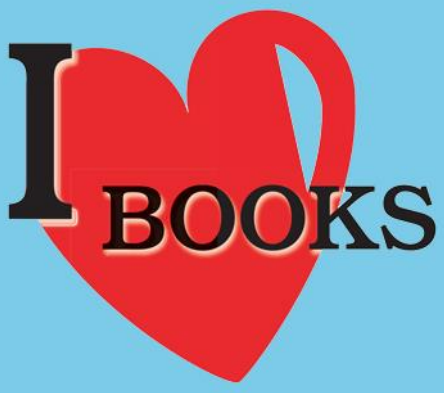



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Opening extract from

# Christmas According to Humphrey

Written by

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To my niece, Jennifer Powell Radman,
and my nephew, Todd Vincent Powell –
'Jenny' and 'Todd' all grown up!



# 1 What a Lark

'Humphrey! Where are you?' a voice called out.

I wasn't quite sure where I was, because I'd been sound asleep in my cage until I heard the voice.

My cage is a wonderful world all to itself. I have everything a hamster needs: a wheel to spin on, a sleeping hut, a climbing ladder, food, water, a mirror, tree branches and a corner just for my poo. (And that, of course, isn't near my food or water or sleeping hut.) And my bedding is like a lovely quilt that keeps me warm when it's cold.

I poked my head out of the bedding.

So that's where I was. Room 26 of Longfellow School!

'Oh, so that's where you're hiding.' Mrs Brisbane, my teacher, leaned down to look into my cage. I do like to play hide-and-squeak at times, but all I could

think of that morning was keeping warm. During the winter at Longfellow School, they turn the heat down at night and turn it up again in the morning.

'Brrr, it's chilly,' Mrs Brisbane said. She was still wearing her heavy coat and a woolly cap. 'I hope the heat goes on soon.'

'YES-YES-YES!' I agreed.

But since I am a hamster and she is a human, all she heard was 'SQUEAK-SQUEAK-SQUEAK.'

'BOING-BOING!' my neighbour Og said. He's the other classroom pet in Room 26 and he makes a very strange twanging sound. He can't help it. He's a frog.

'Morning, Og,' Mrs Brisbane said, taking off her cap. 'Winter is definitely here.'

Soon my classmates began to arrive. They were all wearing heavy coats and hats, scarves and gloves.

'Hi, Humphrey-Mumphrey!' Slow-Down-Simon shouted as he raced into the room.

He'd been calling me that ever since we played a funny name game. I liked my nickname.

'Hi, Oggy-Moggy,' Be-Careful-Kelsey called out as she passed by Og's tank.

'BOING!' Og replied.

Rosie rolled into the classroom in her wheelchair. She had a bright red cap and a bright red nose. 'It's cold out there,' she announced.

'It's freezing out there! It's twenty below zero!'



Thomas T. True said as he entered. Just the thought of twenty below zero made me shiver and quiver.

I was about to dive under my bedding again when Mrs Brisbane corrected him. 'Thomas, it's actually two degrees *above* zero, which is cold, but not quite freezing. Now go and hang up your jacket.'

The students who had already hung up their coats stood around, talking.

'Wait until you see the present I'm making you,' I heard Helpful-Holly tell Kelsey. 'You'll love it.'

'What is it?' Kelsey asked.

'It's a special surprise,' Holly said.

Kelsey smiled. 'Great!'

Holly turned to Tall-Paul, who was standing behind her. 'I'm making you a special present, too,' she told him.

Tall-Paul looked puzzled. 'Why?' he asked.

'Because you're my friend,' Holly said.

'You too,' she told Small-Paul, who was standing next to Tall-Paul.

The two Pauls exchanged puzzled looks.

Then Holly came over to my cage. 'Don't worry, Humphrey,' she said. 'I'll make a present for you, too.'

'That's unsqueakably nice of you,' I replied.

My squeaks made her giggle.

She turned to Og's tank. 'I have a great idea for your present, Og.'

'BOING-BOING!' Og twanged happily.

