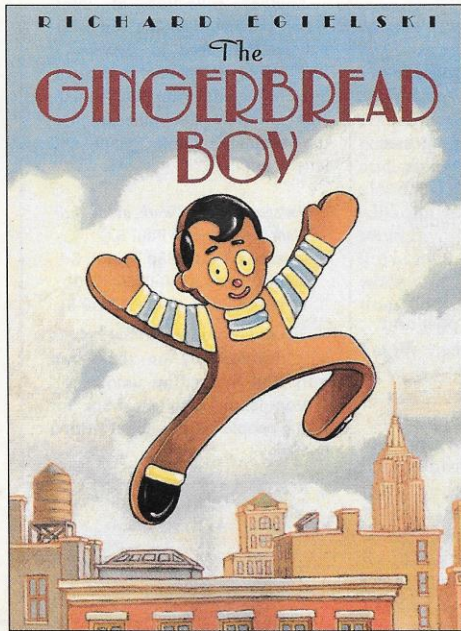


“Run, Run, As Fast As You Can”

Stories of Gingerbread Men and Other Runaways

by Camille Hayward

Young children have always loved the tale of the gingerbread man. What better time to highlight it than in the month of December? Children in preschool through second grade will enjoy hearing the familiar tale and can easily expand on its possibilities, especially if the teacher or librarian ties the story to the actual making and eating of gingerbread—be it in the shape of a man, a rabbit, or an entire house. The following book suggestions and activities link the story of the gingerbread man to tales of bakers and bakeries, to cultural variants focusing on other runaway food items, to a novel of a gingerbread rabbit, and to the fairy tale of Hansel and Gretel, with its gingerbread cottage setting.



Gingerbread Men

Begin by reading one of several tellings of the traditional American tale of the gingerbread man. Paul Galdone's illustrated version, *The Gingerbread Boy*, is a good starting point. Then try Jim Aylesworth's new retelling, which is tailor-made to be read aloud, with the characters' refrains in bold type to indicate that the children listening should join in—loudly. Contrast settings with Richard Egielski's recent urban version of the tale, in which the gingerbread boy leads his pursu-

ers on a chase through Manhattan. One could then go on to read Eric Kimmel's recent edition, *The Gingerbread Man*. Children will naturally compare all four. Kimmel has softened the ending a bit, for although the fox eats the cookie man, the last page remarks:

*But don't be sad, for that wasn't
the end of the gingerbread man.
The gingerbread man has gone
away,
But he'll be back some other day.
For gingerbread men, return, it's
said,
When someone bakes some ginger-
bread.*

Of Bakers and Bakeries

A trip to a local bakery, if possible, adds a nice extension to the story and links more books to this folktale classic. A wonderful book to read at this time of year—with or without the bakery visit—is *The Stingy Baker*, a version of a Pennsylvania Dutch folktale, retold by Janet Greeson and illustrated by David LaRochelle. Another, more recently published version of this same tale is *The Baker's Dozen: A Saint Nicholas Tale*, by Aaron Shepard, illustrated by Wendy Edelson. Both are engrossing retellings. Read together, they encourage children to contrast and compare, as the tone and events differ significantly. But, in both versions, the bakers are pleased to give 13 cookies for the price of 12 in the future.

After looking at these folktale bakers, don't miss the opportunity to introduce

Maurice Sendak's *In the Night Kitchen*. This book was actually inspired by Sendak's experience as a youngster. He was intrigued by a slogan on the side of a cracker box—"We Bake While You Sleep"—and so wanted to know what was happening in the middle of the night; he wished he could be one of the lucky bakers up and at it in that magic hour, while he was forced to go to bed. Sendak retained his understanding of the child's feeling of being left out of the action when he created Mickey, who is transported into the bakery and is able to help the bakers. Eric Carle's *Walter the Baker* is a story with a folkloric tone in which a baker is commanded by a king to "invent a roll through which the rising sun can shine three times." The result is the pretzel. (However, Carle appends a note that the word *pretzel* comes from the Latin word for "arm" and was traditionally a simple bread eaten during Lent, its shape based on the position of praying arms crossed over the chest.)

