

A Holiday Story and a Song

by Margaret Whisnant

*The Life and Times of a
Very Unusual Reindeer*



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A Holiday Story and a Song

It's Christmas 1949, and the song about his life is climbing to the #1 spot on the U.S. pop charts. Not too shabby for an eight-year-old with an unusual nose.

Our juvenile celebrity got his start as the brain child of Robert L. May, who worked as a copywriter for the Montgomery Ward Company at their flagship store in Chicago. This huge retail and catalog giant had been buying and giving away children's coloring books during the holiday season as a way to attract more shoppers to their outlet stores around the country. The practice was getting expensive, so the company president asked the marketing department to create an original story they could produce themselves and save money.

On a January morning in 1939, May's supervisor called him into his office. The company, he explained, needed a Christmas story for youngsters, preferably something with an animal character like Ferdinand the Bull. Robert's natural ability for writing made him the man for the job. When he left the office that day, 34-year-old Robert May had some homework to do.

Clement C. Moore had already hitched eight reindeer to Santa's sleigh in his 1823 poem *A Visit from St. Nicholas* (a.k.a. *The Night Before Christmas*), and May's daughter was fascinated by the deer at the Lincoln Park Zoo. His story, then, would be about a reindeer; but, like the ugly duckling, his character would be a misfit searching for its place in the world. As a child, Robert had been bullied because of his small stature. His young hero, he decided, would also be physically different. He would have a big glowing red nose.

It took a while to settle on a name. May considered *Rollo*, but it sounded too cheerful for a picked-on misfit. *Reginald* was too British. *Rudolph*. . . Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer. That was it!

Rudolph's story slowly came to life as a poem of rhyming couplets like those of *A Visit from St. Nicholas*. May's 4-year-old daughter, Barbara, was thrilled with the story when it was finished in late August, but his boss wasn't so enthusiastic. He was worried about the red nose because he thought people would associate it with drunkenness. Undaunted, May sent an artist friend to the Lincoln Park Zoo to make sketches of his daughter's beloved deer with added red noses. The boss couldn't resist when he saw the drawings. Rudolph, his red nose, and Denver Gillen's illustrations were approved!



During the 1939 holiday season, Montgomery Ward distributed 2.4 million copies of the Rudolph booklet to children visiting Santa Claus in their 531 stores. They loved it! Then paper shortages during World War II limited its production for a few years, but by the end of 1946 almost 6 million children had received free copies of Rudolph's story.

That same year, a commercial publisher asked May about turning Rudolph's story into a for-sale book. There was only one problem. May didn't own his story! Montgomery Ward did. The company had paid him to write it as part of his job, so it held the copyright and exclusive rights to sell the work. Even worse, May was being crushed financially by huge medical bills from his wife's terminal illness back in the summer of 1939. He made a plea to Montgomery Ward's corporate president, Sewell Avery, to turn the copyright over to him. In an act of tremendous generosity and kindness, Mr. Avery did just that in January of 1947.

May's new relationship with his little reindeer changed his life. Rudolph was about to erase his debt and make him a millionaire.

Maxton Publishers, Inc. printed and distributed Rudolph's first book in 1947, and it was a best-seller. The next year, movie theaters ran a nine-minute cartoon version of May's story complete with Rudolph's new song, composed by Johnny Marks, a professional songwriter and May's brother-in-law. With both a story and a song to his credit, Rudolph was officially on a rocket ride to stardom.

Believe it or not, the music industry of 1948 was not very interested in Rudolph's 113-word song. They didn't want to mess with Santa's established story, and popular recording artist of the time turned it down. Then Gene Autry, a famous movie star cowboy and singer, got his chance. At first he balked. The song was just too childish for his cowboy image. Thank goodness his wife was able to convince him to give it a try. Autry's recording of "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer" sold 2 million copies during its first Christmas season and soon took the #1 spot on the charts. It proved to be Autry's most popular recording. It is second only to "White Christmas" as the best-selling holiday song of all time.

On a January morning in 2014, Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer will celebrate his 75th birthday! So far, over 500 Rudolph products have hit the market. Hundreds of artists have recorded his song. His first TV special aired in 1964 and continues to run every year. Millions of children hear his story and sing his song in more than 25 languages each holiday season.



As predicted, Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer has gone down in history.

A Holiday Story and a Song

Refer to *A Holiday Story and a Song* to answer the following questions.

