to the firing;
While my good Dame, she
Bids ye all be free;
And drink to your heart's desiring.

With the last year's brand
Light the new block, and
For good success in his spending,
On your Psaltries play,
That sweet luck may
Come while the log is a-tinding.

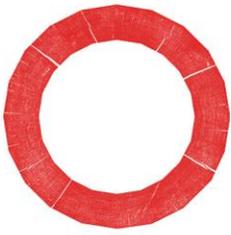
Drink now the strong beer,
Cut the white loaf here,
The while the meat is a-shredding;
For the rare mince-pie
And the plums stand by
To fill the paste that's a-kneading.

IG: That was Robert Herrick's poem **Ceremonies for Christmas** read by Dr Will Tosh.

[Music plays]

IG: Behind the scenes, there is a whole team of people who work to bring you the podcast whose voices you never hear, here to represent the entire digital team is the lovely Sophie Wells with a little story she heard whispered down on the banks of the River Thames.

Sophie Wells: In the early hours of the morning, the city of London sleeps. All the little people who bustle about the daytime are tucked up in their beds, dreaming of strange occurrences in far off places. Winter has arrived at last, and it is cold. So cold in fact, a mean



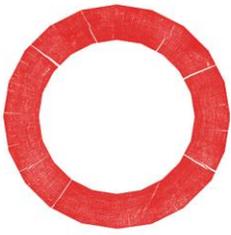
layer of frost carpets the cobbled streets and drops of dew cling to the turning leaves. So cold that a thick white fog hangs in the air.

Though; I think you'll find, that this fog isn't really fog at all. It is Dragon's Breath. And that can only mean one thing. A Dragon. Yes, somewhere hidden between the tangle of train tracks and slender alleys lives a fire breathing, scaled monstrosity. It's true.

Though I don't expect you to believe me... I wouldn't write it off just yet. With London being as big and old as it is, there are plenty of places for something wonderful; like a Dragon, to hide. Someplace clever; as all Dragons are very smart. Someplace where no human would ever think to look. Someplace so totally and utterly obvious that it would be silly to even begin to think a creature so large and so rare would live there. Someplace like a river. A big one.

No one knows exactly what lies at the bottom of the Thames River. However if anyone did care to take a proper look, I am certain the last thing they would expect is a Dragon! To be fair, we shouldn't be all that shocked. After all, this land was her home long before it was ours. Did you know, dragons are actually totally terrified of people; what with Britain's folklore rich with tales of Dragon-Slaying Knights. So it's no real surprise that no one has ever seen them, they are far more afraid of you then you are of them. That's why they sleep in the Thames.

It is said that the water of the River Thames is so cold that when the Dragon lays down to sleep on the riverbed, it's body temperature drops below freezing point and the whole thing is encapsulated in a layer of ice. So, in the early hours of the morning just as the sun is due to rise... the Dragon wakes, and takes a big wide yawn. If you've ever seen water boil on a stove, then I'm sure you can guess what happens next. The sheer heat of her fiery breath thaws the ice around her body, letting off thick billows of steam that stretch all over London. Cloaking the skyline in a heavy sigh; or what we have come to know as fog. It is then she heaves her great body from the river and out into the streets, hungry for something to eat. There is little time to hunt, as before long the veil of mist will subside and she will be forced back to the river once more to sleep.



And that is all I have come to know. True story. Again, you don't have to believe me. Although I am sure you are more than capable of deciding for yourself what is fib and fantasy, take my advice. The next time you wake to the blanket of fog hanging over London... you'd better keep your wits about you. Or you might just meet the Thames Dragon yourself.

[Music plays]

IG: That was **The Thames Dragon**, an original story by Sophie Wells.

Now as we come to a close for the year, we come to Artistic Director Michelle Terry who always makes time to appear on the podcast in between such small matter such as running a theatre and appearing on our stages not to mention, weathering a pandemic this year, so I take my festive hat off to you Michelle, without further ado hears Michelle to read us out.

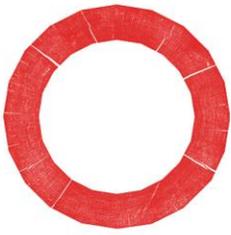
Michelle Terry: In the Bleak Midwinter by Christina Rossetti

In the bleak midwinter, frosty wind made moan,
Earth stood hard as iron, water like a stone;
Snow had fallen, snow on snow, snow on snow,
In the bleak midwinter, long ago.

Our God, Heaven cannot hold Him, nor earth sustain;
Heaven and earth shall flee away when He comes to reign.
In the bleak midwinter a stable place sufficed
The Lord God Almighty, Jesus Christ.

Enough for Him, whom cherubim, worship night and day,
Breastful of milk, and a mangerful of hay;
Enough for Him, whom angels fall before,
The ox and ass and camel which adore.

Angels and archangels may have gathered there,
Cherubim and seraphim thronged the air;



But His mother only, in her maiden bliss,
Worshipped the beloved with a kiss.

What can I give Him, poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb;
If I were a Wise Man, I would do my part;
Yet what I can I give Him: give my heart.

IG: That was Christina Rossetti's **In the Bleak Midwinter** read by Michelle Terry.

[Music plays]

IG: That's it from us but *Such Stuff* will be back next year, so from everyone at The Globe we wish you a merry Christmas and a happy and healthy new year.

You've been listening to *Such Stuff* with me Imogen Greenberg, alongside Paul Ready, Dr Will Tosh, Sophie Wells and Michelle Terry.

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