A CHRISTMAS CAROL
by Charles Dickens
Preface

I have endeavoured in this Ghostly little book, to raise the Ghost of an Idea, which shall not put my readers out of humour with themselves, with each other, with the season, or with me. May it haunt their houses pleasantly, and no one wish to lay it.

Their faithful Friend and Servant,

C. D.

December 1843

Scenes By Stave

STAVE ONE: MARLEY'S GHOST
- Out upon Merry Christmas! - God bless you, merry gentlemen!
  - Scrooge's Fireside.
  - The Ghost. - The Ghost's departure.

STAVE TWO: THE FIRST OF THE THREE SPIRITS
- Another unearthly Visitor.
  - Scrooge's School Days.
  - The Fezziwig Ball. - Scrooge's old Love.

THERE WILL BE A SHORT INTERVAL BETWEEN STAVES TWO & THREE.

STAVE THREE: THE SECOND OF THE THREE SPIRITS
- Christmas Shops.
  - At Bob Cratchit's. - Tiny Tim and Mr. Scrooge.
  - Games at Forfeits. - Ignorance and Want.

STAVE FOUR: THE LAST OF THE SPIRITS
- A Death has occurred. - Ghoules.
  - Poor Tiny Tim! - The Ghost.
  - The Name of the dead man.

STAVE FIVE: THE END OF IT
- A delightful Boy.
  - Scrooge reclaimed by Christmas.
DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Ebenezer Scrooge, a miserly man
Bob Cratchit, his clerk
Mrs. Cratchit, Bob's wife
Martha, their oldest daughter
Peter, their oldest son
Belinda, their second-oldest daughter
Two young Cratchit children, boy and girl
Tiny Tim, their son, on crutches
Fred, Scrooge's nephew
Kitty, Fred's wife
Portly Gentlemen, fundraisers for the poor
Young caroler
Jacob Marley, the ghost of Scrooge's old partner
Ghost of Christmas Past
Youngest Scrooge
Schoolboys
Fanny, Scrooge's sister, Fred's mother
Old Fezziwig, Scrooge's jolly old employer
Mrs. Fezziwig, his wife
Three Miss Fezziwigs, their daughters
A Fiddler
Housemaid
The Baker
The Cook
The Milkman
Young Scrooge
Belle, Scrooge's onetime fiancée
Dick Wilkins, a fellow clerk
Other revelers
Ghost of Christmas Present
Ignorance
Want
Ghost of Christmas Future
Three businessmen, acquaintances of Scrooge
Charwoman, Scrooge's house cleaner
Mrs. Dilber, a laundress
Undertaker's man
Old Joe, a junk salesman
Christmas boy, sent to buy the Christmas turkey
Good-humoured fellows, three or four
Various revelers, children, denizens of London
Fred's housemaid

A Dickensian Glossary

stave: An archaic form of “staff,” a stanza of a poem or song.

the ruler: Scrooge threatens a young caroler with this essential tool of his trade, used in making charts and graphs to record his monetary gains and losses. Later, Bob contemplates using it on Scrooge when he thinks he (Scrooge) has gone mad.

blindman’s-buff: A parlor game in which one player, blindfolded, tries to catch and identify someone from among the other players in the room.

“like a bad lobster in a dark cellar”: A comic incongruity, but also invokes the idea of a face after burial, with the stench and phosphorescent glow of decay. Rotting crayfish do appear to glow in the dark.

lumber room: A storeroom, sometimes used for firewood, but more often for unused household items.

gruel: Oatmeal or other cereal boiled in lots of water. Interestingly enough, this meager fare was also the staple diet in prisons and workhouses at the time.

“when the bell tolls One”: The ghost of Hamlet’s father, too, enters when the bell tolls one in Shakespeare’s Hamlet.

dull conversation with the Ghost: Ghosts and spirits were believed to speak in dull or monotonous tones

plain deal forms: Long, unpainted and unfinished school benches made of deal wood or pine.

half of half-a-quartern: A tiny bit of spirits, as a quartern is only one fourth of a pint.

if a lunch is provided: It was customary at the time that no matter how cheap the funeral some food should be provided for the mourners.

the copper: A boiler; it’s kept in the washhouse because the rest of the year Mrs. Cratchit uses it to boil her laundry.

“A smell like washing day!”: The pudding was cooked in a cloth, here in a boiler generally used for laundry.

smoking bishop: A popular Christmas punch, made by pouring port wine over ripe bitter oranges. The mixture was then heated and spiced were added. The name “Bishop” was derived from its purple color.
In 1883, forty years after *A Christmas Carol* was first published, Vincent van Gogh wrote a letter to his brother Theo telling him that he had just purchased a new sixpenny edition of the Charles Dickens novella. “I find all of Dickens beautiful,” van Gogh wrote, “but this tale, I’ve re-read it almost every year since I was a boy, and it always seems new to me.”

