

RANDOM SAMPLES

KIDS TO SANTA: YOU'RE KIND OF SCARY

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I am not afraid of Santa. Never have been.

I used to think nothing of this. After all, everyone's supposed to love Santa Claus, right? He brings you presents — good ones — and all he wants in return is a glass of milk and some cookies. Or so I'm told.

Apparently I have more courage than most. That's the only conclusion I can make after seeing the new book, *Scared of Santa: Scenes of Terror in Toyland* (Harper, \$9.95), by Toledo native Nancy Watkins and her colleague at the Chicago Tribune, Denise Joyce.

Inside are more than 250 pictures of children who will stop at nothing to get away from this "jolly" old elf. They cry, pout, scream, howl, scowl, frown, wriggle, wiggle, shriek, wail, and generally freak out.

You can see it in their eyes: Any Christmas wonder has been completely replaced by the fear of being thrown in the lap of a fat guy in a crazy red suit who keeps shouting "Ho ho ho!" over and over. They glare warily at a hugely bearded man who insists on entering their house through the chimney and who sits at a candy cane throne.

"The stage is set for a meltdown," says Ms. Watkins, 48.

PHOTO GALLERY

[See kids who are scared of Santa](#)

It fascinates me that so many kids fear something that is meant only to make them happy. Clearly, adult ideas about what is reassuring and comforting to children are a bit skewed.

Of course, Santa isn't the only one with this public relations problem. Clowns are the same way. A study in *Nursing Standard* magazine made headlines earlier this year when it revealed that every one of the 250 children polled disliked the use of clowns in hospital decor, with some finding them "frightening and unknowable."

The same could be said for Santa. He's imposing and so out of the ordinary. Can you really know a man who lives at the North Pole and flies around on a reindeer-powered sleigh? It's one thing to hear a story about him, quite another for him to grab hold of you at the mall, especially if you know you've been naughty.

Having never met Kris Kringle as a youth — I'm Jewish; it never came up — I've never actually faced this situation. Who knows how I would have reacted. I did see it play out over and over, though, when I had the chance to sit in for the Big Guy at a local mall a number of years ago.

Children who were excited about Santa in theory suddenly had second thoughts, and for every boy who couldn't wait to give me a hug, there was another who wouldn't get near me. Each had the telltale signs of terror smacked across his little face: mouth quivering, eyes narrowed with worry as mom or dad — filled with high hopes and refusing to be denied the grand payoff after waiting in line — slowly nudged them forward.

I'm told that most kids eventually get over the trauma. Jan Connors, a South Toledo woman who appears in *Scared of Santa* as a weepy, chubby-cheeked 1-year-old, says she bears no scars and has nothing but fond memories of St. Nicholas.



Hilarious as some of the photos are in retrospect, I still don't totally understand why so many parents insist on documenting these ho-ho-horrors of Christmas past. I readily admit that I'm not helping matters, though. I've had more than my fair share of opportunities to dress up as characters that kids are supposed to love, and the results have always included anguish for some of them.

I was Santa. They cried.

I was a mime. They yelled.

I was Curious George. They backed away.

I was a minor league baseball mascot. They hid in fear.

So while, just like Santa, I'll do my best to spread some cheer this holiday season, I can't promise that your kids won't run away screaming. Just make sure you have a camera handy when they do.

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