

EXPLORING A Christmas Carol

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ADAPTED FOR THE STAGE BY TOM HAAS

NOV 19-DEC 26, 1998 IRT MAINSTAGE

AN IRT STUDY GUIDE

"**T**here poured upon him daily, all through that Christmastime, letters from complete strangers to Dickens which I remember reading with a wonder of pleasure; not literary at all, but of the simplest domestic kind of which the general burden was to tell him amid confidences about their homes, how the CAROL had come to be read aloud there and was to be kept upon a little shelf by itself, and was to do them no end of good."

This passage, written by Dickens's lifelong friend, literary agent, and biographer, John Forster, suggests something of the overwhelming positive response which greeted Dickens upon the publication of *A Christmas Carol*.

This warm response to Dickens's Yuletide story is one that many of us have shared, a response now deepened by our familiarity with the story not only on the printed page, but also on the stage and screen.

It is the story of Ebenezer Scrooge, a bitter, miserly man, who is visited by four ghosts on Christmas Eve. The first ghost, Jacob Marley—Scrooge's former business partner—visits Scrooge to warn him against his miserly and heartless ways. Marley warns Scrooge that if he doesn't change his selfish behavior and tend to the needs of his fellow man, he will be doomed to an afterlife of misery. In order to redeem himself,

Scrooge must that same night accept the visitations of three spirits: the ghosts of Christmas Past, Present, and Future.

The Ghost of Christmas Past shows Scrooge both happy and unhappy scenes from his childhood and early life. Along with such joyous events as a reunion with his sister and a lively holiday party, Scrooge relives many painful memories—including the day he ended his engagement with the woman he loved, devoting himself entirely to his money-making business.

The Ghost of Christmas Present shows Scrooge two contrasting Christmas gatherings.

One is a lively celebration hosted by Scrooge's nephew, at which the merry group plays a word game that mocks Scrooge's greed. The other is a modest Christmas dinner at the home of Scrooge's employee, Bob Cratchit. The meal is meager but joyous, the only cloud being the illness of Cratchit's son, Tiny Tim. Even Scrooge is touched by the boy's bravery.

The Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come shows Scrooge horrifying scenes of a dark and dismal future—vagrants looting through a dead man's stolen belongings, laughing and mocking the deceased; an unmourned corpse, left alone in an empty room—remnants of a life whose absence from the world is no great loss, is even to some a source of joy.

Scrooge's fate depends on his response to the spirits of Christmas Past, Present, and Future. The final moments of the story radiate a spirit of generosity and redemption, as well as sheer, giddy joyousness, which have helped to make *A Christmas Carol* one of the most popular books ever written. ★

