

## Best Christmas Movies

### Best Christmas movie rundown.

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Jim Carrey appears as several characters in Disney's A Christmas Carol, including Scrooge and the Ghost of Christmas Present. Photo © ImageMovers Digital LLC. All Rights Reserved.

I did a scary movie blog for Halloween, and a quick shout out to Planes, Trains and Automobiles for Thanksgiving, so it seems a blog about some of my favorite Christmas movies is in order.

What would Christmas be without Ebenezer Scrooge? Dicken's A Christmas Carol must be the all-time leader in book-to-film adaptations. I greatly enjoyed the new Jim Carrey/Disney computer-animated version that's in theaters now. I also like both the 1951 version with Alastair Sim (considered by many the best of the lot) and the 1970 Albert Finney musical version, Scrooge. I'm somewhat embarrassed to admit it, but I find the older I get the more tolerant I am of musicals. When I was younger, the only way I could be persuaded to watch a musical would be if you strapped me into a chair with my eyes pried open, a la A Clockwork Orange. Now I like some of them. I think the transformation officially began in 1986, with the release of the movie version of the off Broadway musical, Little Shop of Horrors. The 1970 musical Scrooge boasts a great turn by Albert Finney as "Ebbie," and I think the terrific sets and cinematography capture the flavor of Victorian London better than any other live-action version. Having Alec Guinness as Marley's ghost doesn't hurt, though the best Marley for me is now the truly frightening animated version in the new movie. In Scrooge, what does hurt, for me, is when Tiny Tim and his sister sing their song at the beginning of the film. Blechhhh! This is made up for later in the movie, during the "Thank You Very Much" musical sequence, in which the people of London are overjoyed that Scrooge has kicked the bucket. It's a toe tapper!

Anyone with a TV is probably familiar with A Christmas Story, maybe a little too familiar, thanks to TNT's annual 24-hour A Christmas Story marathon that begins on Christmas Eve. This now-traditional holiday favorite was far from a hit when it opened in theaters in 1983. It was something of a fluke, having been directed by Bob Clark, who up to that point was best known for horror movies such as Children Shouldn't Play With Dead Things (1973) and Black Christmas (1974), and the teen raunchfests Porky's and Porky's II. A hilarious, heartwarming family film about Christmas coming from Bob Clark took people by surprise (sadly, Clark was killed in a car accident in 2007).

I saw A Christmas Story when it opened and loved it immediately. The story of Ralphie's quest for a Red Ryder BB gun evokes many laughs, a perfectly captured feeling for 1940's Indiana, and a strong emotional punch. Fans could rattle off any number of classic scenes: Flick's tongue stuck to the flagpole, Ralphie's encounter with brass commercialism via Little Orphan Annie's decoder ring, his brother dressed for school (classic quotes: "My brother looked like a tick about to pop" and "Getting ready for school was like preparing for extended deep-sea diving"), Christmas in the Chinese restaurant and, of course, Ralphie's surrealistically hellish visit with a department-store Santa Claus.

The movie is based on a portion of the book In God We Trust, All Other's Pay Cash, by humorist and radio personality Jean Shepherd. I've read several of Shepherd's books, including A Fistful of Fig Newtons and The Ferrari in the Bedroom. They're pretty funny. Shepherd himself narrates A Christmas Story.[Click to enlarge](#)

A Christmas Carol.  
Scrooge.  
A Christmas Story.  
It's a Wonderful Life.  
Christmas Vacation.

The entire cast is great, but special kudos must go to Darren McGavin, who plays "The Old Man." You never learn Ralphie's dad's name, but to me he is now nearly as iconic a figure of the holidays as Scrooge himself. I've been a fan of McGavin's, who died in 2006, ever since he starred in The Night Stalker (1972), one of the all-time best television movies ever made, about a vampire stalking victims in Las Vegas. As reporter Carl Kolchak, McGavin later starred in not just the sequel, The Night Strangler (1973), but the television series. Every week Kolchak would encounter a new creature. Ultimately, the show was canceled, reportedly not for lack of ratings, but because they ran out of good monsters to work into the stories. I remember some of the monsters in the shows toward the end were pretty stupid.

Of course, Peter Billingsley as Ralphie is no less an indelible figure in *A Christmas Story*, with his moon face and saucer eyes behind Coke-bottle glasses. He has gone on to become a successful movie producer, often partnering with director Jon Favreau. They did *Iron Man* together, as well as other projects. Billingsley recently made his feature-film directorial debut with the comedy *Couples Retreat*, starring his buddies Jon Favreau and Vince Vaughn.

No discussion of holiday movies would be complete without *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946), the Frank Capra classic starring Jimmy Stewart as put-upon everyman, George Bailey. With a plot built around a question I'm willing to bet we have all pondered -- what would the world be like if we had never been born? -- *It's a Wonderful Life* enjoys a universal appeal that has made it an enduring favorite. Like *A Christmas Story*, it did not exactly set box office records when it was first released. Now, though, for many people the holiday season would be incomplete without their annual viewing of *It's a Wonderful Life*. Stewart's great, of course, but for me, a large part of the movie's attraction is the most memorable angel in movie history: Clarence Oddbody, played by Henry Travers. Of interest to *Little Rascals/Our Gang* fans is the appearance of Carl Switzer, otherwise known as Alfalfa, as the schnook who hits the button that opens the gymnasium floor during the film's dance sequence. For overall warm fuzzies, *It's a Wonderful Life* remains the champ. I still get a little choked up at the end, when George's brother raises his glass, and toasts, "To my big brother, George, the richest man in town."

I'll close this already lengthy blog by going from the feel-good sentimentality of *It's a Wonderful Life* to the laughs of National Lampoon's *Christmas Vacation*. I loved the first *Vacation* movie, which was based on a hilarious National Lampoon short story called "Vacation '58." The short story was written by John Hughes, who would later claim big-time fame as the writer and sometimes director of hits such as *The Breakfast Club*, *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, *Sixteen Candles* and *Home Alone* (Hughes died unexpectedly last year). *Christmas Vacation* is based on another Lampoon story written by Hughes, "Christmas '59." I just realized I have not read it; I'll have to before next Friday.

The Griswolds' Christmas is steeped with over-the-top disaster upon disaster. No matter how disinterested his family behaves, Chevy Chase as the manic Clark Griswold is determined to have the perfect Christmas, even at the risk of life and limb (by the way, it's great to see Chase in the new TV show, *Community*). The scene in *Christmas Vacation* that always cracks me up is the snow saucer scene, when Clark smears a new "space-age polymer" across the bottom of his saucer. When he pushes off, he rockets down not just the sledding hill, but through woods, crashing through snowbanks, outhouses and across roads. Randy Quaid as cousin Eddie is forever memorable, tossing off many of the movie's funniest lines. One of my favorite Eddie moments is when Clark is telling the children that he just heard on the radio that Santa was spotted in the vicinity. "Really, Clark?" asks a suddenly serious Eddie. Also fun is Brian Doyle Murray (Bill's brother), who plays Clark's boss, and Julia Louis Dreyfus -- yet to achieve star status on *Seinfeld* -- as a snotty neighbor.

Whether you want to laugh or mist up, one of these holiday movies should suit your purpose. So break out the DVD player, top off your Wally World Marty Moose mug with egg nog, and enjoy!

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