In that simple but heartfelt sentiment, the artist touched upon the extraordinary legacy and enduring afterlife of this “Ghost Story of Christmas” and why it continues to remain one of the most popular and endearing of all holiday entertainments – quite possibly the greatest Christmas story since the original one. Dickens may not have invented Christmas, but he’s offered up a parable that transcends the season and given us a narrative that touches upon our most primal and basic human needs, sensibilities, and inclinations. It’s a story about understanding human nature, a chronicle of one man’s self-discovery, and a powerful moral tale with a contemporary relevance and essentialness that is…well, downright spooky.

Since its publication in 1843, *A Christmas Carol* has become such an integral part of Christmas tradition and folklore that no holiday season would be complete without a visit from the ghosts of Christmas Past, Present, and Future, or an incarnation of Ebenezer Scrooge, Bob Cratchit, and Tiny Tim. It’s a story that endures because it always speaks to the present time, and it remains a heartwarming moral fable filled with glorious energy, flavor, and humor. It may be a short book, but it’s also a great one.

Over the years, Dickens’s novella has been adapted for the stage, film, television, radio, opera, and ballet. There are sequels, prequels, musical versions, animated versions, silent versions, Disney versions, all-canine versions, and even a zombie version. Who doesn’t know it?

But how many of us have actually read it?

Sure, we see copies of the book in libraries, in bookstores, in gift shops, on coffee tables, and even on our own bookshelves. We quote from it and we refer to it, but when was the last time we really sat down and read it? Aloud?

When the opportunity arose for me to first present this story, I thought it would be foolish to let anyone but Dickens himself do the talking. In reacquainting myself with the original novella, I was overwhelmed by the power of the narrative itself – by the vibrancy of his detail, the richness of the characterizations, and the compassion of its message. The journey from darkness to light, from misery to redemption, from selfishness to generosity, and from loneliness to communion resonated in very profound and moving ways. In other words, it was – and is – storytelling at its simple best.

Like the greatest of writers, Dickens drew upon the life around him, as well as his own experiences. His humble childhood certainly informed his works, and his prose reflects his deep and abiding sense of obligation and responsibility toward those driven into poverty and destitution. He never lost sight of this moral vision, no matter how popular and successful he had become, and his fervent belief in our shared humanity permeated all his works. He routinely reminds us that though life is hard, we possess a common need to refresh and embrace our connection with each other and to revel in the joys and responsibilities of this shared humanity.

It is also important to recognize that *A Christmas Carol* was written during a period when the old English traditions of Christmas were in a state of decline. Nineteenth-century industrial capitalism was threatening to bury the season in an avalanche of greed, somberness, and misery. The polarization between the rich and the poor was a great cause of social concern. It was indeed, “a time, of all others, when Want is keenly felt and Abundance rejoices.” Sound familiar?

What Dickens gives us is a narrative of redemption, rebirth, and renewal. His story is one of conversion and transformation; of one man’s journey from the loneliness of his own dark prison into the liberating light of our common humanity. It reflects Dickens’s desire that we embrace this humanity and seek to reacquaint ourselves with the child within us all – endeavoring to capture that joyful energy, eagerness, compassion, and delicacy that the childlike spirit can conjure.

Several years ago, I had a director tell me that the greatest and most powerful sound one can experience in the theater is the sound of a beating heart. My intention tonight is simple – to let the pulse of this wonderful story unfold as Dickens originally envisioned, and to allow you to bring your own imagination to bear on his rich, compassionate, potent, and glorious prose. Let it “shine upon the cold hearth and warm it, and into the sorrowful heart and comfort it.” Its message is as relevant and resonant today as it was in the London of the 1840s.

“May it haunt their houses pleasantly,” Dickens wrote in the preface to his “Ghostly little book.” Just try to wrap your mind around that.

Paul Morella
Was Charles Dickens the first pop star? That is the comparison drawn from his public readings, 150 years ago. His gruelling tour itineraries read like Madonna’s or Eminem’s. People sometimes fainted at his shows. His performances even saw the rise of that modern phenomenon, the “speculator” or ticket tout. (The ones in New York City escaped detection by borrowing respectable-looking hats from the waiters in nearby restaurants.)

As well as being our greatest novelist, Dickens developed a new, composite art form in his stage performances, acting out specially adapted passages from his own works and varying his expressions and speech patterns, so that it seemed as if he were becoming possessed by the characters he created. His reading tours won him huge popular acclaim on both sides of the Atlantic. And in all probability they contributed to his premature death, from a stroke, in 1870.