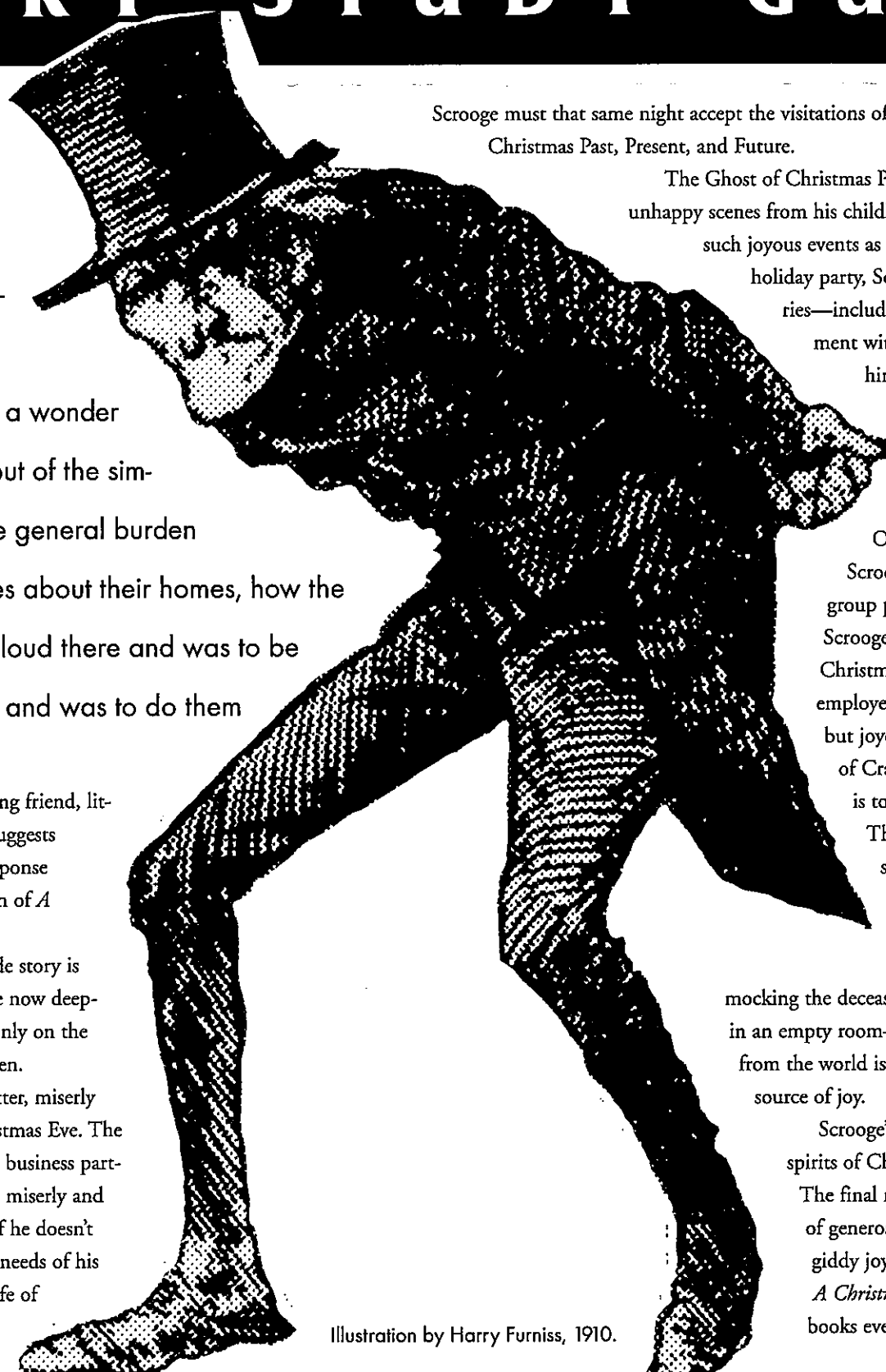


Illustration by Harry Furniss, 1910.

A Christmas Carol

Russell Metheny has been known to make some grand gestures in his career. He is the scenic designer who brought *Shirley Valentine's* Greek island sailing downstage, in the words of one reviewer, "like the cavalry coming to the rescue." He is the scenic designer who split the stage in two for the finale of the recent production of *Abe Lincoln in Illinois*. And he is the scenic designer who tore down the masking and blanketed the bare stage with an endless field of white, fluffy snow for the IRT production of *A Christmas Carol*.

This adaptation of Dickens's novella was written by Tom Haas (former IRT artistic director) and produced at the IRT every year from 1980 through 1984. After a twelve-year hiatus, the play was brought back in 1996 and is now making its third (or eighth) appearance. Production supervisor Michael Passaro calls it a "revisal."

"That's a great word choice," says IRT artistic director Janet Allen, "because you can never really revive a production. Since theatre is a hand-crafted art, there are no two productions alike. No two performances of a single production can even be the same; if you don't believe me, just read a week of stage manager's performance reports."

