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## Founding Brothers The Revolutionary Generation by Joseph J. Ellis

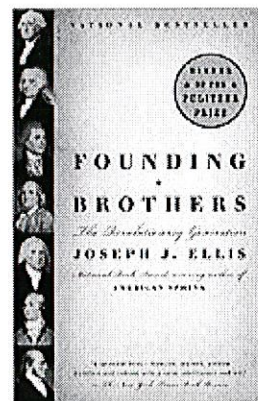
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**Random House**

## About this Book

In a landmark work of history, the National Book Award—winning author of **American Sphinx** explores how a group of greatly gifted but deeply flawed men—Hamilton, Burr, Jefferson, Franklin, Washington, Adams, and Madison—set the course for our nation.

Joseph Ellis illuminates the profoundly deep bonds and the often fractious, sometimes blind, efforts of the Founding Fathers—re-examined here as Founding Brothers—to realize strikingly different visions of America. During their own time, and even more so in ours, the Founding Fathers were perceived as demigods no more tainted than marble statues by the stain of imperfect humanity. Ellis's penetrating analysis of six fascinating historical episodes, including Hamilton and Burr's deadly duel, Washington's Farewell Address, and the correspondence between Jefferson and Adams, brings these statues to life and their visions into focus.

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## Discussion Questions

1. The anecdote that Benjamin Rush liked to repeat about an overheard conversation between Benjamin Harrison and Elbridge Gerry on July 4, 1776, makes clear that the signers of the Declaration of Independence felt some doubt about their chances of surviving their revolutionary act. As Ellis points out, if the British commanders had been more aggressive, "The signers of the Declaration would . . . have been hunted down, tried, and executed for treason, and American history would have flowed forward in a wholly different direction" [p. 5]. Why is it so difficult to grasp this notion of the new nation's utter fragility? How successful is **Founding Brothers** in taking the reader back in time, in order to witness the contingencies of a historical gamble in which "sheer chance, pure luck" [p. 5] were instrumental in determining the outcome?
2. Ellis has said, "We have no mental pictures that make the



revolutionary generation fully human in ways that link up with our own time. . . . These great patriarchs have become **Founding Fathers**, and it is psychologically quite difficult for children to reach a realistic understanding of their parents, who always loom larger-than-life as icons we either love or hate." How does **Founding Brothers** address this problem, and how does it manage to humanize our image of the founders? How does the book's title relate to this issue?

3. What was **really at stake in the disagreement and duel between Aaron Burr and Alexander Hamilton**? If Hamilton felt that the disparaging statements he had made about Burr were true, should he have lied in order to save his life? Was this merely a war over words? Did words have more significance then than they do now? What role did newspapers play in the drama, and how is the media's role different or similar today?

4. In congressional **debates in 1790 about the possible abolition of slavery**, Georgia representative James Jackson attacked the abolitionist Quakers as "outright lunatics" [p. 97] and went on to say, "If it were a crime, as some assert but which I deny, the British nation is answerable for it, and not the present inhabitants, who now hold that species of property in question" [p. 98]. Does Jackson's refusal to name "that species of property" point to his own moral discomfort with owning enslaved human beings? To what degree were the founders complicit in this deliberate refusal to name and acknowledge the moral problem of slavery?

5. Because of the founders' refusal to press for abolition, the **slavery question was bequeathed to Abraham Lincoln to solve--and the Civil War illustrated just how divisive the issue was**. How **accurate was George Washington's belief that "slavery was a cancer on the body politic of America that could not at present be removed without killing the patient"** [p. 158]? Should the nation's leaders have pressed harder, given that "the further one got from 1776, the lower the revolutionary fires burned and the less imperative the logic of the revolutionary ideology seemed" [p. 104]? What difference might it have made in the racial currents of contemporary American life if slavery had been abolished in the early days of the nation?

6. What does Ellis mean when he says that the public figures on which he focuses in this book were "America's first and, in many respects, its only natural aristocracy" [p. 13]? In what sense is this true?

7. How does the **character of George Washington come across**, as Ellis presents him and in the quoted extracts of the farewell address? How does Washington measure up to the mythology that surrounded him even in his own time? What qualities made Washington so indispensable to the new nation?