- _____ 1. Which of the following is **not** true of the Montgomery Ward Company?
- (A) It was a huge retail and catalog company based in Chicago.
 - (B) The owners wanted a holiday story that they could produce and give to shoppers.
 - (C) The owners wanted to use Ferdinand the Bull as their story character but couldn't because of copyright laws.
 - (D) Before 1939, it had been buying coloring books and giving them away to holiday shoppers.
- _____ 2. Robert May worked in Montgomery Ward's marketing department as a copywriter, which means he wrote the scripts (copy) for the store's ads and other promotional materials. Because the company had paid him to write his reindeer story, he did not own the copyright to the work. How is a *copyright* different from a *copywriter*?
- (A) A copyright gives an author the right to sell and profit from his work. A copywriter gets paid a salary by an employer, and he cannot sell the work to someone else.
 - (B) The person who creates a piece of writing always owns what he writes, but a company always owns the materials created by a copywriter.
 - (C) A copywriter gets paid for the work he creates each day, but by law a copyright holder can make a profit only once.
 - (D) If only one person does the writing, they the copyright belongs to the single author. A copywriter usually works with other writers and can never claim the copyright.
3. What sources inspired May to write a poem about a reindeer with a red nose?
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- _____ 4. May's original story is
- (A) a narrative written from the reindeer's point of view.
 - (B) a short chapter book.
 - (C) a poem written in rhyming couplets like *A Visit from St. Nicholas*.
 - (D) the same poem as Johnny Marks's song with the exception of a few lines.

- _____ 5. Johnny Marks was May’s
- (A) co-worker at Montgomery Ward.
 - (B) brother-in-law.
 - (C) boss.
 - (D) best friend.
- _____ 6. What is the author’s purpose for writing this text?
- (A) to entertain
 - (B) to persuade
 - (C) to convince
 - (D) to inform
- _____ 7. What text structure does the author use to present Rudolph’s story?
- (A) cause and effect
 - (B) sequence
 - (C) compare and contrast
 - (D) a list of facts
8. The author describes Sewell Avery’s decision to give Robert May the copyright to Rudolph’s story as *an act of tremendous generosity and kindness*. What facts support this statement?

- _____ 9. Which of the following text passages connects the information in the third paragraph to the present?
- (A) *On a January morning in 2014, Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer will celebrate his 75th birthday!*
 - (B) *Autry’s recording of “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer” sold 2 million copies. . . It is second only to “White Christmas” as the best-selling holiday song. . .*
 - (C) *May’s new relationship with his little reindeer changed his life. Rudolph was about to erase his debt and make him wealthy.*
 - (D) *Millions of children hear his story and sing about him in more than 25 languages each holiday season.*

10. An *inference* is a conclusion based on reasoning and evidence. Decide which of the following statements are inferences that a reader could make after reading “A Holiday Song and a Story” by writing *Yes* in the blank. If the statement is not a logical inference, write *No* in the blank.
- _____ a. Ferdinand the Bull is a character in a children’s story.
 - _____ b. Robert May made a lot of money working as a copywriter for the Montgomery Ward Company.
 - _____ c. Montgomery Ward gave away the coloring books and the Rudolph booklet as a way to get shoppers to come to their stores.
 - _____ d. Robert May had only one child.
 - _____ e. Rudolph is a male reindeer.
 - _____ f. Denver Gillen was the artist who went to Lincoln Park Zoo and drew illustrations of reindeer with red noses.
 - _____ g. Montgomery Ward’s president, Sewell Avery, was well known for his many acts of generosity and kindness.
 - _____ h. May’s songwriter brother-in-law, Johnny Marks, made money from the song he wrote about Rudolph.
 - _____ i. Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer is popular in countries other than the U.S.
- _____ 11. The book and song title “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer” is an example of
- (A) a simile
 - (B) personification
 - (C) a hyperbole
 - (D) alliteration
- _____ 12. The meaning of *associate* as it is used in paragraph 6 is
- (A) accompany.
 - (B) connect.
 - (C) a companion.
 - (D) colleague.

Answer Keys

1. C (RI. 6.1, 7.1, 8.1)
2. A (RI. 6.4, 7.4, 8.4)
3. The company requested an animal story. Robert's decision to write about a reindeer was inspired by Clement C. Moore's 1823 poem *A Visit from St. Nicholas* and his daughter's fascination with the deer in Lincoln Park Zoo. The traditional story of the ugly duckling gave him the idea of a misfit. His own childhood experiences as the victim of bullying because of his small size inspired the reindeer's physical difference—the big glowing red nose. (RI. 6.1, 7.1, 8.1)
4. C (RI. 6.1, 7.1, 8.1)
5. B (RI. 6.1, 7.1, 8.1)
6. D (RI. 6.6, 7.6, 8.6)
7. B (RI. 6.5, 7.5, 8.5)
8. May's story was proving to be very popular. The fact that commercial publishers were asking to turn it into a for-sale book meant that it had a great potential to be a big money maker. Since May had created the story as a Montgomery Ward employee, the company owned the work and all the rights to it. The company and its executives stood to make a lot of money from May's story. At that time, May still had huge medical bills to pay from his wife's terminal illness back in the summer of 1939 when he was writing the Rudolph story. He certainly needed the money that his story might bring in.
Sewell Avery was extremely generous because he turned over the copyright to May and gave up any claim he might have to future profits from the story. He was kind in that he helped May out when he needed it. (Author's opinion: Avery's decision was rare in 1939 and would be listed as extinct today.) (RI. 6.8, 7.8, 8.8)
9. A (RI. 6.3, 7.3, 8.3)
10.
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. Yes
 - d. No
 - e. Yes
 - f. Yes
 - g. No
 - h. Yes
 - i. Yes (RI. 6.1, 7.1, 8.1)
11. D (L. 6.5, 7.5, 8.5)
12. B (L. 6.4, 7.4, 8.4)

