

No, Virginia, There Is No Santa Claus

Dennis J. Chase

Seventy-five years ago, Virginia O'Hanlon, age 8, wrote to the editor of the *NEW YORK SUN* to settle her doubts about Santa Claus. Francis P. Church, an associate editor, published his reply which immortalized the line, "Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus." It has been reprinted possibly more times than any other single newspaper article.

But this traditional view of children, and of the place of Santa Claus in the Christmas season, has not gone unquestioned. In the early 1900s, Maria Montessori, the Italian educator, criticized the deliberate deception of children by such "little lies" as Santa Claus. "One of the most important tasks of the good mother is to inculcate in her child the habit of

telling the truth," she wrote. "[F]rom a single lie [comes] a long series of wrong acts." Currently only Lee Salk, a New York professor of pediatric psychology, and author of *WHAT EVERY CHILD WOULD LIKE HIS PARENTS TO KNOW*, has publicly favored a policy of truth-telling to children about *everything*—including Santa Claus.

In the interest of rethinking this issue of children, Santa Claus, and parental responsibilities, what follows is the original letter of Virginia's, with a new answer. . . .

Dear editor:

I am 8 years old. Some of my little friends say there is no Santa Claus. Papa says "If you see it in The Sun, it's so." Please tell me the truth, is there a Santa Claus?

Virginia O'Hanlon
115 West 95th St.

Dennis J. Chase is a frequent contributor to local and national publications including REASON. His most recent REASON article, "Up From Journalism," appeared in REASON's September 1973 issue.

Virginia, your little friends are right. There is no such person as Santa Claus, but I hope you will not become downhearted and skeptical by this. Pretending there is a Santa Claus is just a way to celebrate the holiday spirit by imagining a person who has love, generosity and devotion for everyone. Adults dress up like Santa Claus in order to make these qualities more real to you, Virginia, and not because they want to mislead you. Christmas is the time we think so very much about all that is good in the world that we pretend all the unhappiness is gone for awhile, and that Santa Claus comes to give hope to everyone.

A long time ago, someone told adults that imagining a Santa Claus was not enough, and that little girls and boys need to actually *believe* in Santa Claus for Christmas to be any fun. The real world, they reasoned, is a bitter place, and they wanted to protect you from it for as long as possible.

Of course, all children learn the truth, and then they see the world differently. In just these small ways they learn that the world is a place they can never be sure of, a place where even parents lie, even to their own children. I hope, Virginia, that is not the lesson you learn, because it is not the lesson your mother and father really want you to believe.

You know, Virginia, last Christmas a little black girl exactly your age wrote to the editor of

another newspaper, and asked why she had never seen a black Santa Claus. Is there one? she wanted to know. He told the little girl that Santa Claus was not black, or white, or red, or yellow. He said Santa Claus "has no color." Isn't that silly?

Another girl, this one 4 years older than you, said she learned about Santa Claus by sneaking downstairs after bedtime and "catching" her parents putting out gifts for Christmas day. One thing you should learn, Virginia, is how one lie leads to many others. Some parents even pretend that Santa Claus climbs up and down chimneys, and that his reindeer can fly. Do you know, Virginia, that a famous teacher at a famous university in Chicago has advised parents that telling children the truth about Santa Claus will help spoil the "golden age" of childhood? I'm sorry to say that many adults just don't think about what happens afterward, and how children are affected when they find out the truth.

What is too bad, Virginia, is that it would be so easy for your parents to tell you the story of the real Santa Claus, St. Nicholas, the bishop whose kindness has made him the most popular saint in history. That is why gifts are given in his name, and why the day he died is remembered and combined with Christmas. But some adults, I'm afraid, think children live in a different world, not one just smaller in size, but smaller in values. They will not lie to their friends, but they will lie to children.

No, Virginia. There is no Santa Claus. And I am sorry you had to learn the truth from your friends and not from your father and mother. But this is changing—some people are saying that adults can be honest with children, and that children will learn to be honest by the examples of the adults they see.

Many parents think this will spoil Christmas for children. I hope that's not true, Virginia. Spoil Christmas? You might as well say that Thanksgiving is "spoiled" because you never met a Pilgrim, or that history is "spoiled" because you never saw Pocahontas, or that a puppet show is "spoiled" because the puppets aren't real. What many adults have forgotten is how good children are at pretending.

Some also say that adults will deprive children of the joy of fantasizing by telling them the truth about Santa Claus. We know that's not right, Virginia. As a matter of fact, it is just the opposite case: only children who know the truth about things are then *able* to fantasize about them.