8. Ellis focuses more intensively on the plight of the slaves than that of the **Indians**, but he does point out that **Washington addressed their situation with the suggestion that they abandon their hunter-gatherer way of life and assimilate themselves into the general population as farmers** [p. 159]. Was this a viable solution, or merely a pragmatic one? What other solutions might have been offered at the time?

9. What is **most surprising about Thomas Jefferson's character**, as presented by Ellis? Which aspects of his personality, or which particular actions or decisions, seem incongruous in the man who wrote the idealistic words of the Declaration of Independence?

10. What is **most impressive about Abigail Adams's intervention on her husband's behalf in his quarrel with Thomas Jefferson**? Is it possible to compare the political partnership of John and Abigail Adams with, for example, that of Hillary and Bill Clinton?



11. Ellis has said of **Founding Brothers**, "If there is a method to my madness in the book, it is rooted in the belief that readers prefer to get their history through stories. Each chapter is a self-contained story about a propitious moment when big things got decided. . . . In a sense, I have formed this founding generation into a kind of repertory company, then put them into dramatic scenes which, taken together, allow us to witness that historic production called the founding of the United States." Does his focus on creating separate narrative units succeed in making the complex history of the founders simpler to penetrate and understand? Are there any drawbacks to presenting history this way?

12. Ellis says that the founders were always self-conscious about how posterity would view their decisions and their behavior. For instance, Adams's efforts on behalf of a "more realistic, nonmythologized version of the American Revolution" were partly motivated by his wounded vanity, his effort to get rid of versions of the story that "failed to provide him with a starring role in the drama" [p. 217]. How similar or different are more recent presidents' efforts to shape the historical portrayal of their own terms in office, as with presidential libraries and such?

13. Ellis notes that his ambition with **Founding Brothers** was "to write a modest-sized account of a massive historical subject . . . without tripping over the dead bodies of my many scholarly predecessors." In search of a structure in which "less could be more" Ellis takes as a model Lytton Strachey's **Eminent Victorians** (1918). Strachey wrote that the historian "will row out over the great ocean of material, and lower down into it, here and there, a little bucket, which will bring up to the light of day some characteristic specimen, from those far depths, to be examined with a careful curiosity" [p. ix]. How does this approach differ from other historical narratives or biographies of historical figures that you have read, and how does it affect your reading experience?

14. In the conflict between Republicans and Federalists described by Ellis throughout the book, readers can understand the origins of party factionalism that is a strong factor in American politics to this day. If, as Ellis writes, "The dominant intellectual legacy of the Revolution, enshrined in the Declaration of Independence, stigmatized all concentrated political power and even . . . depicted any energetic expression of governmental authority as an alien force that all responsible citizens ought to repudiate and, if possible, overthrow" [p. 11], what compromises were made in order to bring a stable national government to fruition? Does the apparent contradiction between Republican and Federalist principles still create instability in the American system?

15. In recent years historians have tended to avoid focusing on such issues as leadership and character, and more is being written about popular movements and working people whose lives exemplify a sort of democratic norm. Ellis clearly goes against this trend in offering **Founding Brothers** as "a polite argument against the scholarly grain" [p. 12]. Does he effectively convince his readers that the founding of the American nation was, in fact, largely accomplished by a handful of extraordinary individuals?

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## Critical Praise

"A splendid book—humane, learned, written with flair and radiant with a calm intelligence and wit."

—*The New York Times Book Review*

"Lively and illuminating...leaves the reader with a visceral sense of a formative era in American life."  
—*The New York Times*

"Masterful.... Fascinating.... Ellis is an elegant stylist.... [He] captures the passion the founders brought to the revolutionary project.... [A] very fine book."  
—*Chicago Tribune*

"Learned, exceedingly well-written, and perceptive."  
—*The Oregonian*

"Lucid.... Ellis has such command of the subject matter that it feels fresh, particularly as he segues from psychological to political, even to physical analysis.... Ellis's storytelling helps us more fully hear the Brothers' voices."  
—*Business Week*

"Splendid.... Revealing.... An extraordinary book. Its insightful conclusions rest on extensive research, and its author's writing is vigorous and lucid."  
—*St. Louis Post-Dispatch*

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*Journal of Southern History*, May 2002 v68 i2 p440(2)**Founding Brothers: the Revolutionary Generation.** (book review) *Kim M. Gruenwald.***Full Text:** COPYRIGHT 2002 Southern Historical Association

By Joseph J. Ellis. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000. Pp. [xii], 288. \$26.00, ISBN 0-375-40544-5.)