So just as the IRT productions of *A Christmas Carol* varied from year to year in the 1980s, so will this year's production vary from last year's, which was different from the year before. As always, the *Carol* will have the wonderful storytelling Dickens is known for, enacted by actors who play several roles. Where director Scott Wentworth also played the role of Narrator in 1996, this year's co-directors Janet Allen and Priscilla Lindsay will remain off-stage; the narration will be divided among several members of the cast. Speaking of the cast, some will return, some

will be new, and some will be returning but in new roles (including Paul Carlin, last year's Marley, as this year's Scrooge). There are some new costumes—Marley, Fan, Ignorance and Want, to name a few—and some returning, courtesy of costume designer Murrell Horton. And lighting designer Michael Lincoln promises some exciting new lighting effects.

But one thing that will not change this year is the snow. Audiences and actors alike delight in this production's endless snow-covered field. During the performance actors make tracks through the snow, symbolizing their individual journeys. Hidden objects and trap doors under the snow add to the magic and spirit of this telling of *A Christmas Carol*.

With the stage masking stripped away, the theatre's backstage area is revealed. This allows the audience to experience the magic of the story and at the same time see how it is created. "I thought the theatre architecture backstage would be terrific," says Metheny, "because we didn't want to be stuck in London in one time period. But the architecture has a terrific spooky quality which is great for the show, and it's great for the audience. It says *theatre*."

"We try to amplify that quality by making the theatre equipment more obvious and more period—pipes with old dead ropes and garlands, everything with this curious, romantic, spooky reference to the past, to the great old plays performed over the years on this stage. So the 'new' *Christmas Carol* has all that flavor of all the *Christmas Carols* that have been done in the past. And yet there is something also about the IRT in the midst of a whole new era, and celebrating the theatre."

"This year we'll see things change and adjust. But with *A Christmas Carol* here at the IRT, every year the show has to come from the performers. And

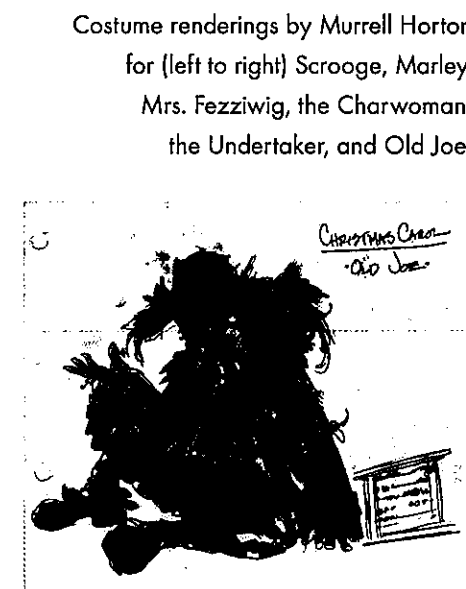
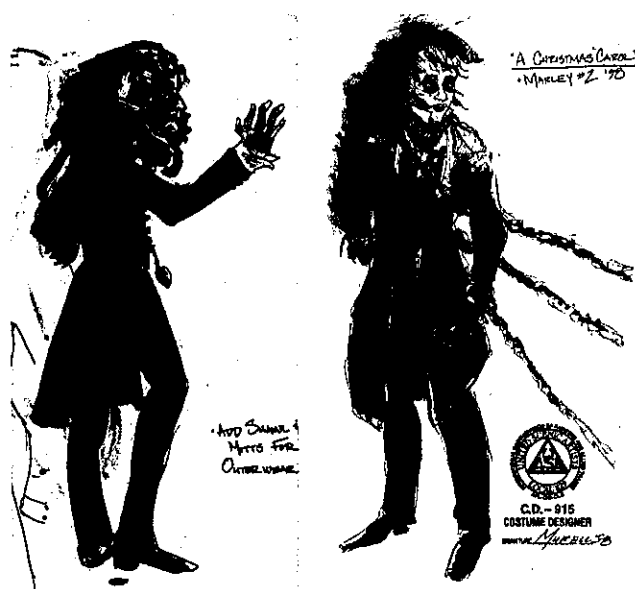
every year the performers change, they go on to other shows, children grow up and their voices change and they step up to other roles. So the actors have to be the primary focus. And this time of the year is perfect for giving the audience a feeling of home, a gift, a celebration of becoming subscribers or coming to the theatre for the first time and just being part of that big family. There's something about taking the scenery away, and focusing on the characters, and breaking your heart, and uplifting you, and I think that's great.