Teacher's Resources

Making Media Comparisons: (RI. 6.7, 7.7, 8.7)

The Story:

May's original story of Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer is different from the version presented in his brother-in-law's song and the yarn that unfolds in the made-for-TV films.

To begin with, May's book, as mentioned in the script, is a poem written in rhyming couplets in the cadence and form of Clement C., Moore's *A Visit from St. Nicholas*. It begins with

*'Twas the day before Christmas, and all through the hills
The reindeer were playing. . . enjoying the spills.*

and end with

*You may hear them call, as they drive out of sight:--
"Merry Christmas to all, and to all a good night!"*

Copies of the authorized reproduction of May's 1939 story poem with Denver Gillen's original illustrations (published by Applewood Books) can be [purchased from Amazon.com](#). I **highly recommend** purchasing a new or used copy of this book as a comparison resource.

The nine-minute cartoon mentioned in the script is a close match to May's story. It can be [viewed on YouTube](#). A pre-Gene Autry recording of Johnny Marks's song introduces the film. In the cartoon, Rudolph

*lives in a reindeer village instead of with Santa at the North Pole.
is picked on, but has a loving mother.*

*is not acquainted with Santa before the fateful foggy Christmas Eve.
is discovered accidentally by Santa while he is delivering gifts to the reindeer village.*

It's also interesting to note that in this animation, the reindeer of Rudolph's village tend to transition from their natural, four-legged gait and stand up on two legs in human posture.

Also available on YouTube: [Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer: The Movie](#) (1 hr. 17 minutes) from 1998.

Use these resources to compare and contrast:

- May's book and Clement C. Moore's *A Visit from St. Nicholas*.
- May's book and the nine-minute cartoon.
- The content of May's story poem and Johnny Marks's song lyrics.
- The 1944 nine-minute cartoon and the 1998 movie.

The Song:

In spite of being shunned in 1948, Johnny Marks's reindeer song has since been recorded by hundreds of artists.

[Listen to Gene Autry's hit recording here.](#)

Bing Crosby was one of the artists who refused to record Rudolph's song in 1948, but here he is [singing the song on You Tube](#).

Teacher's Resources—continued

Popular signer Perry Como initially agreed to record Marks's song, but he wanted a line of lyrics changed. Marks refused and subsequently offered the song to Gene Autry. Somewhere around 1953, Perry Como did record the song. [Check it out on YouTube.](#)

How about [Rudolph the Red-Nosed-Reindeer in rap?](#) (DMX) **Warning:** Some of the public comments left for this video are not appropriate for students!

Use these videos to compare and contrast the different versions. Start with these criteria:

- the intended audience
- musical arrangement—mood
- the artists' styles
- your favorite and why
- Compare the audio recordings to the original 9 minute cartoon. How do they work together for their audience? Explain how each media has its own appeal. If only the recording or only the cartoon were available, which do you think people would prefer? Why?

Rudolph's song is second only in popularity and sales to "White Christmas."

[Listen to Bing Crosby's popular rendition of this song on YouTube.](#)

Compare and contrast "*Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer*" to "*White Christmas*."

Suggested criteria include:

- What do they have in common?
- What are their intended audiences?
- How are their stories different?
- What mood is created by each song?
- Why do you suppose "White Christmas" is #1?

Research Ideas: (W. 6.7, 7.7, 8.7)**Robert May**

Research and write about May's life after he received the copyright to "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer." Where he worked. What he did, etc.

Johnny Marks:

What familiar Christmas songs did Johnny Marks write after "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer"? Who recorded them? Which one do you like the best?

Gene Autry:

What other standard Christmas songs did Gene Autry record? After the success of his Rudolph recording, Autry went out in search of another song that would bring the same favorable outcome. He did find and record a second very popular song, but it didn't match Rudolph's status. Still, the song character went on to have his own TV movie. Who is he? (*Frosty, the Snowman*).

Montgomery Ward Company:

Montgomery Ward no longer exists. What happened?

The Internet Hoax:

In addition to being a story, a song, a merchandize giant, and several movies, Rudolph is also the subject of an [internet hoax](#) .

- Search the internet to find the fake Rudolph story.
- Why is it a hoax?
- How can you spot an internet hoax?

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