

Tricky St. Nick

Andrew Beckham's *The Lost Christmas Gift*

In the pages of artist and author Andrew Beckham's *The Lost Christmas Gift*, published by Princeton Architectural Press, readers will find a poignant, magical tale of a father and son and their encounter with a mysterious figure on the night before Christmas Eve. The narrator, a man named Emerson Johansson, tells of a package he receives from his father decades after it was mailed. It arrives two days before Christmas, in the present time, and contains a journal that is reproduced, page for page, in *The Lost Christmas Gift*. The journal details an adventure Johansson's father shared with his son one holiday season, when the younger Johansson was a boy. Now an old man himself, Johansson tells his story alongside the pages of the journal. Inside those pages are old photographs and a handwritten script, which contribute to the illusion that the journal is a relic from the past. The photographs are real, not illustrations.

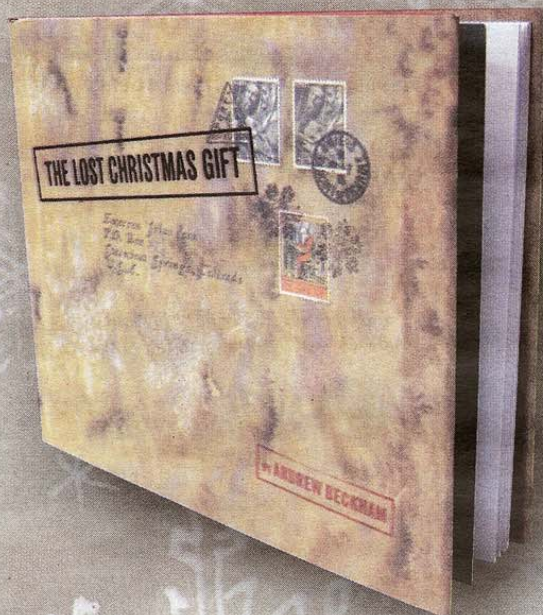
"Those are my photographs, and they were all taken on the same day a few years ago, right after a huge blizzard up on Rabbit Ears Pass, which is a high-country wilderness area in Colorado," Beckham told *Pasatiempo*. "The narrative in the book is about a father and son who get lost on Rabbit Ears Pass during the blizzard. I did a few things to them to give them a vintage quality. I was able to get my hands on some glass plate negatives from the 1920s, which is the era I was interested in, and I scanned those glass negatives. I pulled the original imagery out and put my imagery in. I wanted the historical veneer of the visuals to be very real." Beckham signs copies of *The Lost Christmas Gift* at Collected Works Bookstore on Friday, Nov. 23, and an exhibit of original artwork and prints from the book is on view at Chiaroscuro Contemporary Art.

Johansson's narration is in the book's margins, next to the images from his father's handmade journal. The journal includes Beckham's photographs and illustrations, presented as though they are the work of Johansson's father. To add to the illusion, Beckham's introduction tells how the younger Johansson told Beckham the story, but the introduction, too, is a work of fiction. "There is no historical Emerson Johansson," Beckham said. "He is a fictional character, but hopefully the reader is drawn in because there is this high level of realism. By the time you get far enough into the book and you realize it's a story about St. Nicholas — you get the reindeer and the sled and the whole bit — it becomes apparent that it's a work of fiction. The idea is to draw the reader in with that almost documentary style at the beginning."

The book's cover image, also a photograph, is of the package containing the journal. Beckham went to lengths to present the image as an actual artifact, constructing the package by hand and then shooting it for the book. He even had custom stamps made, based on early-20th-century French originals, to make the package look as though it had indeed been mailed from Europe years before. Johansson tells us his father was fighting in a war overseas and sent the package to compensate for his not being home for the holidays. (The time period or war is never specifically stated.)