"I like shows that are events. Every show is an event from the moment the audience walks in, and you have to try and figure out how to keep that event going. And *A Christmas Carol* is a perfect opportunity—but making bold choices is tricky because it's hard to move away from what people expect. And it's not about abstraction, or setting it on the moon. But it can be about huge, massive amounts of snow, and how the past, present, and future fall out of it or rise up through it."

A Christmas Carol brings to mind visions of Christmas cheer and scenes of a distant past in which we wish we could participate: a merry gathering at the Christmas dinner table with roast goose and a steaming plum pudding; a lively dance of country folk on Christmas Eve; a family toast in which a poor boy calls forth the spirit of Christmas with a simple, "God bless us, everyone!" These impressions of *A Christmas Carol* are the essence of its lingering charm and create moments of celebration in the theatre. The IRT's production will be filled with such visions and much more; for these visions create in us a spirit of generosity and goodwill which we need not only at the holiday season, but all the year through. ★



A Christmas Carol, 1997. Photo by Greg Whitaker.



Costume renderings by Murrell Horton for (left to right) Scrooge, Marley, Mrs. Fezziwig, the Charwoman, the Undertaker, and Old Joe.

Charles Dickens

A LIFE OF PURPOSE

Charles Dickens, the great English novelist, was born February 7, 1812, in Portsmouth, on the southern coast of England. His father lost his small appointment in the navy pay office when Charles was three, and the family moved to London. Indeed, the Dickens family moved so often during Charles's childhood that he was unable to attend school regularly.

At the age of 12 Charles had to leave school to work in a rat-infested blacking (shoe polish) factory; two weeks later his father was sent to debtor's prison. Luckily, a small inheritance rescued the family, permitting Charles to return to school for two years; but his formal education was short-lived. At 15 he became a legal clerk and at 18 a court reporter for the *Mirror of Parliament* and the *True Son*. Dickens quickly acquired a reputation as a top reporter.

In 1834, Dickens began to publish short narrative sketches under the pseudonym "Boz" in the *Morning Chronicle*. In 1836, on his 24th birthday, *Sketches of Boz* was published. That same year Dickens married Catherine Hogarth, daughter of a newspaper editor. Together, they had ten children before they divorced in 1858. Shortly after marrying Catherine, Dickens resigned from the *Morning Chronicle* and became editor of a new monthly magazine. This allowed Dickens more time to focus on his writing. He explored contemporary conditions for pauper orphans in his second novel, *Oliver Twist*.

Although Dickens enjoyed great prosperity, the poverty of his youth left him with a distrust of the ruling class and an acute sensitivity for the downtrodden. He traveled to Yorkshire in 1838 to gather material for a novel dealing with the notoriously severe living conditions in lower-class boarding schools. The result was *Nicholas Nickleby*, in which a youth escapes from a tyrant schoolmaster.

Dickens held strong views about the relationship between a lack of education and social oppression. He was convinced that education was the solution to England's problems. He was expressing this belief at a meeting when he conceived the idea of *A Christmas Carol*. Shortly there-

after, in the fall of 1843, he started writing the short book. He composed it in a frenzy, alternately laughing and crying at the images that occurred to him; and he polished it in his mind while walking the streets of London at night. With illustrations by Dickens's friend John Leech, the book was published at Christmas 1843.

Dickens generously ordered the volume to be handsomely bound but sold at an extremely low price. Thus, in giving England *A Christmas Carol*, he lost approximately the amount of money an average family in England would make in a year. Dickens followed this story with several other short Christmas stories written in haste for quick reward. (Recall that in this period

Charles and Kate Dickens were producing a large family—their fifth child was born in January 1844—and Dickens was obsessed with making a sufficient living to support his growing brood. Much of his writing was done for commercial purposes—that is, to feed his family—which is a startling fact to remember for those who consider Dickens a writer of mythic greatness.)