Runaway Cakes and Buns

Undoubtedly, the gingerbread boy folktale commonly known in America is a version of the European tale of the rolling bun. There are versions from France and Russia. One well-known retelling is Marcia Brown's *The Bun: A Tale from Russia*, first published in 1972. The Caldecott Award-winning artist brings to life this tale of a little old man and little old woman who scrape what is left out of their flour bin and create their last meal—a bun that rolls right out from under them! The bun is chased by a succession of characters—a hare, a wolf, a bear, and, finally, a fox—who, as in the American tale, tricks the runaway into coming nearer. This wily fox feigns deafness and asks the bun to come closer and closer—to hop on his nose. As in Aesop's fable of the fox and the crow, this fox is also a flatterer and begs the bun to sing for him in his beautiful voice. Of course, the fox eats the bun—there is no wasted sentiment here: "Like a fool he hopped onto the fox's tongue and—Snap! That was that!"

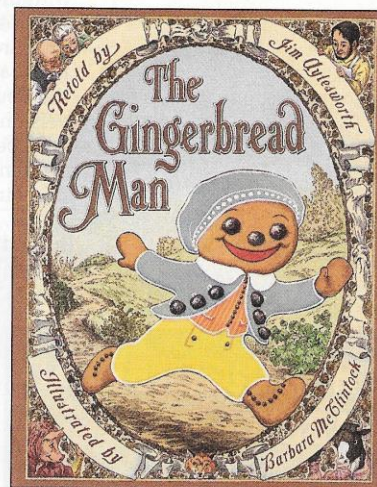
In *Nursery Tales from around the World*, Judy Sierra presents three stories of runaway foods in the section entitled "Runaway Cookies." One runaway

is the gingerbread man from America, another the bun from Russia, and the third, an escaped pancake from Norway. Each tale features a cumulative refrain as the proud dough-based protagonist boastfully proclaims that no one can capture him, until—alas—time and again, he meets his doom. In the Norwegian tale, he falls victim to a hungry pig.

Ruth Sawyer creates a near folktale in *Journey Cake, Ho!* This well-known storyteller combines cumulative elements of the original stories, and coins a peppy refrain for the journey cake to sing as it runs away from Johnny, the bound-out boy. In a twist on the traditional tale, the journey cake, after being followed by a succession of Appalachian farm animals, winds up home again, with the crowd of animals turning out to be those that were originally lost by the old couple. The journey cake is not eaten by a fox or a pig, but provides a good supper for the man and woman who scraped him together in the first place.

A Gingerbread Rabbit

The Gingerbread Rabbit by Randall Jarrell adds a poetic depth to this study. Illustrated warmly by Garth Williams, the novel tells of a mother who discovers a real rabbit, life-size and beautiful. She wishes to give him to her little girl, but he is not one to be kept. She then decides to create a gingerbread rabbit instead, only to have the dough rabbit dash off the baking sheet before ever going into the oven; he runs away for fear of being eaten. As with his folktale counterparts, he, too, meets a fox. Being fundamentally naive, he is led by the fox to believe that the sly fox is merely another species of rabbit, one happening to be red in color and the boastful owner of a beautifully pluming tail. Children are amused by the rabbit's innocent assumptions, but they are relieved that his life is spared and that he meets up with the original rabbit and is adopted into his family. The story is resolved with the mother, creating a rabbit of cloth for her daughter.



Gingerbread Houses

After exploring a variety of folktales with the runaway food motif, one might turn next to the fairy tale Hansel and Gretel, which features a handsome house made of gingerbread. Not only is the house gingerbread, but in frequent versions (as well as in Engelbert Humperdinck's opera of the tale) there is a fence made of gingerbread boys and girls that surrounds the witch's house. These unfortunate children were turned to gingerbread by the witch, echoing the enchantment of the little boy in *The Stingy Baker*. Children will

enjoy hearing a variety of Hansel and Gretel stories and comparing illustrations of the witch's house in the books. One beautifully realistic version is found in the Caldecott Honor Book illustrated by Paul Zelinsky, *Hansel and Gretel*.

