

## A Christmas Carol

### A Christmas Carol movie review.

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Check out the movie trailer for A Christmas Carol at the end of this blog.

I used to read Charles Dickens' A Christmas Carol every year as part of my holiday tradition. We've all got them, right? We've got our favorite movies to watch (which reminds me I've got to watch Planes, Trains and Automobiles between now and Thanksgiving), our favorite foods, drinks, get-togethers, and anything else that could be filed away under "tradition."

My copy of A Christmas Carol is a small hardcover book with illustrations by Arthur Rackham (1867-1939). Nobody illustrated the period like Rackham, and his renderings for Dickens' ghost story were the perfect compliment to the text.

Somewhere along the way, though, I stopped reading it. At the moment, I'm not even sure where it is. But A Christmas Carol is still very much a part of my festivities every year due to the uncountable number of film versions that abound. OK, sure, you can count them. Feel free.

One of my favorites is the one many people consider the best: the 1951 Alastair Sim version. Of course, there's also Mr. Magoo's Christmas Carol, Scrooged with Bill Murray, The Muppet Christmas Carol and many others starring everyone from Patrick Stewart and Henry Winkler to Albert Finney (in the musical Scrooge with Alec Guinness as Marley's ghost) and Kelsey Grammer. There is most definitely a Scrooge for all tastes.

And now to the mix add Jim Carrey, or at least a computer-animated version of him created through motion-capture technology. I'm happy to proclaim Disney's new A Christmas Carol a welcome addition to the crowd.

Now that he's played both the Grinch and Scrooge, Carrey appears to have cornered the market when it comes to grouches transformed by Christmas. His work in A Christmas Carol is excellent, but fans of the wacky, frantic Jim Carrey might be disappointed. Don't expect Ebenezer Scrooge to be antic and rubber-faced. This Scrooge is perhaps the dourest. Carrey's voice work is very impressive, English accent and all. Let's face it; a bad English accent can be extremely off-putting. Case in point: Keanu Reeves in Dracula.

I was doubly attracted to the new A Christmas Carol because, in addition to being a fan of Dickens' story, I also love animation. As a kid I was obsessed with cartoons, of course, but it was in the 1970s, when I discovered the PBS television show International Festival of Animation, that the world of animation really showed what it had to offer.

Being a longtime fan of traditional cel animation, I have watched computer animation replace it over the years. I enjoy computer animation, and I've been a big fan of Pixar since seeing their first short, Luxo Jr. , at an animation festival in 1986. The star was a desk lamp, now a Pixar icon that jumps into frame at the beginning of all their films.

Speaking of Pixar, 2012 will see the release of a new Pixar movie called newt. I came across this plot synopsis: "What happens when the last remaining male and female blue-footed newts on the planet are forced together by science to save the species, and they can't stand each other? Newt and Brooke embark on a perilous, unpredictable adventure and discover that finding a mate never goes as planned, even when you only have one choice. Love, it turns out, is not a science."

Hey, I'm there! But I do wish cel animation would stage a comeback. It just may, depending on how well Disney's The Princess and the Frog, in theaters next month, does at the box office. This film is the studio's return to cel animation after announcing it was not going to make such films any longer (the last being, I think, Home on the Range in 2004).

This, along with the success of Hayao Miyazaki's cel-animated films (including Princess Mononoke; the Academy-Award-winning, and personal favorite, Spirited Away; and, most recently, Ponyo), might be a good push in the right direction.

A Christmas Carol is proof positive that computer animation and motion-capture technology have come a long way, even since director Robert Zemeckis' previous foray in holiday animation, 2004's The Polar Express. With motion capture, actors are outfitted with sensors during the filming process. The actors act out a role, and these sensors allow the physical

performance to be translated to a computer-animated character. Early films utilizing the technology were interesting, but sometimes the human characters appearance and expressions were a bit off. One criticism of *The Polar Express*, which I agreed with, was that the characters' eyes appeared emotionless.

Not so with *A Christmas Carol*. Scrooge's eyes shine, water, twinkle and crinkle with very realistic emotion. There are times when the characters look downright real, especially in some of the darker scenes. When you see a movie like this, with animated human characters that are so realistic, you wonder how long flesh-and-blood actors are going to be in demand. Think of it: A popular computer-animated character would never age, would never demand more money or would never cause other headaches that some studios have to endure to placate their stars. And who's to say computer-animated characters could not attain the same level of stardom as a human actor? Woody and Buzz Lightyear from *Toy Story* have demonstrated that it's possible. Of course, the fact that they're voiced by popular actors contributes to their popularity. Maybe real human actors stand a chance of survival after all.

I'm going to assume everyone's familiar with the plot of *A Christmas Carol*. In addition to portraying the old, crusty Scrooge, Carrey also plays all three of the ghosts and Scrooge at four earlier stages of life. The Ghost of Christmas Past was especially interesting, and it's the first time, at least as far as I'm aware, that the ghost has been portrayed as it was in the book: as a flame-headed spirit complete with candle-snuffer (which is the conical thing Scrooge is riding in some poster artwork).

Gary Oldman plays Bob Cratchit. He, too, "appears" as assorted characters, including, most memorably, Marley's ghost. This is by far the best Marley scene I've seen in any version of *A Christmas Carol*. Marley is a terrifying, floating and tormented phantom with creepy hair waving about as if he were underwater. His appearance was the highlight of the movie for me. Of course, I'm partial to horror films, so this should come as no surprise.

I saw the 3-D IMAX version of the movie (full title: *A Christmas Carol: An IMAX 3-D Experience*), and I recommend it wholeheartedly. The only drawback was that it cost \$16.50 at the Regal theater I attended. That's the most I've ever paid for a movie, and it was a bit of a shock. But I didn't feel ripped off afterward. The 3-D was eye popping, and coupled with the animation, there was much depth and detail. Snowing scenes were extraordinary, the renderings of England in the 1840s were superb, and the flying scenes were dizzying.

With the advent of increasingly larger home television screens, coupled with the irritations inherent in movie theaters (rising ticket prices, talky audiences, cell phones, etc.), studios have been trying to create a movie-going experience people cannot duplicate at home. Thus, 3-D technology has been getting much attention. A few years ago I was at Paramount Studios having lunch with A.C. Lyles, a longtime Paramount producer known these days as "Mr. Paramount." His latest credit was the HBO series *Deadwood*. During lunch, one of the head muckety-mucks at DreamWorks stopped by our table to sit and visit a bit. He mentioned that he was flying to New York that afternoon for a big meeting of film industry executives. I asked him if he was allowed to say why. "3-D," he said. "It's all about 3-D these days."

He wasn't kidding. You may have noticed increasing numbers of 3-D releases, and many more are on the way (among them the Pixar movie *newt*). I'm anxious to see James Cameron's *Avatar*. Cameron is well known for advancing filmmaking technology, and the 3-D in this movie is supposed to be revolutionary. One thing's for sure: the days of the red-and-green-plastic 3-D glasses used to watch such 1950s classics as *Creature From the Black Lagoon* and *It Came From Outer Space* appear to be over forever, except maybe at nostalgic revival showings of old 3-D movies.

Robert Zemeckis, the director of *Back to the Future*, *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* and *Forrest Gump*, has created what will likely become a new Christmas movie tradition for future generations. If you, like me, are partial to the story, *A Christmas Carol* should delight. If you're a fan of animation and/or 3-D movies, you'll be doubly delighted. However, parents should be forewarned: Some scenes, including Marley's ghost, may result in visions other than sugar plums dancing in the heads of tiny tots.

Final verdict: Highly recommended, especially in 3-D.

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