Why did Dickens take his show on the road? His first public readings were for charity, beginning with two performances of *A Christmas Carol*, before a crowd of 2,000 working-class people in Birmingham. Soon, though, the offers of payment were coming in, and Dickens, always with an eye for the business opportunity, was tempted. But if money was a motivation, it was far from the only one. Dickens was fascinated by the stage: he had seriously considered becoming an actor as a young man, and had a small theatre fitted up at his house in Tavistock Square. He also clearly relished the chance of coming face to face with his readers, to whom he spoke so personally in the prefaces to his novels.

What Dickens’s public got was something of a spectacle. Like a Victorian magician, Dickens performed against simple but striking stage architecture, with a vivid maroon backdrop and a red reading stand that he had designed himself, with “a fringe around the little desk for the book”. On top of the stand, Dickens kept the reading copies that he made of his texts – special versions of the Christmas books and passages from his novels, pasted into volumes with extra-wide margins, to allow for his scribbled alterations and stage directions to himself. Continually changing while in repertoire, these adaptations developed into new, free-standing versions of the old favourites.

Many people found Dickens’s performances hypnotic; the author is known to have experimented with mesmerism. One audience member describes a particularly popular rendition, of the murder of Nancy by Bill Sikes in *Oliver Twist*: “Warming with excitement, he flung aside his book and acted the scene of the murder, shrieked the terrified pleadings of the girl, growled the brutal savagery of the murderer... Then the cries for mercy: ‘Bill! dear Bill! for dear God’s sake!’... When the pleading ceases, you open your eyes in relief, in time to see the impersonation of the murderer seizing a heavy club, and striking his victim to the ground.”

Up to this point Dickens had been following a text that reads (with prompts in his own hand, marked here in italics): “Laying his hand upon the lock (action), he reached his own door - he opened it softly (xx Murder coming xx).”

Not everyone fell under his spell so easily. Mark Twain was disappointed by the performance that he saw: Dickens, he said, did not enunciate properly, and was “rather monotonous, as a general thing; his voice is husky; his pathos is only the beautiful pathos of the language – there is no heart, no feeling in it – it is glittering frostwork.” But even he was taken with the sight of such a celebrity, fascinated to have in front of him the famous head, that “wonderful mechanism” that had governed the directions of so many literary characters. “I almost imagined I could see the wheels and pulleys work.”

For all the extraordinary effect that they had, the story of Dickens’s public readings does not have a happy ending. By the late 1860s, the author’s family and friends were becoming concerned that the tours were taking too great a toll, particularly after the Sikes and Nancy scene was added to the bill. “The finest thing I ever heard,” Dickens’s son Charley told him, “but don’t do it.” As with most other things in his life, Dickens pursued his readings with a compulsive energy that allowed him little time to rest. He maintained an exhausting schedule, and suffered from bouts of depression. He grew weak and weary, and as his health faltered, he developed chronic influenza.

Dickens’s friend and doctor, Francis Carr Beard, finally called time on the public performances. His medical notes show that Dickens’s heart rate was raised dramatically each time he read, particularly when his text was Sikes and Nancy. His final readings, like the others, were a huge success, but he ended them like Prospero: “From these garish lights I vanish now for evermore.” Within three months he was dead.

Why did Dickens write *A Christmas Carol*?
Appalled by the polarization between the rich and the poor, particularly the children of poverty, and stressing the need for education, regardless of wealth, he originally intended to write a cheap pamphlet entitled, “An Appeal to the People of England, on Behalf of the Poor Man’s Child.” At that time, Christmas was celebrated in a muted fashion, and Dickens thought it would be the perfect backdrop for the form and themes he intended to address. Money was also a factor. In 1843, though only 31, he had found success with *Oliver Twist* and *Nicholas Nickleby*; however, his latest novel, *Martin Chuzzlewit*, hadn’t been the triumph he hoped for. Burdened with the need to support a large family, and struggling with financial woes himself, Dickens was quite anxious for the story to succeed.

**Why did he call it *A Christmas Carol***?
The title suggests a song or ballad of joy celebrating Christmas. Dickens wanted to establish a whimsical tone to lend the story a certain musicality and rhythm. Furthermore, he wrote the story in five “staves” or stanzas, instead of the normal “chapters,” implying that he wanted it read like a piece of music as well. He maintained the conceit in the two subsequent Christmas books by setting off their chapters in accordance with the stories’ titles: *The Chimes* is divided into four “quarters,” like the tolling of a clock, and the divisions of *The Cricket on the Hearth* are called “chirps.”