Dickens continued to incorporate his own life experiences in his works. His semi-autobiographical 1849 novel, *David Copperfield*, about a young man who struggles through poverty to achieve respect, was an immediate success. The novels *Bleak House*, *Hard Times*, and *Little Dorrit* followed in rapid succession, and all took on a similar pattern. He wrote chapters of each book for publication in periodicals and later published them as complete novels. In this manner, Dickens was literally making up the story as he went along.

The last years of Dickens's life were characterized by extensive travel throughout the world to perform public readings from his novels. He was hailed everywhere as the greatest writer of his age. Though he enjoyed traveling and the opportunity to exhibit his acting skill in public readings, the combination caused a strain. In June 1870 he suffered a stroke and died instantly at the age of 58. For three days, thousands of citizens passed by his open casket in Westminster Abbey to pay their respects to the most beloved of English writers. ★



Dickens, 1843

* footnotes

"buried with a stake of holly through his heart"—Scrooge evidently views anyone who would waste his money celebrating Christmas as little better than a murderer, as murderers were traditionally buried at crossroads with stakes through their hearts.

"Why did you get married?"... "Because I fell in love!"—In agreement with contemporary economists, Scrooge does not approve of his nephew's marrying before he had sufficient income to support a family. To marry for love was sentimental nonsense to many Victorians. None of these is a winning argument about Scrooge himself, either as a man or a father, but not about his children.

Children work houses—The Poor Law of 1834 put children in government workhouses (houses of refuge) until they were 16, a place for the destitute where they might labor in exchange for their room and board. The children were put to hard labor, and their day and night were spent in the house, where as little as possible was spent on food and shelter. The work houses were characterized by strict discipline. The sexes were segregated and classified. It was considered a disgrace to go to such a place. Dickens fiercely attacked these institutions.

"A poor excuse for picking a man's pocket every twenty-fifth of December!"—It was not unusual to work on Christmas Day in Victorian England.

London Town—Once a suburb, now a part of London, east of Regent Street, known for its small cottages and cheap houses. Dickens lived there as a boy.

choir—a carriage of pleasure drawn by one horse.

"Old Fezziwig laid down his pen and looked up at the clock, which pointed to the hour of seven."—Fezziwig has chosen to close the shop early; the usual hour of closing was nine o'clock.

"Outside the baker's they had smelt the goose, and known it for their own!"—Poor people rush at the Christmas dinner in their homes, so their holiday goose was treated by the local baker for a fee.

"the pudding singing in the copper"—The copper was a large kettle kept in the wash-house for laundry. In this house Mrs. Cratchit boils the traditional Christmas pudding.

all gathered—being in many places at once, comparing notes.

Holiday Traditions

Mistletoe, the wassail bowl, the singing of carols—these are just a few of the images conjured up as we read—or watch—*A Christmas Carol*. How did these traditions begin? How did Christmas become the celebration it was in Dickens's day, or for that matter the celebration it is today?

Most people are aware that Christmas commemorates the birth of Jesus Christ, the inspiration of the Christian faith. But few people are aware of just when that birth occurred. For centuries history has been divided into two eras, presumably separated by Christ's birth.

Contemporary scholars suggest, however, that Jesus was probably born around the year 7 B.C., in part because he was born during the reign of King Herod and Herod died in 4 B.C. after a long illness. Although there is some debate, it is also thought that the birth occurred during the spring, because it is during lambing time that shepherds would be "watching their flocks by night" as noted in the book of Luke—at other times they would leave the sheep to themselves.