'I've got a big list of things to make,' Holly said. 'It's a lot of work. I even sneaked out of bed last night and worked at my desk with a torch. It's the only way I'll get them all done.'

I wanted to get a present from Holly, but I didn't want her to go without sleep to make it!

The bell rang and Holly rushed to her table.

Hurry-Up-Harry arrived just as the bell stopped ringing, but at least he made it on time.

'Class, as you can tell by the weather, winter is here,' Mrs Brisbane announced after she took the register. 'And that means we've got to get busy practising.'

'We do?' I asked. I know I'm supposed to raise my paw before squeaking, but it slipped out.

'This year, Longfellow School is putting on a show to celebrate the Christmas holidays. It's called *Winter Wonderland*. Each class will do a special performance that has to do with winter,' she explained. 'It takes place the evening before the holidays start, and your friends and families are all invited.'

Some of my friends went 'Oooh.'

Some of my friends went 'Ahhh.'

Thomas T. True said, 'All right!'

I said, 'SQUEAK', because when you celebrate something, it's fun.



'Ms Lark will be in later this morning to tell you about your part in the show,' Mrs Brisbane said.

I'd heard of Ms Lark, the music teacher. Sometimes the rest of the class goes to her room, but Og and I stay behind. My friends always come back humming.

Mrs Brisbane changed the subject and passed out sheets of maths questions.

I, on the other paw, kept thinking about the winter show. I know winter can be COLD-COLD-COLD. But it can be pretty when it snows.

But what on earth was a wonderland? I wondered what it would be like all through maths class.

While Mrs Brisbane was cleaning the board, the door opened and in came a woman who almost looked like a student. She was slim with curly brown hair, and she was shorter than my tallest classmate, Paul Green. (I call him Tall-Paul.) She had a big smile on her face and she carried a stack of papers.

'Hello, Ms Lark,' Mrs Brisbane greeted her. 'We've finished maths class and are ready to hear about the show.'

I scrambled up my tree branch and shouted, 'Yes! Tell us now!'

Suddenly, Ms Lark froze. 'What was that noise?' she asked.

'Oh, that's our classroom hamster, Humphrey,'

Mrs Brisbane said. 'I think he wants to say hello to you. Would you like to come and meet him?'

Some of my friends laughed, but Ms Lark didn't.

She stared in the direction of my cage . . . and I think she shivered.

Mrs Brisbane walked towards my cage, but Ms Lark didn't follow. In fact, she took a step back.

Just then, Og said, 'BOING!'

Ms Lark backed up again. 'What was that?'

'That's Og the frog,' Helpful-Holly said.

The music teacher's eyes grew wide and her voice sounded strange as she said, 'You have a lot of animals in this class.'

Mrs Brisbane chuckled. 'Yes, and they're not all in cages and tanks.'

The rest of the class laughed, but Ms Lark didn't even smile.

She kept staring in the direction of my cage until Mrs Brisbane said, 'We're all excited to hear about the winter show. Why don't you tell us about it?'

At last, Ms Lark smiled and moved to the front of the classroom. 'It's going to be an exciting celebration of everything the season has to offer. And I think Room 26 has the best part of the show.'

It's hard for a small, excitable creature like me not to squeak up when I hear something wonderful, but I managed to stay silent.



Og splashed around in his tank. I guess it was hard for him to stay silent, too.

'Your class is performing two songs. There'll be swirling snowflakes and prancing horses and jingle bells!' Ms Lark's eyes sparkled.

'Oh, I love horses and bells!' I heard Sophie say. Then she turned to Kelsey, who was next to her, and started to tell her a story.

'Stop-Talking-Sophie,' Mrs Brisbane said.

Sophie said she was sorry and I think she meant it.

Rosie raised her hand. 'Will there be real horses?' she asked.

'No,' Ms Lark said. 'But there will be prancing and dancing and singing and ringing!'

All my classmates were excited at her answer.

'Yippee!' I squeaked. I didn't mean to, but it slipped out.

Suddenly, the sparkle went out of Ms Lark's eyes.