But I am afraid, Virginia, that 10,000 years from now, and 10 times 10,000 years, adults will still be telling children about Santa Claus, tooth fairies and storks. Some of them have more fun than they think children are having, and perhaps that is why they do it. At least you have learned the truth, Virginia. There is no Santa Claus. But there are still gifts and Christmases and Virginias and much in the world to be happy about. ☐

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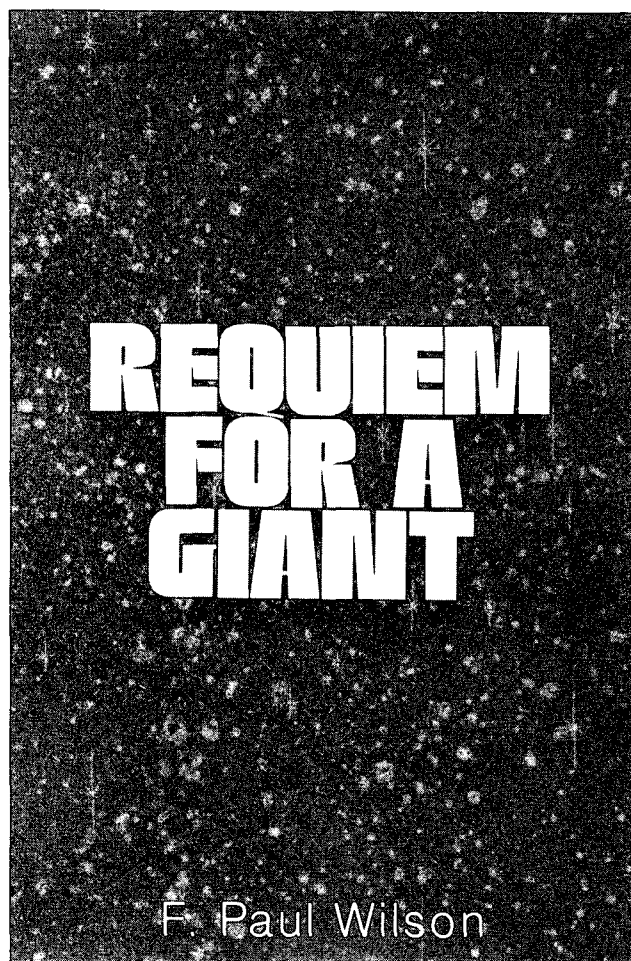
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At different times during the course of his career he was called a reactionary, a romantic, a fascist, a visionary, a conservative, an Objectivist, a troglodyte, a technocrat, a racist, and other sundry epithets—some more caustic, some more complimentary. He was all of them and none of them.

John W. Campbell, Jr. was an individualist in the truest sense of the word, rejecting all labels and refusing to admit to following any particular philosophy. There will never be another like him. He was the prime mover in shaping science fiction into its present day form and the genre will bear his imprint for as long as it exists. To his monthly editorials in *ANALOG* he brought a unique combination of prejudice and objectivity which guaranteed the reader an unusual, idiosyncratic approach to any given subject.

He's gone now and *ANALOG* isn't quite the same. It's still the best s-f magazine on the market, still the largest selling . . . but something's missing. The editorials don't have quite the same punch, color, incisiveness. He was a giant and a tough act to follow.

BINARY STAR

Campbell was 20 years old when his work

first saw print in the January 1930 issue of Hugo Gernsback's *AMAZING STORIES*. The genre was a natural for an imaginative MIT student who liked to write fiction. Subsequent tales rapidly gained him an ardent following and it wasn't long before s-f editors realized that the John W. Campbell name on the cover meant rapid sales on the newsstand. In a little over four years he was considered to be the most popular science fiction author in America, rivaled only, perhaps, by E. E. Smith.

That position was soon challenged by a new name—Don A. Stuart—whose "Twilight" was published in the November 1934 issue of *ASTOUNDING STORIES*. This story, a mood piece about man's far-flung future, entranced the science fiction world and further Stuart efforts such as "Atomic Power", "Blindness", "The Escape" and "Night" put Campbell's name in near total eclipse. Stuart's stories were something new to s-f; they were more subdued, more emphatic than Campbell's cosmic-scale romances, and they tolled the death knell for the Bug Eyed Monster—and fantastic invention-riddled space operas which had typified science fiction until then. Stuart's work formed the vanguard in science fiction's coming of age, when mood, plot and characterization began to rate equal time with the scientific aspects of the story.

Stories bearing the Campbell name became few and far between; and after he took over the editorial post of *ASTOUNDING STORIES* in September 1937, they became virtually extinct. His energies were now totally devoted to reshaping the face of science fiction. Strangely enough, the Don A. Stuart name disappeared, too—but by then most knowledgeable s-f fans knew that Campbell and Stuart were one and the same.

ASTOUNDING—which changed its name to *ANALOG* with the February 1960 issue—became Campbell's life for the next 33-plus years. (It should be mentioned that he also edited the lamented *UNKNOWN WORLDS* from 1939 to its demise in 1943.) He decided that it was time for science fiction to move out of its gee-whiz-lookit-that phase and become a more mature medium of expression. Scientific extrapolation is the core of good s-f, yes, but Campbell wanted the writer to put some flesh on his characters: he began demanding personality and motivation, a theretofore rare finding in the field.

A group of young writers who could fill the Campbell bill began to cluster around *ASTOUNDING*. Campbell nurtured the likes of Asimov, van Vogt, Sturgeon and Heinlein, berating them and

F. Paul Wilson has published short stories and novelettes in ANALOG and is currently working on a science fiction novel. He has a B.S. in biology from Georgetown University and has recently completed medical school. He is currently serving his internship in New Jersey, and is planning to enter general practice.