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The Most Famous Reindeer

Montgomery Ward executives feared Rudolph's red nose would remind too many parents of drunks.

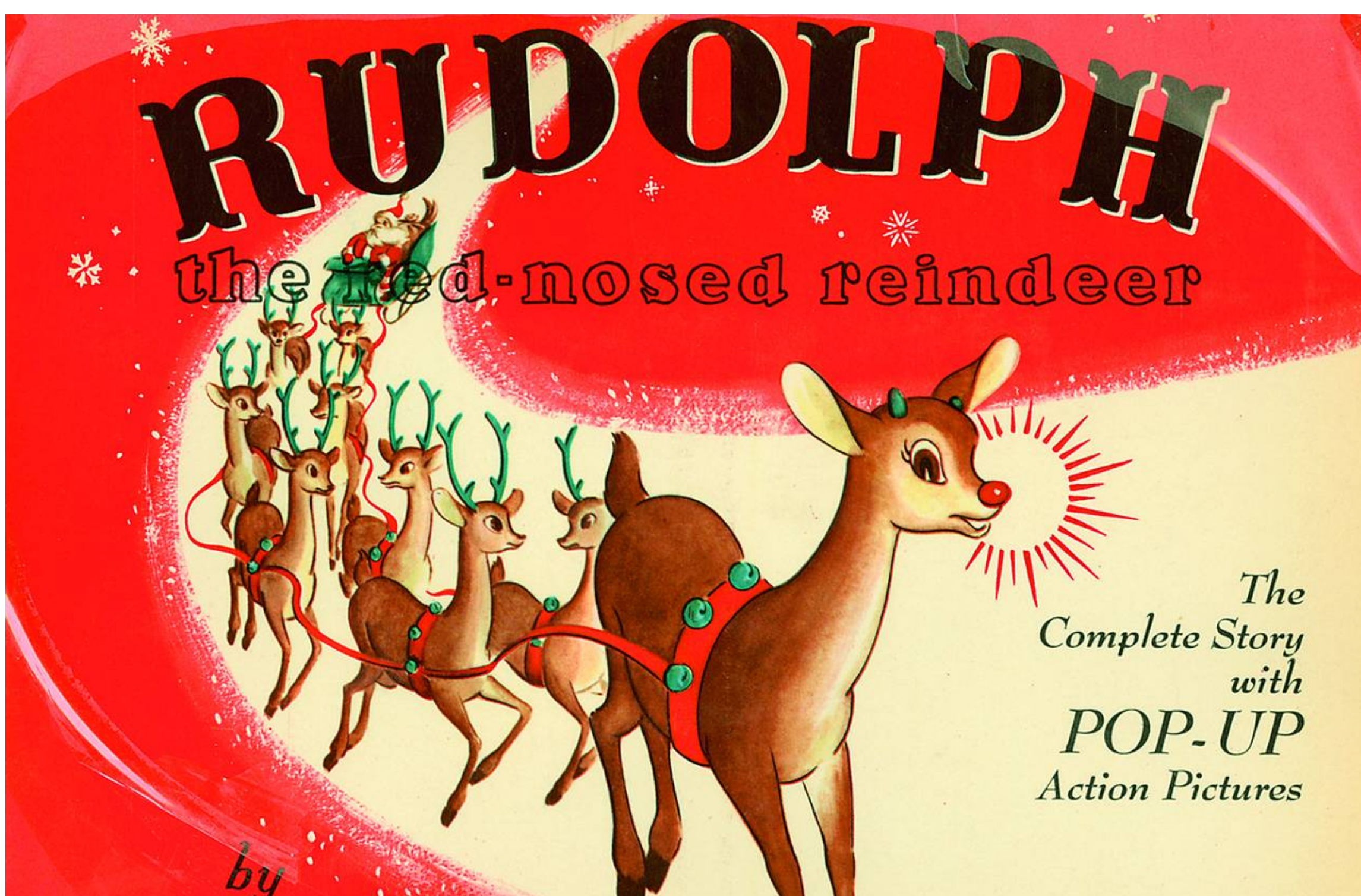


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By Edward Kosner

Updated Nov. 18, 2016 6:10 pm ET

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It's that time of year again, and the earworm is wriggling your way. Maybe it's already taken residence:

You know Dasher and Dancer
Prancer and Vixen,
Comet and Cupid
Donner and Blitzen.
But do you recall
The most famous reindeer of all?

Of course you do. Soon radio, television, social media, shopping malls and elevators in America and much of the industrialized world will be saturated by recordings of a song about a cute Christmas character invented during the Depression by a disconsolate Jewish copywriter to attract children and their parents to a now-defunct chain of department stores.

Despite its commercial genesis, the story of Rudolph turns out to be, among other things, the first real addition to American Christmas lore since the first decades of the 19th century. That's when Washington Irving transformed churchy St. Nicholas into a clay-pipe-puffing, rotund charmer and Clement Clarke Moore equipped him with eight flying reindeer and an automatically replenishing, toy-filled sleigh. Gene Autry, the singing cowpoke, made the song into a hit in 1949, and since then it's been recorded by everyone from Ella Fitzgerald and Destiny's Child to the Temptations and Burl Ives, not to mention Bing Crosby, Dean Martin, rapper DMX, and the Cadillac, the doo-wop group revered for "Speedoo."

