

Xmas/ Christmas

Is Xmas a word? Or is it an interloper, an abbreviation used in mobile phone SMS language, a mere piece of slang spelling? My word, it certainly is not! Xmas is an old form of Christmas dating back to 1551. X is the Greek letter chi and was used as the first letter of *Christos* 'Christ' in Greek. So X became an abbreviated form of the word *Christos*.

In Old English, around 1100, *Cristesmessas* meant 'Christ's festival'. The spelling was simplified over the years and by the early 1600s became *Christmas* (the *Ch-* spelling was borrowed from the Greek and Latin forms).

Of course, November is the month when many begin to get into a festive mood and no more so than in South Australia. This year I have Swedish friends who are bringing their seven-year-old granddaughter, Molly, all the way to Adelaide to see our Christmas Pageant.

On that magic Saturday morning, if you listen carefully to parents talking to their children, prompted by the costumed characters on floats as the pageant wends its way through Adelaide's streets, you will hear the sounds of children's literature being taught – words and phrases that we carry throughout life:

"Little pigs, little pigs let me in, or by the hair of my chinny-chin-chin, I'll huff and I'll..."

"Mirror mirror on the wall, who is the fairest...?"

"Fee-fi-fo-fum! I smell the blood of..."

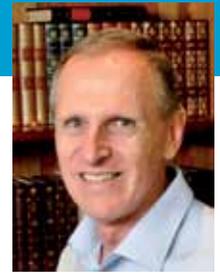
Traditional tales are the lifeblood of childhood fantasy and an important part of early education. Just think of the sayings we use that originate from traditional tales.

House of straw; streets paved with gold; paying the piper; the Midas touch; an ugly duckling; letting out the genie; and so on. All these idioms draw their meaning from stories and if the stories fade and are not passed on, the idioms lose their sense.

Young Molly from Sweden is beginning to learn English. Watching the pageant with her parents and grandparents has parallels with reading a picture book together, or these days, finding fairytales as interactive books online. The talk about the story, the words and the pictures, puts language into a meaningful setting, making it fun and easier to understand.

Whether you take your children to the Christmas Pageant

MY WORD with Rodney Martin



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or, from a distance, watch it together on television, it is a wonderful opportunity to engage them in language.

Read fairytales before the pageant so their excitement will be heightened when they recognise familiar characters on the magnificent floats. The Christmas season can be a springboard for children's language development.

Rodney Martin has a background in primary education and is a children's author (There's a Dinosaur in the Park, Martin's Picture Dictionary), an editor and award-winning educational publisher (The Watertower). His SA family business, Era Publications, recently launched Traditional Tales Online (see www.erapublications.com/south-kids).