

PUBLISHING NOW

Christmas comes but once a year, so is it wise to write a novel that's only marketable during the festive season? Kathleen Whyman asks the publishers

Much as I love Christmas, I'm not keen on seeing decorations and mince pies in the shops when it's still October – as I write this. But, even though I'm not ready to tuck into the selection boxes yet (that's a lie – I'm always ready for chocolate), the seed has been planted and I find stocking fillers are working their way into my shopping basket and I'm keeping an eye out for 'the perfect present'.

Subliminal selling works, not just in the supermarket aisles but on the bookshelves too. And, as books account for 30 per cent of the Christmas present market in the UK, it's a hugely important season for publishers.

At Head of Zeus (Aria), Christmas-themed books are released in September and October. 'This gives us time to drum up interest and a publication buzz before the festive season kicks off,' explains commissioning editor Rhea Kurien. 'They can do extremely well, which is why there's such stiff competition from all publishers.'

Nia Beynon, director at Boldwood, agrees. 'Christmas books are a huge trend across all formats. Not only because of gift-buying – physical books and reading devices – but Christmas fiction tends to be uplifting and often romantic, which is exactly what people want at this time of year.'

Last Christmas's stand-out hit was Josie Silver's *One Day in December*. 'It was the magical combination of a great concept and

a beautiful package along with a title that hinted at Christmas,' says Thorne Ryan, fiction editor at Hodder & Stoughton. 'It also included the words "one day", which immediately brings to mind David Nicholls' international phenomenon.'

'Christmas books lend themselves well to romantic fiction,' says Emily Griffin, deputy publisher at Cornerstone. 'Golden age murder mysteries in winter settings are increasingly popular – there's nothing more atmospheric than being stranded in a country mansion in the snow.'

Keshini Naidoo, co-founder and publishing director at Hera Books, adds: 'While romantic fiction is the perfect fit for a seasonal read, I'd love to find a ghostly, spooky but commercial novel that can be read in the festive season as an antidote to all that sweetness. It worked for Dickens!'

Tom Tivnan, managing editor of *The Bookseller*, reminds us that Christmas is a popular theme for children's books too. 'Last year we had Tom Fletcher's *Christmasaurus*, Rod Campbell's *Dear Santa* and Kes Gray's *The Night Before the Night Before Christmas*, just to mention a few.'

Not just for Christmas...

However, if you want your novel to last beyond 25 December, the broader you make the concept, the better, as Thorne Ryan explains. 'If Christmas isn't central to your



Keshini Naidoo

plot, a book set during winter rather than Christmas can keep selling through January, February and March as well.'

What about the rest of the year? No one wants the book they spent months, possibly years crafting to be whipped off the shelves after a few months, never to be seen again.

Kurien admits: 'They don't really sell afterwards if they're very Christmas-focused. But they sell enough at the end of the year for them to be worth it.'

Griffin points out: 'The digital market means people can find them online at any time of year,' while Ryan says: 'They're more likely than other books to revive at Christmas year after year, meaning they can have a longer shelf life than non-seasonal books, especially in ebook and audio.'

Tivnan agrees. 'Just as songs such as *Fairytale in New York* get played every year during the holidays but never in the summer, books like *The Grinch who Stole Christmas*, Christmas-themed cookery books, a lot of cosy Christmas crime and millions of editions of *A Christmas Carol* sell year after year.'

Rather than putting all their novelty gifts in one Christmas cracker, publishers release seasonal titles throughout the year.

'We hook on to Valentine's Day, New Year and summer reading,' says Beynon.

'The seasons and holidays are great opportunities for marketing books as gifts, even if those books aren't specifically themed around the occasion,' says Ryan. 'Christmas is the most obvious, but also Valentine's, Mother's Day and Father's Day. Halloween is where science fiction and fantasy has its fun.'

Summer is a big sell for Head of Zeus (Aria). 'There are lots of books with summer in the title, which we package as holiday reads,' says Kurien. 'These sell well throughout the year.'

But before we think about summer, let's enjoy Christmas. As Naidoo says: 'When the skies turn grey and cold weather draws in, what could be better than getting cosy and curling up with a festive read?'

I'm in. Now, where's that selection pack?



Rhea Kurien



Thorne Ryan