The Man Who Invented Christmas: How Charles Dickens's A Christmas Carol Rescued His Career and Revived Our Holiday Spirits by Les Standiford

The History Of A Beloved And Influential Book

As uplifting as the tale of Scrooge itself, this is the story of how one writer and one book revived the signal holiday of the Western world.

Just before Christmas in 1843, a debt-ridden and dispirited Charles Dickens wrote a small book he hoped would keep his creditors at bay. His publisher turned it down, so Dickens used what little money he had to put out A Christmas Carol himself. He worried it might be the end of his career as a novelist.

The book immediately caused a sensation. And it breathed new life into a holiday that had fallen into disfavor, undermined by lingering Puritanism and the cold modernity of the Industrial Revolution. It was a harsh and dreary age, in desperate need of spiritual renewal, ready to embrace a book that ended with blessings for one and all.

With warmth, wit, and an infusion of Christmas cheer, Les Standiford whisks us back to Victorian England, its most beloved storyteller, and the birth of the Christmas we know best. The Man Who Invented Christmas is a rich and satisfying read for Scrooges and sentimentalists alike.

My Personal Review:
Over a hundred and fifty years ago, Charles Dickens brought out _A Christmas Carol_. Neither it nor his other novels have ever gone out of print, but this one has sparked more readings, plays, musicals, and films than any of the others, and people who know nothing of Pickwick, Nicholas Nickleby, or David Copperfield do know Ebenezer Scrooge, Bob Cratchit, and Tiny Tim. You might think that _A Christmas Carol_ was just one in a
series of successes from the most famous of Victorian novelists, but it came at a time when Dickens was thirty-one years old and had recently done so poorly by his writing he was thinking what else he might do with his life. The great story of how this beloved novel came to be, and its influence on those who have read it ever since, is the subject of _The Man Who Invented Christmas: How Charles Dickens A Christmas Carol Rescued His Career and Revived Our Holiday Spirits_ (Crown). Les Standiford, who writes fiction and nonfiction and teaches creative writing, has not unearthed new, original sources for this story, parts of which will be familiar to Dickens fans, but he has drawn together parts of Dickens biography, social and church history of Christmas celebrations, and a depiction of the book and magazine publishing system in Dickens's time to make an entertaining and educational volume that anyone who loves the original book will find fascinating.

Dickens had been a hugely successful author, but in 1843 his public was not being as happy or responsive. In October he spoke at a fundraiser in Manchester, and walked the streets of the industrial city, wondering if his career was coming to an early end. The walks, and the reminders of the economic woes of the city, must have done the trick. The Christmas ghost tale took hold of him, and when he got back to London, he wrote it up in a fever. His publisher was not impressed, and Dickens had to take full responsibility for the book's production. Dickens meant to clear a thousand pounds by the book, and he had every reason to think it was going to do well for him. The public loved it and the reviews were fine. What a shock, then, to get his publishers account and find that with charges for paper, binding, coloring the drawings, and commission for the publisher, his great success got him 137 pounds. There was a long-term profit from the book, and plenty of goodwill from the public, and so Dickens went on to other successes, never returning to anything like his 1843 nadir. _A Christmas Carol_ helped cement traditions into the Christmas celebration that were practiced by a relative few, like holly, mistletoe, and plum puddings. He didn't introduce these traditions, but he increased their appreciation and he made future celebrants think these steps were more-or-less obligatory. The book does not stress gift-giving, except in its theme of charity. One profound effect was from Scrooge's insistence on the big prize turkey being sent round to the Cratchits. The traditional Christmas meal had been goose, but Scrooge doomed the goose industry while promoting the new field of turkey farming.

The other thing that _A Christmas Carol_ did was to promote annual Christmas good feeling. If Scrooge can improve himself, we can hope to improve ourselves; if he can keep a charitable Christmas, then so can we. Standiford is certainly right to appreciate the book as a ghost story, but not one that simply amazes or chills. The beauty of the book is, then, [Dickens's] use of a deceptively innocent form to do such serious work. Dickens was interested in delivering what he called a sledge-hammer blow on behalf of the poor and unfortunate. He was nominally Anglican, but he was critical of organized religion, missionaries, and any devout hypocrisy.
He produced a counterpart to the Nativity story that was not only secular but pagan, at a time when intellectual forces were about to begin to assault traditional religious thought. He allowed readers to imagine Christmases past, present, and future, and he had the honorable intention of improving them thereby. And millions of us every year take up the volume, or watch a stage presentation or a film (if you have never seen the 1951 Alastair Sim version, that’s the one to get). Perhaps it is making us better individuals every year; there is surely nothing wrong with its earnest pedagogy towards charity, compassion, humane working conditions, and celebration of family life. And who will say Bah, humbug to all that?

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