'Does that hamster ever get out?' she asked.

'Sometimes,' Mrs Brisbane replied. 'When he rolls around in his hamster ball.'

This time Ms Lark definitely shivered. And it wasn't even cold any more.

'Could you explain how we're going to prepare for our musical numbers?' Mrs Brisbane asked.

'We'll be rehearsing in here,' Ms Lark said. 'The music room is being used to store the scenery for

the show.' Then she started talking about schedules and rehearsals and costumes.

My friends were especially excited about the costumes.

'Some of you will be floating snowflakes,' Ms Lark explained. 'And some of you will be jingle-bell horses.'

There was a lot of murmuring in the classroom.

Og splashed a little louder.

'I'll be sending a letter home to your parents,' Mrs Brisbane said. 'Now, let me say that this will be a lot of work and I want to make sure that you're all prepared to do your best.'

'I WILL-WILL-WILL!' I squeaked, but luckily, I don't think Ms Lark heard me because all of my friends were talking, too.

'Quiet, please,' Ms Lark said. Once everyone quietened down, she added, 'It will be work, but it will also be fun and I know it will be wonderful! Now, I'm sure you all know the song "Jingle Bells", but there will be a brand-new snowflake song, too. I wrote it myself and I brought copies for you.'

Helpful-Holly jumped up. 'I'll pass them out.'

Ms Lark gave her the papers and Holly made sure all her friends had one.

All her friends except Og and me!

'I'll be working with you on the melody,' Ms



Lark explained. 'And one more thing: does anyone in this class play the piano?'

Do-It-Now-Daniel's hand went up. 'I do,' he said. 'I take lessons.'

'Great,' Ms Lark said. 'Would you like to play for the performance?'

'Sure,' he said.

'I'll play the new song and I'd like to have you play "Jingle Bells". I'll get you the music so you can practise,' she said.

Be-Careful-Kelsey's hand went up. 'I take ballet lessons!'

I already knew that and, I must say, Kelsey is a little more careful since she started ballet.

'That will be a big help,' Ms Lark said.

Thomas's hand went up next. 'I play a musical instrument.'

Mrs Brisbane didn't look convinced. 'Tell-the-Truth-Thomas,' she said.

Thomas sometimes stretches the truth a little.

'I do,' he insisted. Then he puckered his lips and began to whistle.

There are several things humans can do that I wish hamsters could do. Whistling is one of them.

Ms Lark and Mrs Brisbane both laughed.

'That's not a musical instrument,' Mrs Brisbane said.

'Sure it is,' Thomas said. 'My mouth!'

‘I think we need that mouth for singing,’ Ms Lark said.

Soon, the bell rang for playtime and my friends ran to get their coats.

‘Stay buttoned up,’ Mrs Brisbane told them. ‘It’s cold out there.’

Mrs Brisbane walked towards the door with Ms Lark. ‘It will be hard work, but I know the children will love the programme,’ Mrs Brisbane said.

‘I can see it now.’ Ms Lark had her sparkle back. ‘A real winter wonderland.’

After she left, Mrs Brisbane came over to see Og and me. ‘You know, I don’t think Ms Lark likes animals very much,’ she said. ‘I feel sorry for her.’

Poor Ms Lark. I felt sorry for her, too. She doesn’t know what she is missing.

**Humphrey’s Merry Christmas Musings:**
I wonder how an intelligent human being could not like a handsome hamster with long whiskers and beautiful golden fur.





# 2 Singing Snowflakes

After playtime, my friends wanted to talk about the winter show.

Mrs Brisbane, on the other paw, wanted to talk about science.

‘I tell you what,’ she said. ‘Since you’ll be singing about snowflakes, let’s talk about them.’

It turns out that snowflakes are SO-SO-SO interesting! I discovered that:

- Snowflakes are made of little crystals of ice.
- Each snowflake has six sides.
- Snow forms in clouds where the temperature is below freezing.
- No two snowflakes are ever the same.
- Ice crystals form around tiny bits of dirt! Can you believe a beautiful snowflake starts with a piece of dirt?