Joseph Ellis introduces his notes at the back of *Founding Brothers* with the following disclaimer: "The awkward truth is that this book represents a distillation of my reading in the historical literature on the revolutionary era over the past thirty years" (p. 249). However, there's nothing awkward about this book. Rather than pronouncing truth from an ivory tower, the author writes in a breezy, conversational style that invites discussion: "Here are my thoughts," Ellis seems to be saying, "what are yours?" The dominant theme of the book is that current scholarly and political debates about whether the writing of the Constitution fulfilled the promise of the American Revolution or betrayed it represent a continuation of political sparring that goes all the way back to the summer of 1787. Scholars will not be surprised, of course, but Ellis provides an excellent and readable introduction of that debate for general readers, and colleagues will welcome the synthesis of a generation of scholarship, new speculations, and a running commentary on current theory in the notes.

Ellis traces the politics of the half century that followed the Declaration of Independence by examining the relationships and interaction between seven men and one woman--Abigail Adams, John Adams, Aaron Burr, Benjamin Franklin, Alexander Hamilton, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and George Washington. The foundation of Ellis's interpretation rests on a basic assumption: "[T]hey all knew one another personally, meaning that they broke bread together [and] sat together at countless meetings.... Politics, even at the highest level in the early republic, remained a face-to-face affair ..." (p. 17). It is Ellis's judgment that some of them would have never come to the fore on the crowded European political stage--their world made them as much as they made their world. The phrase "Founding Brothers" is not intended to ask readers to imagine the romanticized revolutionary band of lore, but rather encourages them to see past the image of wise, patrician fathers making pronouncements from on high, visualizing instead competitive siblings fighting over a valued inheritance.

Ellis uses six episodes he considers to be crucial windows to the past. He begins with the duel between Burr and Hamilton, which led to the latter's death, to discuss themes about honor and character in the "dangerously fluid" political world of the early 1800s (p. 46). Next, a dinner hosted by Jefferson, who wished to sit down and facilitate a discussion between Madison and Hamilton to iron out difficulties in 1790, sets the stage for a discussion of sectional versus national loyalties and different visions of the role elites should play in the nation's future. Ellis then examines the first Quaker petitions calling for the end of slavery and the congressional debate that followed to highlight not conflict between North and South, but rather the role Virginia's statesmen played in relieving

tensions between New England and the Deep South. A chapter on Washington's Farewell Address examines the jockeying for position that took place in the first president's administration and makes much of the fact that Hamilton and other key Federalists had served in the Continental Army while Republicans Jefferson and Madison had not. Ellis concludes with a chapter about the trials and travails of John Adams that led him to sign the Alien and Sedition Acts, and a chapter that explores the retirement correspondence of Ellis's latest biographical subjects--Adams, whom he characterized as the "passionate sage," and Jefferson, the "American sphinx."

Founding Brothers is not without problems. Ellis's reasons for leading off with the Burr-Hamilton duel do not ring true, and by the time readers finish the book, they will probably conclude that Ellis did so in order for his two chapters about Adams and Jefferson to appear sequentially at the end. Also, the author's frankly sympathetic portrayal of Alexander Hamilton in that first chapter seems to be at odds with his portrayal of Hamilton throughout the rest of the book. These are small matters indeed, however, for Founding Brothers is a terrific book and a wonderful read. Ellis challenges readers to really and truly walk a mile in the shoes of these people of the past, rather than simply lionizing them based on the longevity of their ideas--and at a time when debates about impeachment, the electoral college, and the Second Amendment dominate the headlines, nothing could be more timely. I enjoyed it immensely and recommend it without reservation to general readers interested in the earliest manifestations of tension between the longing for liberty and the need to establish a strong nation, to politicians who lead off speeches with "Our Founding Fathers intended ...," and to professors looking for stimulating topics for classroom discussion.

