

Nov/Dec 2011 . Issue Two . Christmas Special

TORN

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Wish it could be Christmas everyday? Charles Dickens did! By Naomi Racz

Everyone, even those who haven't actually read the book, knows the story of A Christmas Carol. However, most people don't know about Charles Dickens' other Christmas stories. In fact, he wrote six Christmas books in all and contributed Christmas editions of his weekly magazine between 1850 and 1867. Through his stories Dickens helped to revive interest in the celebration of Christmas, which had been declining with the advent of industrialisation and urbanisation. This in turn helped to preserve a lot of the festive traditions we still enjoy now. So was Dickens obsessed or inspired by Christmas? Did he just love a celebration or were his motivations more charitable?

Dickens may have relished Christmas because he was a man who loved to entertain and host lavish parties for his friends. He wanted to be the jester, making everyone laugh with games, magic tricks, music, songs and dancing. He also enjoyed eating and drinking to excess. For such a person then, Christmas would have offered the perfect excuse to throw a big party, and that is exactly what he did. Perhaps he wrote about Christmas because he loved a celebration?

However, Dickens was also someone who idealised the family in his writings, often portraying the family unit as a force for good. Dickens' Christmas stories emphasise this, as with the Cratchit family who, despite their poverty, feel warm and safe in one another's company. Dickens himself married Catherine Hogarth in 1836 and by 1852 they had nine children. Despite this, his family life was far from perfect and there were cracks in his idealistic public persona. Although he was affectionate towards his children, he came to see his large family as a burden, both financially and as a distraction from his work. Perhaps tellingly, he sent his younger sons off to a foreign boarding school, followed by jobs in the colonies. Dickens' family unit finally broke, when in 1858, he separated from his wife and wrote letters to his friends making false and unpleasant accusations against her.

Another important aspect of Dickens' character was his interest in society's destitute, which showed itself both through his portrayal of the poor in his writings and his charitable work. It was Dickens who helped promote the idea of Christmas as a time to give to the poor. Contradictorily, his Christmas stories were also a source of personal income. As Dickens got older he needed more money to support his ever more lavish lifestyle and his ever expanding circle of dependants. Writing was his livelihood and in the end, his Christmas stories sold well.

Clearly, Dickens was a complex character; he was jolly and revelled in Christmas celebrations, but he was also at times unpleasant in his dealings with those close to him and his financial situation meant he had to be a shrewd business man. In a way, he embodied many of his characters both good and bad. Whatever motivated Dickens, his Christmas stories and festive cheer have survived to this day and have become an important part of our own celebrations. So, in the words of Tiny Tim (sort of), "God Bless Dickens!"

To find out more about Dickens, read Claire Tomalin's recent biography, *Dickens: A Life*