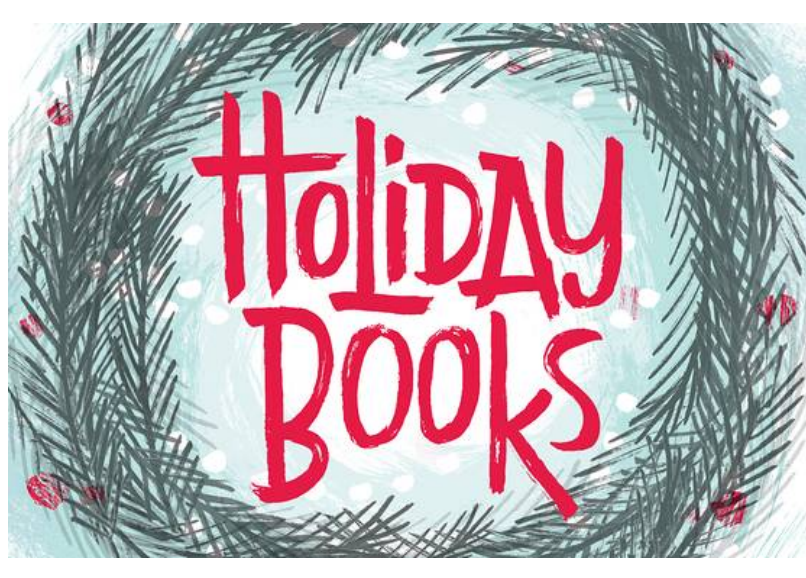
Now, just in time for his annual resurrection, Rudolph and his legend have been deconstructed by Ronald D. Lankford Jr., who has written books about popular music, including a cultural history of Christmas songs. In "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer: An American Hero," Mr. Lankford has shoveled up more facts, anecdotes and trivia about Rudolph than anyone besides Frosty the Snowman might want to know. But the Rudolph saga turns out to be more interesting than one might expect—a parable of American commerce cloaked in benevolence.

The Rudolph creation story begins in Chicago in January 1939, when Robert May, a nerdy 33-year-old adman at Montgomery Ward—with its bursting catalog and more than 600 stores, a retail colossus second only to Sears, Roebuck—was assigned by his boss to dream up a Christmas giveaway, perhaps an illustrated story like the one about Ferdinand the bashful bull. Having skipped grades in school, May had been bullied by his classmates, and the experience informed his approach to his assignment under dire circumstances: He was the father of a young daughter, and his wife was dying of cancer. With a nod to the Ugly Duckling rather than Ferdinand, May came up with an awkward young reindeer mocked by his fellows whose oddity—an incandescent nose—enables him to save the day when a befogged Santa asks him to lead the team for global toy delivery.

RUDOLPH THE RED-NOSED REINDEER: AN AMERICAN HERO

By Ronald D. Lankford Jr.

ForeEdge, 206 pages, \$22.95



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According to the legend, May read his poetic text to his daughter, who loved it. The Ward hierarchy didn't; some worried that the red nose would remind too many parents of drunks. But one exec stood up for Rudolph, and the corporation wound up giving away 2.4 million copies of a 32-page illustrated pamphlet to kids brought to Ward stores by mom and dad. Seven years later, after the end of World War II, another 3.6 million copies were handed out. With an entrepreneurial corporate boost, Rudolph was launched.

May's "Rudolph" was a work for hire owned by Ward, but the company's chairman gave the adman the copyright in 1947, and May made the most of it. Over time, there would be enough Rudolph merchandise to stock a toy store. In 1949, May's brother-in-law, Johnny Marks, wrote the song that has enthralled or tormented people ever since. He paid \$5 to the singer Guy Mitchell to make a demo and sent it to several crooners. At the end of a session to lay down two 45-rpm Christmas records, Gene Autry devoted 10 minutes to "Rudolph" and made it the B-side of one of the discs. It eventually sold 2.5 million copies, his greatest hit.

The legend only grew. In 1964, another corporate angel, RCA, swooped in and produced a stop-motion animated "Rudolph" special that was shown on TV every Christmas. Little Golden Books hired a writer to convert May's poetry into prose.

With commendable energy, Mr. Lankford tracks down every Rudolph lead he can find and even resolves conflicting accounts. This can be heavy going for all but the most obsessive Rudolphophile. But he also explores the big questions. He shows how the postwar baby boom created a vast audience for a new children's character and argues that Rudolph appeals to Americans because the story is actually an inspirational Horatio Alger tale of pluck and luck leading to unlikely success. And he ponders whether Rudolph should be thought of as true folklore or as "fakelore," like Paul Bunyan, or even "fakelure"—a commercial come-on. In the end, it hardly matters.

Then how the reindeer loved him
As they shouted out with glee,
"Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer,
You'll go down in history."

And so he has.

—Mr. Kosner was the editor of Newsweek, New York, Esquire and the New York Daily News.

Appeared in the November 19, 2016, print edition as 'The Most Famous Reindeer of All.'

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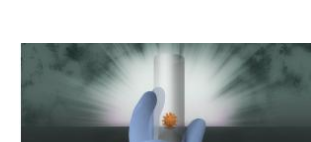
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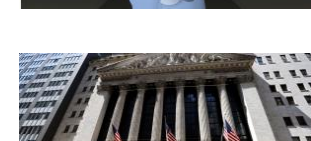
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