KIM M. GRUENWALD  
Kent State University

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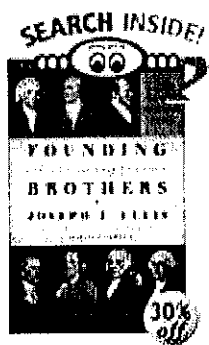
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# Founding Brothers: The Revolutionary Generation

by Joseph J. Ellis (Author)



List Price: \$26.95

## Editorial Reviews

### **Amazon.com's Best of 2001**

In retrospect, it seems as if the American Revolution was inevitable. But was it? In *Founding Brothers*, Joseph J. Ellis reveals that many of those truths we hold to be self-evident were actually fiercely contested in the early days of the republic.

[Search inside this book](#)

Ellis focuses on six crucial moments in the life of the new nation, including a secret dinner at which the seat of the nation's capital was determined--in exchange for support of Hamilton's financial plan; Washington's precedent-setting Farewell Address; and the Hamilton and Burr duel. Most interesting, perhaps, is the debate (still dividing scholars today) over the *meaning* of the Revolution. In a fascinating chapter on the renewed friendship between John Adams and Thomas Jefferson at the end of their lives, Ellis points out the fundamental differences between the Republicans, who saw the Revolution as a liberating act and hold the Declaration of Independence most sacred, and the Federalists, who saw the revolution as a step in the building of American nationhood and hold the Constitution most dear. Throughout the text, Ellis explains the personal, face-to-face nature of early American politics--and notes that the members of the revolutionary generation were conscious of the fact that they were establishing precedents on which future generations would rely.

### **From Library Journal**

Having considered Thomas Jefferson in his National Book Award winner, *American Sphinx*, Ellis expands his horizons to include Jefferson's "brothers," e.g., Washington, Madison, and Burr.

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### **Book Description**

An illuminating study of the intertwined lives of the founders of the American republic--John Adams, Aaron Burr, Benjamin Franklin, Alexander Hamilton, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and George Washington.

During the 1790s, which Ellis calls the most decisive decade in our nation's history, the greatest statesmen of their generation--and perhaps any--came together to define the new republic and direct its course for the coming centuries. Ellis focuses on six discrete moments that exemplify the most crucial issues facing the fragile new nation: Burr and Hamilton's deadly duel, and what may have really happened; Hamilton, Jefferson, and Madison's secret dinner, during which the seat of the permanent capital was determined in exchange for passage of Hamilton's financial plan; Franklin's petition to end the "peculiar institution" of slavery--his last public act--and Madison's efforts to quash it; Washington's precedent-setting Farewell Address, announcing his retirement from public office and offering his country some final advice; Adams's difficult term as Washington's successor and his alleged scheme to pass the presidency on to his son; and finally, Adams and Jefferson's renewed correspondence at the end of their lives, in which they compared their different views of the Revolution and its legacy.

In a lively and engaging narrative, Ellis recounts the sometimes collaborative, sometimes archly antagonistic interactions between these men, and shows us the private characters behind the public personas: Adams, the ever-combative iconoclast, whose closest political collaborator was his wife, Abigail; Burr, crafty, smooth, and one of the most despised public figures of his time; Hamilton, whose audacious manner and deep economic savvy masked his humble origins; Jefferson, renowned for his eloquence, but so reclusive and taciturn that he rarely spoke more than a few sentences in public; Madison, small, sickly, and paralyzingly shy, yet one of the

most effective debaters of his generation; and the stiffly formal Washington, the ultimate realist, larger-than-life, and America's only truly indispensable figure.

Ellis argues that the checks and balances that permitted the infant American republic to endure were not primarily legal, constitutional, or institutional, but intensely personal, rooted in the dynamic interaction of leaders with quite different visions and values. Revisiting the old-fashioned idea that character matters, **Founding Brothers** informs our understanding of American politics--then and now--and gives us a new perspective on the unpredictable forces that shape history.

