



You know Dasher, Dancer, Prancer, and Vixen...but do you recall the most famous reindeer of all?

We're referring, of course, to Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer. And yes, we know what you're thinking: *everyone* knows Rudolph. But do you know the *actual* story behind everyone's favorite flying deer? Until recently, all we knew were the words to the song. But the other day we came across the history of Rudolph and found it so fitting for the season that we thought we'd share it with you today.

It was January 1939. The Great Depression was ongoing, and war was breaking out all over Europe. It wasn't exactly the most festive of times – especially for a young writer named Robert L. May.

At the time, Robert was working as a copywriter for the Montgomery Ward department store in Chicago. While he was often seen as the life of every party, in private he found himself feeling more and more downhearted. For one thing, he was buried in debt, as many Americans were, with little prospect of getting out of it. Professionally, he felt like a failure. Instead of writing the next Great American Novel, he spent his days writing catalog copy, trying to make dress shirts sound exciting. Worst of all, his wife was dying of cancer. Soon, he knew he would have to raise their only daughter alone.

So, when he came to work one freezing day in January, the last thing he felt was the holiday spirit. In fact, he later confessed to being relieved that the Christmas decorations from the previous year were finally being taken down. But as any good writer would tell you, this is the point – when things look bleakest, and the main character is at their lowest point – that the story takes an unexpected turn.

That day, Robert's boss came to him with an unusual request. Every Christmas, the company released a promotional coloring book for children. Since Robert was so good with jokes and limericks, would he be willing to write a story to go along with the next one?

Writing something jolly as a way to sell more clothes was the *last* thing on Robert's mind. But he was in no position to say no – so, of course, he said yes.

Robert got down to work. At first, all he could come up with was that the story should be about a reindeer since his little daughter loved seeing them at the zoo. But that presented a problem. Reindeer were already associated with Christmas. Ever since the poem *A Visit from Saint Nicholas* was published back in 1820. Every child in the country could list their names: Dasher, Dancer, Prancer, Vixen, Comet, Cupid, Donner, and Blitzen. So, what would the story actually be about?

Then, one day, Robert looked out his window at the wintry fog coming off Lake Michigan. That's when it hit him: How could Santa Claus *or* his reindeer ever deliver presents in conditions like *that*?

The solution, Robert decided, was to create a ninth reindeer...with a glowing nose that could guide Santa in the fog. He wrote down a list of names, all beginning with the letter R for "alliterative purposes."¹ There was Rodney, Roddy and Roderick. He tried Rudy, Romeo, and Rolland, too. At last, he came up with a group of three finalists: Rollo, Reginald, and...Rudolph. He selected the last because it "rolled off the tongue nicely."¹ Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer was officially born!

Meanwhile, his wife's sickness worsened. Instead of running away from his grief, Robert decided to draw from it. He also drew from his experiences as a child when he had been bullied or didn't quite "fit in". So, he made the story open on a sad, crying reindeer. A reindeer who just couldn't understand why life was being so cruel. A reindeer who knew it had more to offer the world than the world could see.

Robert decided to write the story as a poem, using the same meter as *A Visit from Saint Nicholas*. Slowly, the story took shape. But then, in July, his wife passed away. His boss offered to take the story off his plate and

assign it to someone else, but Robert refused. As he later explained, “I needed Rudolph now more than ever. Gratefully, I buried myself in the writing.”¹

By the end of summer, Robert had a draft. But when he showed it to his boss, the response was, “Can’t you come up with anything better?”

That might have been the end of poor Rudolph right there – had Robert not received somewhat different feedback from much more important critics. When he read it to his daughter and his wife’s parents, they immediately fell in love with the red-nosed deer. “In their eyes, I could see that the story accomplished what I had hoped,” he later said.¹

So, Robert enlisted a friend to draw pictures for every page. This time, the story was accepted...and the company distributed more than two *million* copies across the country. Then, a small publishing house printed the book in hardcover, and it became a best-seller. Eventually, the rage died down. Robert continued to work for Montgomery Ward, although, like Rudolph, his life improved from that point on. He was able to get out of debt and, a few years later, remarried.

After World War II ended, the company decided to give the rights to Rudolph entirely over to Robert, thinking the reindeer’s usefulness was over. So, Robert asked his brother-in-law, a musician, if he wouldn’t mind turning the poem into a song. The song found its way into the hands of the legendary singer, Gene Autry...and the resulting recording sold more than 25 million copies.

Having started under a mountain of debt, Robert and his family were financially set for life. And though he may not have written the Great American Novel, he wrote something that, perhaps, will last for even longer: A reindeer that will go down in history. A reindeer that, as the Chicago Tribune once wrote, “has become the first new and accepted Christmas legend since *A Visit from St. Nicholas*.”²

We all experience low points in our lives. Sometimes, we feel discouraged about where we are in life. But we love this story because it reminds us that, with just a bit of hope, a bit of belief in *ourselves*, and by remembering that *all* of us have so much to offer the world – like Robert, like Rudolph – things will get better. So, on behalf of everyone on our team, we wish you a Merry Christmas! May your holidays be as bright as the nose of a very special reindeer soaring across the sky.

Sincerely,



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¹ “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer Origins,” *TIME*, <https://time.com/5479322/rudolph-the-red-nosed-reindeer-history-origins/>

² “Robert L. May,” *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_L._May