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STARTING OFF

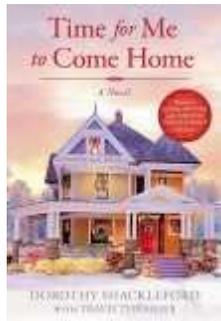
5 TO FIND

Christmas-oriented novellas

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THEY BEGIN TO arrive in late October and early November — small, slim volumes, no more than a couple hundred pages in length, whose covers are adorned with snow landscapes, rosilily lit cottages decked out in garland and twinkly lights, maybe even a Christmas tree.

This year is no exception. Here's a handful of holiday novellas that can easily be read in the course of a quiet winter's afternoon.

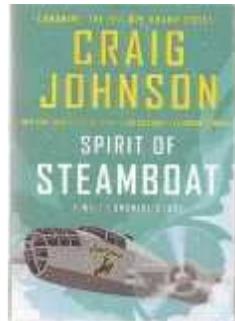


'Time for Me to Come Home'

By Dorothy Shackelford with Travis Thrasher (NAL, \$19.95)

Oklahoma Shackelford is the mother of country star Blake Shelton, and this novella is based on the song of the same title from Shelton's album "Cheers, It's Christmas."

It's the story of a country music star named Heath Sawyer, who plays a sold-out concert at Madison Square Garden on Dec. 23 and realizes that all he really wants for Christmas is to be home in Okmulgee. The difficulties of holiday travel, the people he meets along with the way and the memories of the past make up the bulk of the tale.

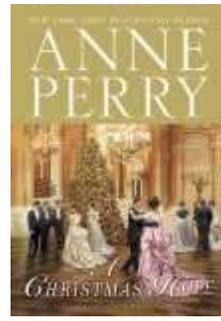


'Spirit of Steamboat'

By Craig Johnson (Viking, \$20)

Johnson's series of crime novels about Wyoming lawman Walt Longmire have been best-sellers and the source of the A&E series "Longmire."

Johnson describes this as "an odd little book" — a short story that quickly expanded into something much larger. Longmire is spending a quiet Christmas Eve reading "A Christmas Carol" when a young woman appears with a lot of questions about a long-ago plane crash. It's less a mystery than a tale of adventure, as an unlikely quartet comes together to embark on a dangerous mission to save the life of a young girl.

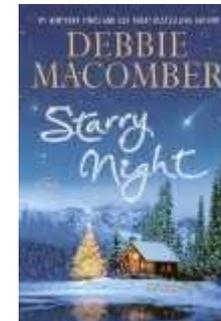


'A Christmas Hope'

By Anne Perry (Ballantine, \$18)

Perry, best-known for her Victorian-era crime novels, has established a separate cottage industry in Christmas novellas — "A Christmas Hope" is her 11th.

A member of Victorian London's high society, Claudine Burroughs is nevertheless unfulfilled, trapped in a loveless marriage and surrounded by acquaintances with whom she has nothing in common. Then Claudine meets the poet Dai Treggeron and becomes enmeshed in a shocking crime that she must solve to save several lives — her own included.

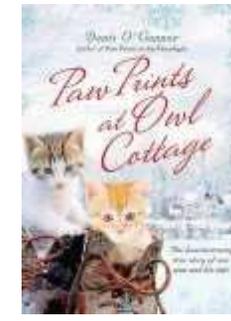


'Starry Night'

By Debbie Macomber (Ballantine, \$18)

A number of Macomber's past novels have been adapted into Hallmark Channel movies, so it's no surprise that she's produced a number of Christmas stories, as well.

"Starry Night" is about a society columnist for a newspaper who is assigned to get an interview with a reclusive author if she wants to advance her career. When she finally tracks the writer to his lair in Alaska, romance begins to play havoc with her professional ambitions.



'Paw Prints at Owl Cottage'

By Denis O'Connor (St. Martin's Press, \$19.99)

Who says these Christmas books have to be fiction? O'Connor, a retired psychologist, wrote about his life with a Maine Coon cat named Toby Jug in his first book, "Paw Prints in the Moonlight."

This sequel recounts how O'Connor and his wife returned to their old home and end up taking in four young Maine Coon cats, and how these four felines brought a special joy to their lives. The volume includes illustrations by Richard Morris.

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