

MUSHROOM NEWSLETTER

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FESTIVE FUNGAL LINKS



The autumn bonanza is over – but can we ever escape mushrooms?

Oh Lord! It's that time of year. Every shop is festooned with fake snow, holly, fir trees and reindeer cut outs. Inside, even the newsagent has piped seasonal songs, while TV ads try to persuade us to buy normally useless products.

Along the same lines, I will gently remind you I have sorted out next year's breaks and these and my knives and field guides are available as quirky gifts (see www.fungiforays.co.uk). OK, plug over, so let's forget the ersatz commercial links and concentrate on the hidden connections between the hidden fungal world and our festivities – and here let me apologise to regular readers or forayers for any repetitions.

We'll begin with the most blatant myth: that our familiar Father Christmas was created by a Coca Cola 1931 ad campaign dreamed up by the influential illustrator, Haddon Sundblom. In this picture, a beaming ruddy-cheeked old man, dressed in the company's colours, brandishes a glass filled with the fizzing brown liquid (by 1971 his Santa had become a provocative bunny girl . . .)



Haddon Sundblom popularised and developed a popular vision of Father Christmas . . .

Actually, the red and white is much older. It is certainly true that Cruikshank depicts him in green in *A Christmas Carol*, but around the same time he was beginning to be dressed in scarlet on seasonal cards and White Rock Beverages was selling water and ginger ale with a 'modern' Father Christmas during the First World War.



Fly agaric: integrally-linked with our favourite Christmas stories . . .

Fly agaric (*Amanita muscaria*)'s psychedelic properties have been appreciated by primitive cultures for many centuries, but people who have dabbled say it is both extremely bitter and gives a horrible hangover.

Nevertheless reindeer-herding shamens used it to communicate with the spirit world, helped by the discovery that muscimol is a resilient chemical unaffected by liver processes. In other words, it leaves the mammalian body almost as pokey as it entered, but most of the other toxins which are responsible for the hangovers and bitterness are removed. As a result, the urine from someone – or something – which has consumed fly agaric is still highly hallucinogenic, but with fewer side effects. This was certainly known in the early 18th century because a Swedish colonel, Philip von Strahlenberg, sent to explore Siberia, described how the poor would wait outside the doors of 'mushroom feasts' with wooden bowls poised. When the revellers emerged to relieve themselves, they would catch the urine and drink it: 'greedily, as having still some of the virtue of the mushroom in it, and by this way they also get drun '.



It's too late for fly agaric – but there's still a seasonal link . . .

Reindeer certainly love it, actively seeking out and wolfing down the mushrooms amid the birch scrub. This has much the same effect on them as it does on humans. At any rate they stagger around and have difficulty focussing. An hour or two later the inevitable happens and the alert herd r is ready with a flask to catch the golden liquid to store for later use.



A hallucinogenically-fuelled Santa and his 'dealers'

When the first serious snows begin to fall in November, the nomadic way of life grinds to a halt as the herdsmen bunker down for the winter. They do this in tepee-like tents which stay put for the next seven or eight months. After a few weeks the snow builds up around the exterior and the only way in and out is through the smoke hole. As nights get longer and longer, there is little else to do but drink reindeer pee and enjoy the traditional celebrations around the winter solstice. The herdsmen sit in the gloom, high on muscimol and imagine reindeer flying across the sky, their dreams are only interrupted by the arrival of neighbours who arrive via the smoke hole with presents for the children.



Should the origins of the word 'pissed' be in the Caius entrance handbook?

According to this version of the origins of the myths, the mushroom is a link to the red and white of Santa Claus's tunic. The practice also may explain why in

several European languages the colloquial expression for getting drunk is to be 'mushroomed' and it just might explain the English phrase 'pissed'.



It is not known if the Oxford mathematician, Charles Dodgson (who we know as Lewis Carroll) actually tried fly agaric, but he did know it could distort perspective. Early copies of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* are illustrated by a caterpillar smoking a hookah while sitting on a mushroom. One side of this mushroom, he tells her, will make her grow smaller, the other taller. This ties in with the experiments of Dodgson's fellow Oxford don, Mordecai Cooke, who wrote that consumption leads to:

erroneous impressions of size and distance are common occurrences . . . a straw lying in the middle of the road becomes a formidable object, to overcome which a leap is taken sufficient to clear a barrel of ale, or the prostrate trunk of a British oak.

Carroll may not have tried the mushroom himself, but he reviewed Cooke's book and it is telling that after the caterpillar gave Alice bottle of mysterious medicine, she uses it to control her size.

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P.S. As always, let me know if you want to be removed from the list and I will do it forthwith.