So how did Christmas get to be December 25? One of the issues with which the early fathers of the Christian church had to contend was pagan holidays. It was not enough to preach the Gospel to the newly converted; if the fledgling religion was to survive, it was also necessary to purge from the converts' lives all traces of other religions. Wiping the slate clean was particularly difficult around old holiday times, when people were tempted to join in beloved celebrations. Quickly realizing that banning such celebrations was fruitless, the church instead co-opted them, establishing Christian holidays which coincided with pagan holidays. Thus the people's natural hunger for celebration and a break from work was satisfied, but within the context of church symbols and teachings.

So Christmas—literally, Christ's Mass—was established on December 25, to coincide with the Roman celebration of the winter solstice, the shortest day of the year. This feast had long been celebrated with bonfires, lights, processions, and prayer. For the Saturnalia, another mid-winter Roman celebration, homes were decorated with evergreens, guests were invited, and presents exchanged. The early church transformed these traditions into the

Agape, a "love feast" in which observers gathered together, sharing a meal, prayers, and songs in preparation for services. At first these songs were solemn hymns in scholarly Latin. Over the centuries these were replaced by jollier songs in the vernacular, and when these songs were wedded to medieval dance tunes called carols, they became the Christmas carols we still sing today.

The tradition of the Christmas feast is an old one. Roman banquets could go on for days, and in medieval England the twelfth-night celebration of Epiphany was literally the culmination of twelve nights of feasting.



Illustration by Hablot K. Browne ("Phiz")
for *The Pickwick Papers*, December 1836

Today we drink hot punch or mulled wine, recalling the immense wassail bowls of merry England (*wassail* comes from the Anglo-Saxon for "be whole"—a healthy greeting, indeed). The centerpiece of the American dinner is turkey, but in England the bird of choice was goose or sometimes swan. The Christmas pudding, a bread pudding mixed with plums and raisins, was stirred by each member of the household as he or she made a wish.

Holly, ivy, and mistletoe were all considered sacred because they bloomed in the winter. Mistletoe was

thought by the Druids to cure any sickness; it was considered so powerful that if enemies encountered the plant in the wood they would lay down their arms until the next day, which is why today we show our love and friendship by kissing under the mistletoe.

By the nineteenth century, many of these traditions had been lost in an England which was becoming less rural and more industrial. Writers such as Sir Walter Scott and Washington Irving penned nostalgic accounts of old-fashioned Christmases. Charles Dickens himself included "A Christmas Dinner" in his *Sketches by Boz*, and two

chapters of *The Pickwick Papers* are devoted to a country Christmas at Dingley Dell. But in *A Christmas Carol*, written and published in 1843, Dickens found a way to both celebrate and revitalize the old country traditions by transplanting them to an urban setting. As Scrooge revisited his childhood, readers were reminded of their own childhood celebrations, or those they had heard about from their parents and grandparents. Then as Scrooge journeyed with the Spirit of Christmas Present, readers encountered lavish and lengthy descriptions of a wide variety of holiday celebrations, from the humblest to the most luxurious. Pages and pages of Dickens's exquisite prose were devoted to detailed examination, indeed glorification, of city streets, shops, and homes, all deep in the throes of a Christmas revelry that was more evident in Dickens's imagination than in reality.

Indeed, Dickens is often credited with, if not inventing, at least revitalizing Christmas. *A Christmas Carol*, along with Dickens's other

Christmas stories, enjoyed a wide audience, and these tales inspired people in their own holiday celebrations. Today we look back at the Victorian Christmas celebration with nostalgia and envy. But today's celebration, while perhaps less reverent, is if anything more pervasive and definitely more lavish. As Charles Dickens himself wrote in *Sketches by Boz*, "There are people who will tell you that Christmas is not what it used to be.... Dwell not upon the past.... Reflect upon your present blessings.... Fill your glass again, with a merry face and a contented heart. Our life on it, but your Christmas shall be merry, and your new year a happy one!" ★



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This project is partially underwritten by grants from
the Arts Council of Indianapolis, the Indiana Arts Commission,
and the National Endowment for the Arts.

Study Guide designed by Richard J. Roberts.

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A Christmas Carol