Activities

- Create paper-bag puppets using the gingerbread man theme and have the children use them to reenact the story.
- Bring in ginger root and have the children use the library to research where it is grown and how the root is ground to produce the powdered spice used in gingerbread cookies.
- Dramatic play might center on the gingerbread man's actions in jumping out of the oven and running away. Children can assume the roles of the old couple and of the animals in pursuit, taking turns portraying the gingerbread man.

Gingerbread Lore

The Bun: A Tale from Russia. Illus. by Marcia Brown. 1972. 32p. Harcourt, o.p.

A bun runs away from an old man, an old woman, a hare, a wolf, and a bear, only to be eaten by a fox.

Carle, Eric. *Walter the Baker*. 1972, 1995. 40p. Simon & Schuster, \$16 (0-689-80078-9); paper, \$5.99 (0-689-82088-7).

In this tale, loosely based on a German folktale, a baker creates the first pretzel when a

king demands "a roll through which the rising sun can shine three times."

The Gingerbread Boy. Retold and illus. by Richard Egielski. 1997. 32p. HarperCollins, \$14.95. (0-06-026030-0).

A lively retelling in which a New York City gingerbread boy leads a chase through the city's streets and subways, depicted in stunning two-page spreads.

The Gingerbread Boy. Retold and illus. by Paul Galdone. 1975. 40p. Clarion, \$5.95 (0-89919-163-0).

The gingerbread boy escapes all those who try to catch him until he is tricked into being eaten by a fox.

The Gingerbread Man. Retold by Jim Aylesworth. Illus. by Barbara McClintock. 1998. 32p. Scholastic, \$15.95 (0-590-97219-7).

This classic retelling includes boldface type for the various characters' refrains, so that children can join in, making this ideal for reading aloud to a group.

The Gingerbread Man. Retold by Barbara Baumgartner. Illus. by Norman Messenger. 1998. 32p. DK Ink, \$8.95 (0-7894-2493-2).

With its large type and simple vocabulary, this telling is a good first introduction to the tale for a young child, and a version that a beginning reader can read independently.

The Gingerbread Man. Retold by Eric Kimmel. Illus. by Megan Lloyd. 1993. 32p. Holiday, \$15.95 (0-8234-9724-8); paper, \$6.95 (0-8234-1137-0).

A gingerbread man runs away from a variety of farm animals, but, in the end, a fox eats him as it ferries him across the river.

Greeson, Janet. *The Stingy Baker*. Illus. by David LaRochelle. 1990. 32p. Carolrhoda, o.p.

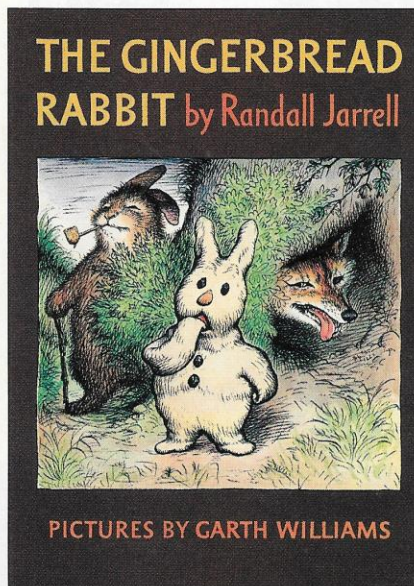
A mysterious woman demands a baker give her 13 gingerbread cookies instead of the usual dozen. When he refuses, she places a curse on his boy, turning him into a life-size gingerbread cookie. When the baker learns to be more generous, his son returns to him.

Grimm, Jacob, and Wilhelm Grimm. *Hansel and Gretel*. Illus. by Paul Galdone. 1982. 40p. McGraw-Hill, o.p.

Galdone reillustrates the Grimm fairy tale with a flat palette that strikingly reveals the humanness of the characters.

Hansel and Gretel. Retold by Rika Lesser. Illus. by Paul Zelinsky. 32p. 1989. Putnam, o.p.; paper, \$6.99 (0-698-11407-8).

In this Caldecott Honor Book, Zelinsky's masterful oil paintings offer a richness to the story.



Jarrell, Randall. *The Gingerbread Rabbit*. Illus. by Garth Williams. 1996. 56p. HarperCollins, \$11.95 (0-06-205086-9).

