

Geoffrey, the Manhattan woman

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Introduction

A nine-year-old girl once wrote a novel called *My Christmas Boats*. It was picked up by Simon and Schuster, in stores the following Christmas.

A friend sent me the hardback as a joke. I read it. It was awful. Really awful. But I couldn't put it down. For a whole week I neither ate nor slept. All I did was read. It was only a hundred pages, but I probably read it fifteen times.

I'm not the kind of person who recommends things. What's more, I hate the kind of person who does the recommending. I even hate the person who doesn't hate the person who recommends things. That's how averse I am to "word of mouth" marketing. But I really couldn't help myself here. I must have called everyone I'd ever met. People I hadn't talked to in years.

...Ring... ...Ring... ...Ring... ...Ring...

"Hello, you have reached the answering machine of Chad Buhner. I'm not here to take your call so please leave your name and number after the beep and I'll return your call as soon as possible. God bless."

...Beep...

"Hi Chad, it's Clark from Tristan Trinity High School. Sorry I didn't see you at the reunion. Look, you have *got* to read..." etc.

At least half the people I called actually answered the phone. Once I had finished explaining who I was ("no, it's Clark *Matthews*, class of '79; I sat behind you in trig" or "it's little Clark Matthews from Sunday School", etc.), I assured every one of them "this book will change your life!"

Most people responded with something like "oh." The few people who weren't too startled by my call had the common sense to ask me "why?"

At first I didn't have an answer. But then I thought about it. And I decided that reading *My Christmas Boats* is like watching a midget stock shelves: perhaps there's some skill at the lower levels, but when it comes time to do some reaching...

And whether I'm watching the midget or reading the book, it's impossible to look away at that point. They're doing their damndest – so focused, so sincere – but I know it's not going to work out.

With the midget, I feel guilty for staring. But there would be far more pain in *not* staring. So I suffer the guilt. With the book though, I can experience the exact same pleasure in voyeur form. Nobody can see how much happiness I'm taking from the experience.

And my pleasure comes from the author's sincerity. She really means it. There has never been an author who wrote with more passion.

The story begins with the acquisition of the boats. We don't know the main character's name (first person perspective; she's only ever "I" or "my"), but we do know it's a girl. And that girl receives her boats in the first paragraph.

Her first night is spent sleeping in them. The next morning, she got up early and, still in her boats, began wading through puddles. That afternoon, she used them to kick cinepones.

At first I assumed this was a nautical term (part of that "reaching" I was talking about).

Then I realized: she's in boots kicking pinecones.

The whole book was similarly terrible. But it was written with such sincerity. The author was so serious on her way to failure. And that's where all the charm and comedy dwells. And I think *that* is why the book sold so well.

When the paperback came out, the words "more than a million copies in print!" were in a larger font than the book's title.

And no edition of the cover made any mention of the book's author. The first edition said something about "Santa's favorite elf", but subsequent prints just left that part blank.

And I had to know.

So I set out on a mission.

That mission ended this morning when I met a girl named Geoffrey. A girl who wrote the book half her life ago. She's been eighteen for two weeks. And she doesn't seem to be doing a very good job as a teenager. Or as a girl.

This is a story about that girl. And about my mission.