

# The Man Who Invented Christmas (2017)

Rated PG. Running time: 1 hour 44 min.

Our content ratings (1-10): Violence 1; Language 2; Sex/Nudity

Our star rating (1-5): 4.5

*The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners*

*Isaiah 61:1*

*The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.*

*Mark 1:15*

Director Bharat Nalluri's film never claims that Charles Dickens *invented* Christmas, but it does show how he struggled to create the classic story that transformed what most people considered, before he wrote *A Christmas carol*, to be a minor holiday.

The film begins at a packed theater in New York City in 1842 during the triumphant tour of the U.S. by what was then the most popular writer in the English language, young Charles Dickens (Dan Stevens). His novel *Oliver Twist* had made him popular on both sides of the Atlantic. Despite the lavish adulation he receives when he takes the stage, he can hardly wait to get back to England. However, once he does, his muse seems to desert him, and his next three books are flops.

It is "16 months later," and we see the author with his wife

supervising the redecorating of their crowded new home with furnishings they can ill afford, such as a fancy crystal chandelier and a shiny brass door knocker that will not stay attached to the door. With servants, wife Catherine (Morfydd Clark), their four young children, and his good friend and confidante John Forster (Justin Edwards), Dickens is hard put to find the solitude required to come up with a new book. In one short scene he sits with his pen poised over a blank sheet of paper, and all that issues from it is a large drop of ink that falls onto the page. To add to his distraction, his mooching father (Jonathan Pryce) with his hand out and his long-suffering mother (Ger Ryan) show up. To his chagrin soft-hearted Catherine picks up on their hint and invites them to stay. Kate has one more piece of news that he manages to accept as good news—she is expecting their fifth child.

In her screenplay, based on the book by Les Standiford, Susan Coyne has come up with a visually interesting way of dealing with HOW a writer creates a work, something that most films about the creative process fail to do. We see how strangers that Dickens overhears at home and around London inspire bits and pieces of his story and character. His new Irish chambermaid Tara (Anna Murphy) telling his children a ghost story provides the form. A well-dressed theater-goer heartlessly says that the poor should hurry up and die so as to “decrease the surplus population.” (I am not sure, but this might be the same man who declared that “the poor do not belong in books.”) At a church cemetery the author hears an old Miser (Christopher Plummer) who has just witnessed his business partner lowered into his grave and utters the phrase that will ever be associated with one of Dickens’ most memorable characters, “Bah, humbug.” (His struggle to come up with an appropriate name for the person is depicted much later). The presence of his ne-er do well father makes him think of the awful day when the elderly Dickens was taken away in a paddy wagon bound for debtors’ prison, leaving the young son to fend for himself. The adult Charles visits the now

dilapidated factory building where he had worked with other destitute boys to produce shoe blacking. All around him were the exploited poor, from whom he would conjure up the Cratchits, though it was from his own family, a sickly nephew, that Tiny Tim was derived.

However, before Dickens can proceed very far, he must sell his idea for a Christmas ghost story to his publishers. They hate the idea, reminding him that Christmas is a minor holiday not conducive to selling books. Besides, Christmas is just a little over six weeks away! Thus, he decides to publish the work himself. How he manages to make all the arrangements, including dealing with the illustrator who demands an upfront down payment as well as finishing the story, while dealing with so many family concerns, proves to be a near miracle.

Much of the fun comes from the author holding imaginary conversations with the book's characters, Christopher Plummer being delightful as Scrooge. Dickens' banker/solicitor Haddock (Donald Sumpter), who drives a hard bargain when the author asks for a loan, becomes Scrooge's business partner Jacob Marley; loyal friend Forster becomes the Ghost of Christmas Present; chambermaid Tara Ghost of Christmas Past, and so on. At times these fill the study as Dickens sets his pen to paper to come up just in the nick of time the ending that had eluded him.

Bharat Nalluri, who also directed the frothy, but enjoyable, little Cinderella story [\*Miss Pettigrew Lives for a Day\*](#), is aided greatly by wonderful costume and set designers—Victorian England looks bright and lively for the present day Dickens family and dark and grim for the author's boyhood stint as a child slave. Director of photography Ben Smithard's cameras capture everything in colorful detail, making this a film that viewers just might want to revisit in the years to come—it is ideal for the Hallmark Channel. The film captures well what Dickens means when he says, "Christmas is about hope that, in the end, our better natures will prevail." His Ebenezer

Scrooge also provides what might be the best illustration outside the New Testament for what it means "to repent" means. This is translated from the Greek word "metanoia," meaning literally to "change one's mind." What a difference such a change makes in the world of Scrooge and the Crackits. What a difference it would make in *our* world were we all to follow his example.

*This review with a set of discussion questions will be in the December issue of Visual Parables.*