**How did he write it?**
By drawing freely from an earlier work, *The Pickwick Papers*, where a Christmas interlude, called *The Story of the Goblins who Stole a Sexton*, is told. In it, the narrator tells of Gabriel Grub, a misanthropic gravedigger who silences a young caroler by hitting him on the head with a lantern. He is ultimately redeemed, however, by a band of goblins who visit him, drag him underground, and show him visions of impoverished families who derive comfort from their love of one another, after which he mends his mean-spirited ways.

**How long did it take to write?**
Six weeks. He spent all hours of the day and night, abandoning other projects and canceling appointments. He told a friend, “I was so closely occupied with my little *Carol*, that I never left home before the owls went out; and led quite a solitary life.” He would take long walks through London, sometimes 20 miles a night, as he fleshed out the story in his mind and raced to get it into print before Christmas. It was officially published as a book on December 19, 1843.

**How well was it received?**
From the first day of publication, sales were tremendous. The first run of 6,000 copies (mostly priced at five shillings) sold out by Christmas Eve, with 9,000 more sold before the end of the year. Because of the high cost of the book (he insisted on a lavish format for the 66-page novella) Dickens’ early profits were limited — 250 pounds for the first printing — and while the critical response was overwhelmingly positive, the financial benefit Dickens had hoped for was somewhat muted.

**How real were the characters?**
Dickens rarely created characters that were not in some way based on people from his own life and experiences. For example, Jacob Marley’s name came from Dr. Miles Marley, an Irishman who practiced medicine near Dickens’ home. While at a party, when the subject of the novelist’s interest in unusual names came up, Dr. Marley mentioned that he thought his own surname was quite unique. Dickens reportedly replied, “Your name shall be a household word before the year is out.” The Cratchit family echoed the author’s own impoverished family, with the six Cratchit children corresponding to the six Dickens. Tiny Tim in particular may have been based on a combination of Dickens’ own frail nephew, who died of tuberculosis at the age of nine, and Dickens’ younger brother Frederick (the boy was originally called “Little Fred” in the manuscript, which Dickens changed during his early revisions). Ebenezer Scrooge’s namesake was apparently Ebenezer Scroggie, an Edinburgh town councilor, who was a charitable and jovial libertine, unlike his miserly fictional counterpart. In his diaries, Dickens states that while taking an evening walk in 1841, he stumbled across the grave marker for Scroggie in an Edinburgh cemetery. The marker identified Scroggie as a “meal man” (corn merchant), but Dickens misread this as “mean man,” due to the fading light. Dickens wrote that it must have “shriveled” Scroggie’s soul to carry “such a terrible thing to eternity.”

**What was wrong with Tiny Tim?**
Just what was Tiny Tim’s mysterious disease? Some prominent pediatricians have suggested that the boy possibly suffered from Pott’s disease, also called spinal tuberculosis, which commonly strikes children under ten years old. Tuberculosis infected half the population in nineteenth-century England, and while primarily a respiratory illness, Pott’s disease can spread to the bones and joints. However, tuberculosis was not curable at the time, so other experts speculate that Tim had a kidney disease, renal tubular acidosis, with symptoms that include muscle weakness, stunted growth and softening of the bones. Another popular theory within the medical establishment is polio, and proper medical attention might have halting the disease. Interestingly enough, the original manuscript makes no mention of the fate of Tiny Tim. Dickens realized when going over the galley proofs that he must reassure his readers that Tim survived, so he added the statement, “…and to Tiny Tim, who did NOT die, (Scrooge) was a second father.”

**Why the enduring popularity?**
*A Christmas Carol* appeals to both religious and secular-minded readers, and offers one of the most popular themes in myth and fiction: redemption. There is a little Scrooge in all of us, and it is gratifying to see him transformed into a man who empathizes with the unfortunate and the downtrodden. As Dickens’ biographer Peter Ackroyd wrote, “Beyond the heart were the poor, the ignorant, the diseased, the wretched; and do we not enjoy the flames of the Christmas fire more because of the very shadows it casts?” Of course, let’s not forget, everyone loves a good ghost story.
The fairies came to his christening. One said, “My gift is early hardship; as a child, he shall know the ugliness of life.” The second said, “My gift is his abandonment; he shall be a castaway.” The third, “His school shall be the streets.” The fourth, “I will give him a sensitive spirit, so that he may feel early pain sharply, and remember it vividly all his life.” The last fairy said, “I will give him genius. Out of the hardship shall come the power to live a hundred lives. The castaway shall have the freedom of the whole world of men and women. The education of the streets shall provide him with boundless treasures of comic and tragic invention. The humiliations of the child shall fertilise the imagination of the poet.”

R. J. Cruikshank

*Charles Dickens and Early Victorian England*