► [See all editorial reviews...](#)

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☆☆☆☆ Well-researched, but impossibly longwinded, April 25, 2003

I found the author's insight to be well researched and fascinated. In fact, my fascination with his topics was exceeded only but the author's fascination with his vocabulary. --*This text refers to the **Paperback** edition*

☆☆☆☆ A Question of Character, March 13, 2002

As a trained historian (Ph.D, 1976) whose professional life has gone far afield, occasionally I have the luxury of keeping up thru books on tape. After a couple of listens to Ellis's narrative, and knowing what we do now about the man's rather pervasive deceptions concerning his own biography, it came to me.

The deceiving, dissembling, two-faced Jefferson of the American Sphinx and Founding Brothers, the man of seductive words with the split-personality, isn't Jefferson at all, it's Joe Ellis. Now you can say it takes one to know one, so this doesn't necessarily get Jefferson off the hook. But it's certainly clear that the key aspects of the author's much acclaimed interpretation of Jefferson's character focus on qualities endemic to Mr. Ellis's persona as super star intellectual and teacher of the young.

You hear it said that the false identity Ellis projected to colleagues and students doesn't vitiate his scholarly works. Surely it's just the opposite. He's not writing about canal building or the impact of steam power. His chosen subject is character. His writing is filled with judgments, commendations and rebukes of a highly subjective nature. His claim to fame is his particular style of impugning Jefferson's character, character assassination a la mode in today's intellectual climate.

So I say, beware. Not because I'm after Mr. Ellis. But to stand up for Jefferson as the fountain head of values that sustained, motivated and inspired dozens of generations of Americans, myself among them. We were a new people in a new land, things could be different here. The world does belong to the living generation. We are free and able to remake it in the image of our fondest hopes and dreams. Ellis and his crowd would cut us off from this our birth right. He's a damaging and dangerous mind, a "head case" working out his own problems in the guise of historical portrait painting. He projects his own faults and self-disgust on the man who surely was the spiritual father of the Revolution -- the great visionary of the possibilities of American life. --*This text refers to the **Paperback** edition*

☆☆☆☆  
**Ellis brings  
history to  
life in  
Founding  
Brothers,**  
December  
16, 2003

Joseph J. Ellis has done a marvelous job with his witty and suspenseful account of the United States' Revolutionary Era. By focusing on key players -- namely Washington, Adams, Jefferson, Hamilton, Madison, Monroe, and Burr -- Ellis takes the reader deeper into the period than any history book does. By focusing on the relationships between these founders, Ellis eloquently illustrates how the nation's parties developed during these



formative years. Intermixed with tales of deception (Think Burr killing Hamilton), friendship awry (Jefferson v. Adams, Adams v. Jefferson), and morality in question (slavery), one finishes *Founding Brothers* with a deeper understanding of the true human being within each of these often larger-than-life historic figures. Top of Form

☆☆☆☆☆ **New Fave for a History Buff**, December 13, 2003

Joseph Ellis manages to take the interactions of seven (or eight, if you include Abigail Adams) founders and illustrate the truly amazing issues that faced the framers of the new country. In the preface, Ellis states he believes that politics, rather than the War itself, was the revolution of America. The Revolutionary War was, as we all know, instituted to free the colonists from the economic and social yoke of the British. To do that, they inspired themselves and their countrymen with the idea of individual freedom. But how does one reconcile individual freedom with the notion of government -- any government. Of the fathers (George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, Aaron Burr and Benjamin Franklin), Washington, Adams and Jefferson are most deeply drawn. They represent the issues, icons and ideologies that perhaps any successful revolution must have. The issues threatened to tear apart the brand new nation nearly at birth. The political battles between Federalists and Republicans were vicious and prolonged, and featured lies, personal attacks, misunderstandings, and featured some amazingly strong and intellectually profound personalities. The 'band of brothers' were not overwhelmed with brotherly love. They fought literally and figuratively with one another, even when they were on the same side. The 'Brothers' were far more than the two dimensional figures on our classroom walls, and their weaknesses, failures and blind spots are made clear. But the wrestling resulted in a Constitution that manages to somehow preserve the idea of individual rights with the demands of a coordinated and unified governance.