This juvenile novel takes its cues from the gingerbread man folktale, but provides a warm resolution: the gingerbread rabbit is adopted into a family of actual rabbits, while the little girl receives a handsewn cloth rabbit.

Nursery Tales from around the World. Retold by Judy Sierra. Illus. by Stefano Vitale. 1996. 114p. Clarion, \$19.95 (0-395-67894-3).

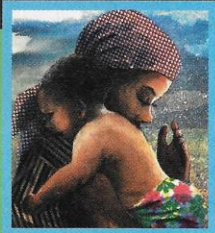
Three runaway food tales—from Russia, Nor-

way, and the United States—are featured in this collection of folktales, richly illustrated with folkloric motifs in oil on wooden panels.

Sawyer, Ruth. *Journey Cake, Ho!* 1953. 46p. Viking, o.p.; Puffin, paper, \$4.99 (0-140-50275-0).

A journey cake runs away from its Appalachian farmhouse, with the animals of the farm in hot pursuit after it. It returns to the old man and old woman of the farm, bringing all the animals back with it. This is a classic retelling by a master storyteller.

THREE STARS AND COUNTING!*



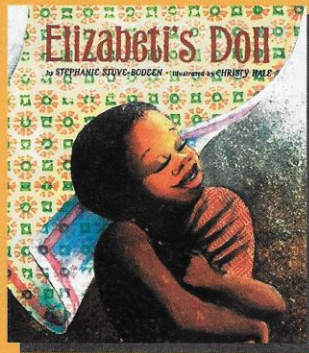
★ "Elizabeti doesn't have a doll and yet she wants to take care of a baby all her own, just like Mama takes care of the new baby. So she finds a rock, kisses it, and names it Eva.... This book is a splendid celebration of life and the power of a child's imagination."

—**Starred Review, School Library Journal***

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—**Pointer, Kirkus Reviews***

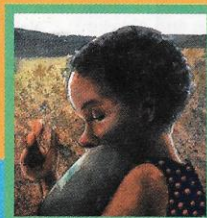
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Scieszka, Jon. *The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales*. Illus. by Lane Smith. 1992. 56p. Viking, \$16.99 (0-670-84487-X).

These fractured remakes of this and other well-known fairy tales are sure to be a hit, especially among the older children, who will recognize the "stinky cheese man" as a stand-in for the gingerbread man.

Sendak, Maurice. *In the Night Kitchen*. 1970, 1995. 48p. HarperCollins, \$15.95 (0-06-026668-6); paper, \$4.95 (0-06-443436-2).

This perennial favorite follows Mickey as he travels in a doughy suit and airplane through his dreamed adventures in a bakers' kitchen.

Shepard, Aaron. *The Baker's Dozen: A Saint Nicholas Tale*. Illus. by Wendy Edelson. 1995. 32p. Atheneum, \$15 (0-689-80298-6).

In this variant of *The Stingy Baker*, a mysterious woman asks a baker for 13 St. Nicholas cookies instead of the usual dozen. He refuses, and for a year, his bakery almost suffers ruin, as his products no longer hold up to his former high standards. The mysterious woman returns in a year to again ask for a baker's dozen. He complies and prospers.

Thomas, Joyce Carol. *Gingerbread Days*. Illus. by Floyd Cooper. 1995. 32p. HarperCollins, \$14.95 (0-06-023469-5); paper, \$5.95 (0-06-446188-2).

This book is really a calendar of poetry; a poem for each month wraps the child protagonist in a warm circle of familial love and acceptance. In January, the boy and his grandmother make gingerbread together. She comments, "He looks just like you." Gingerbread becomes a metaphor for a year of loving ties in a closeknit African American home.

Ziefert, Harriet. *The Gingerbread Boy*. Illus. by Emily Bolam. 1995. 32p. Viking, \$11.99 (0-670-86052-2); paper, \$3.99 (0-140-37818-9).

A beginning-reading edition of the familiar tale, with brightly colored illustrations. The old man and old woman are dressed in contemporary clothing. Instead of old-fashioned threshers, the farmer who pursues the cookie boy rides on a tractor. ■

Camille Hayward is an elementary teacher who is currently working as a school librarian in Seattle, Washington.

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