

Dreaming of a WRITE CHRISTMAS

Sunday Times bestselling author Heidi Swain tells Kathleen Whyman the secret to writing a Christmas hit

It was Heidi Swain's publisher, Simon and Schuster, who suggested she write a Christmas book. The author had found success with her first two novels, 2015's *The Cherry Tree Cafe* and, a year later, *Summer at Skylark Farm*, both set in the fictional town of Wynbridge, and so the publisher suggested a festive title with the same setting.

'It was the next logical step,' says Swain. 'I was fortunate that my readers had quickly fallen in love with Wynbridge and its residents. There's a cosy and heart-warming vibe about the town, and the chance to showcase it in its festive finery was too good an opportunity to miss.'

The result was *Mince Pies and Mistletoe at the Christmas Market*, published in 2016, and its success ensured Swain was asked for another seasonal read the following year. *Sleigh Rides and Silver Bells at the Christmas Fair* came out in 2017 and reached number five in the *Sunday Times* bestseller chart.

'The two-titles-a-year pattern – one for the warmer months and one for winter – was happily established after that,' says Swain. *Snowflakes and Cinnamon Swirls at the Winter Wonderland* came out last year and she has just released her fourth festive novel, *The Christmas Wish List*. So what's the secret to her success when it comes to Christmas books?

'This may sound ridiculously obvious,' says Swain, 'but if you're writing a book with Christmas in the title, then make sure it's packed full of festive detail.'

Before writing her first Christmas novel, Swain researched what readers liked and didn't like about them.

'The overwhelming result was that they absolutely hated books that suggested Christmas on the cover but barely touched on it in the plot,' Swain explains. 'They felt cheated and were well aware it had been used as a marketing ploy. It put them off reading future titles by certain authors.'

'So, if you want to write about Christmas, don't disappoint your reader. Make sure that the magic of the season is sprinkled

across at least every other page.'

For Swain, the appeal of writing festive books comes from a sheer love of Christmas.

'Before I was published, I used to dream about seeing my books for sale and the cherry on the cake was always a sparkly festive title,' she explains.

But they also make commercial sense. Seasonal books can offer greater visibility, especially if an author is fortunate enough to be stocked in the supermarkets. Certain high street shops and supermarkets will stock your backlist alongside a current title, so the higher the number of titles, the greater the shelf space. If you can manage to write two titles a year like Swain, an author has the potential to be a summer holiday read and a Christmas present.

But surely writing seasonal books is restrictive for sales, because shops clear their festive shelves on Boxing Day? Swain doesn't find this a problem.

'*The Christmas Wish List* was published on 3 October so it will be in the shops for almost three months,' she says. 'There's also one supermarket that keeps a summer and Christmas selection of titles in stock for each season, so my backlist is always available. And you can buy them from Amazon all year round.'

Swain often hears from readers saying they received the most recent title for Christmas and then rushed out to buy the others, so each new release generates interest in her other titles.

A winter's tale

With nine books out and another two due next year (one for summer and another Christmas title), most of which are set in Wynbridge and feature many of the same characters, how does Swain come up with new stories each time?

'Keeping it fresh is the key,' she admits. 'I have to give my readers something brand new every winter, so I spend a lot of time looking at Christmas events online, attending local celebrations and making



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notes throughout the year. I'm always after a different aspect of the season to celebrate.'

Swain adds new faces and places to each novel but feels her readers enjoy seeing the regular town events written into each of the books. 'These include the lights being switched on, the tree auction and bake sale, and the Wynthorpe Hall Winter Wonderland. Each book has incorporated these familiar celebrations and traditions into a brand-new plot and they've been very well received. I think readers would be disappointed if they weren't featured.'

Bublé on standby

One of the challenges of writing seasonal books is getting yourself in the right frame of mind. When the smell of sun cream is in the air, ice cream vans are chiming, and you're seriously considering spending your child's university fund on a pool for the back garden, how do you write with feeling about snow, carols and starry, starry nights?

'Get as much of the book planning as possible done in the corresponding season,' says Swain. 'I won't be working on my next Christmas book until *The Secret Seaside Escape* [out April 2020] is completely finished, but I'm planning it now while waiting for my edits to come back. This way, with any luck, there'll be plenty of festive feeling already ingrained to keep me going when the heat hits in July. This works for the summer titles too.'

As a back-up, Swain keeps a jar of mincemeat in her fridge and digs out her Michael Bubl  CD should she need to recreate those Christmassy feelings when we're hit by a heatwave.

When planning her Christmas titles, Swain finds a calendar invaluable.

'My books all lead up to The Big Day on 25th December. Throughout the year, I add to my list of Christmas-themed events and activities, to include in my winter releases. Printing out a calendar to scribble on ensures there's time to fit in all things festive into the story. This has proved particularly useful for marking out the regular events that happen every year in Wynbridge. My readers would soon pick up on the fact that the switch-on or tree auction was happening on the wrong weekend!'

Swain also encourages engaging all the senses when you are writing.

'Not only does Christmas have a wonderful visual impact, it also smells, sounds and tastes great, so draw on that,' she says. 'The Christmas season provides a great framework for a plot. I recommend any author to embrace it.'