Ellis is a gifted writer but even better, he is gifted in choosing the incidents and relationships that illustrate the conflicts that had to be raised, faced and compromised to allow the new country to continue. The Burr Hamilton duel. The love affair between Adams and his wife. The disrespect Jefferson felt, but hid from even his friends. The invisible elephant in middle of the room that was slavery. The impact of one personality -- George Washington -- had in keeping the country together. There are bits of humor, lots of examples, some fine imagining and nice underlying juxtaposition of issues with their examples. The author can see a theme underlying the disputes. While he calls the eight chapters "stories", I suspect he chose the word to avoid calling them 'essays' and thus scaring off most of us who don't want to read boring, windy expositions of historical views. On the other hand, I was originally attracted to history precisely because it is all stories, and I read history in part to see if I can understand the meaning, if there is any, behind the stories. Ellis, I suspect, sees it my way (or more properly, I see it his). He tells the story and manages to tell you why the story matters. While he never says as much, *The Founding Brothers* is about the second American Revolution--the one that took place in the Congress, the plantations of Virginia, the small towns of Massachusetts, the bluffs of New Jersey. With one exception, the second Revolution is bloodless, but wounding; barely civilized at times, but world shaking. It was the overturning of all that had come before in the notion of nations, the idea of governing, and the attempt to make practical the very romantic idea of individual liberty.

I was around in the sixties, which self consciously billed itself as a revolution and at the time, the people behind the bullhorns were exhorting their fellow citizens to shake off the shackles of a lying government and take over the government for the people. I remember thinking at the time, Great, but let's say it works, and the government falls. What do we do then? All of the romantic ideas could be put into practice, but how? And who gets to decide?

*The Founding Brothers* describes with charm, insight, clarity and sympathy the 'how' after the Revolutionary War is done, and the only weapons were wit, ideals, ideas and politics. A failure of politics would be the end of America then. Just as it might be now. --*This text refers to the Audio CD edition*

☆☆☆☆☆ **What an great read!**, December 10, 2003

Reviewer: **Diane Bronson** from Richmond Hill, GA USA

I can't believe the tales of "dull, fell asleep, etc." from some reviewers. I just read it and breezed through it. Certainly if your idea of great reading is Danielle Steel this is not for you. But anyone with an interest in history will find fascinating the details and insights into events at a time that has been heavily edited for posterity.

We take it so much for granted that this country exists, it seems inevitable to us now that the revolution should have succeeded. Ellis shows just how narrow the tightrope was that was being walked by the colonial representatives who created this country. It was so much easier to come together in crisis than to STAY united when the crisis was over, and the harder work of governing had to be done. Factions with radically different agendas were forced to confront their differences, differences so great they called each other traitors to the revolution. By seeing more clearly into our own past it becomes more understandable why recently established democracies have so much trouble sustaining democratic governments.

I found the detail and insight into personalities and contemporary events in the early republic both entertaining and instructive. It's apparent that Ellis prefers John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, but let's face it, there weren't any lies in this book-- Thomas J. is one of the most enigmatic and contradictory figures in U.S. history. It was interesting to see him through someone's eyes who DOESN'T think the world rose and set in TJ. To me, it didn't feel like Ellis was libeling Jefferson, just that we were seeing him warts and all. All in all a great read which I recommend to anyone interested in US history. --*This text refers to the **Paperback** edition*

☆☆☆☆☆ Great book for someone with an interest in US history, December 8, 2003

Reviewer: **knoxstreet (see more about me)** from Atlanta, GA USA

This book really opened my eyes to chapters in American history that I had long ago forgotten. It really brings some of the revolutionary era Americans to life. I particularly enjoyed the stories of John Adams and Thomas Jefferson.

This book is broken down into approximately eight different chapters, each one devoted to a particular aspect of the life of one of the revolutionary brothers.

This book is a great book for someone who has an interest in American history or American politics but doesn't have the time or interest to invest on one of the larger books on the market. It really brings the revolutionary era to life. I gave my copy to a friend who still talks about how great it is. I bought another copy for my father for Christmas. --*This text refers to the **Paperback** edition*