"It is my first book to be published as a trade edition by a traditional publisher," Beckham said. "About a decade ago I started doing limited-edition, hand-built artist books out of my studio and found that there was a market for those. I was having some success selling them to special-collections departments at university libraries and museum collections — institutional-level collections that had holdings in one-of-a-kind or limited-edition artist books. *The Lost Christmas Gift* was originally a hand-built book

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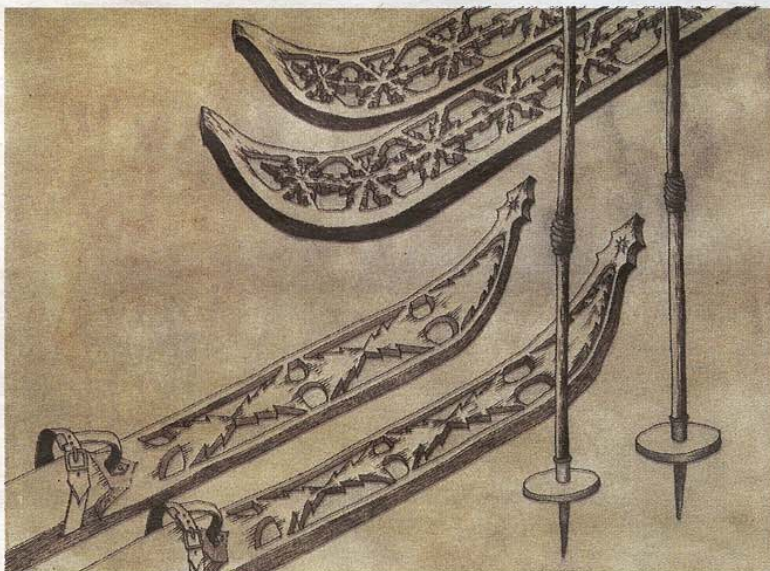




Top to bottom, Andrew Beckham:
The Bivouac; vellum overlay;
The Map

Images (including background art)
 from *The Lost Christmas Gift*





The Skis

I printed on my own, in a limited edition of five copies.” One of Beckham’s handmade versions of the book is displayed at Chiaroscuro, along with a series of framed triptychs of the original artwork, prints from the book, and several faux artifacts, including a letter from the father to the son (reproduced in the book) and the package Beckham made in his studio.

“One of my goals with this story was to tell it in two voices over time. I wanted to make this a book that would have enough layers of content and meaning that it would resonate with adults just as much as it would with kids. If it had been presented just as the journal itself without the sidebars (it does stand alone that way — you can read it all the way through without reading Emerson’s voice in the margins) it becomes a much simpler story. I really wanted a father-and-son dialogue over time. I wanted that poignancy. The idea of memory and myth and where those two connect is an idea I’m really drawn to.”

Beckham’s tale weaves in several representations of St. Nicholas that loosely trace early conceptions of him as an ambiguous shadow figure to the beneficent Santa Claus we know today. “When I looked around at the books on the holiday market that were about St. Nicholas, I was shocked that there were so few that had much depth to them. There’s Clement Moore’s *The Night Before Christmas*, which is the classic and has been around for years. Then there’s Chris Van Allsburg’s *The Polar Express*. But I was trying to tell that Nicholas story just a little bit differently. The first few times the father and son see this mysterious figure, he’s this really rough, almost scary-looking guy. He looks like he could be a trapper or a hunter or a chimney sweep. That comes from just after the Reformation.” The post-Reformation Protestant Church supplanted the figure of St. Nicholas with that of a gift-giving Christ Child, and St. Nicholas was relegated to a lesser position, though not as a saint. “Historians have thought of him as almost the shadow side or doppelgänger of Nicholas,” said Beckham. “He had a lot of different names, depending on what country or culture you’re talking about, but some examples would be Rough Clause or Ashen Clause. On the one hand, he would help the Christ Child hand out gifts, but on the other hand, he would whisk bad children away to some dark end. I wanted to take that piece of history and turn it on its head. As the story progresses, the mysterious character looks more and more familiar, and of course, by the last couple of drawings it’s clear who we’re talking about. My hope is that this is the kind of book you can go to again and again, and over time, more of its layers of meaning and layers of history and its content are going to bubble up to the surface after repeated reads.” ◀

details

- ▼ Andrew Beckham signs *The Lost Christmas Gift*
4 p.m. Friday, Nov. 23
Collected Works Bookstore, 202 Galisteo St., 988-4226
- ▼ Andrew Beckham: *The Lost Christmas Gift: Images & Artifacts*
Opening reception 5 p.m. Saturday, Nov. 24; exhibit through Dec. 29
Chiaroscuro Contemporary Art, 702½ Canyon Road, 992-0711