

From the Editor

Mickey's Christmas Carol at Forty

This year marks not only the 180th anniversary of Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*, but also the 40th anniversary of *Mickey's Christmas Carol*. This film is significant because it was the first time Mickey Mouse had appeared as a major character in a longer animation for many years, and because it served as a bright spot for Disney animation, which had experienced a drop in quality since Walt Disney's death in 1966 that would last until the Disney Revival beginning with the release of *The Little Mermaid* in 1989. The voice acting, the animation (especially the sumptuous backgrounds), and the writing were all far superior to the animated feature-length films the Disney corporation had been producing for nearly two decades. For me, however, this production has a great deal of personal value. My parents recorded the network television premiere on VHS, and I watched it over and over. In it I found a different type of Christmas magic that had nothing to do with Santa and reindeer. It was a story of ghosts and other-worldly beings who shatter the stark realism of Scrooge's counting house and Bob Cratchit's poverty. It was a story that insisted upon the necessity to find good in the world, even in such a terrible miser. It was a story that taught me we are all interconnected and that we have obligations to one another. After a few years of watching *Mickey's Christmas Carol*, I graduated to the VHS cassette my father labeled "Versions of a Christmas Carol" that contained the adaptations starring Reginald Owen (1938), Alastair Sim (1951), and George C. Scott (1984). These films told the same story in different ways, and I became intrigued with the time period, with Dickens, and with the way a work of fantasy could comment on the social realities of our world. In many ways, *Mickey's Christmas Carol* began me on my path to becoming a scholar of Victorian literature.

Perhaps one of the most captivating aspects of *Mickey's Christmas Carol* is its ability to balance light-hearted comedy with profound sadness—something Dickens himself was adept at. The sight of Mickey Mouse shedding a tear over the grave of his dead son, then leaving Tim's crutch behind on his tombstone and silently, reverently, reluctantly backing away, accepting the finality of death, is surely the darkest moment in Mickey Mouse's on-screen history. As a child, I could barely stand to watch this moment. I wanted to look away, to pretend that it was not a part of the story, but on some level I knew this *had* to be part of the story. At some point I realized death has to be a part of everyone's story. But, as Scrooge himself realizes, death does not have to be in Tim's story yet, and that he is culpable for the death of this child. At this point Scrooge confronts his own mortality. After Scrooge asks the spirit whose grave he is standing over, the spirit reveals himself to be the villainous Pete, casually lights a huge cigar, and then delivers the line, "Why yours, Ebenezer—the richest man in the cemetery!" I was three years old when I first heard these words, and I have never forgotten them. Nothing I have ever heard since has impressed on me the vanity of wealth and worldly pursuits. In all versions of *A Christmas Carol*, including the original novella, the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come is always represented in the image of the Grim Reaper. In this rendition, however, Disney takes the character one step further as he morphs into a satanic figure, roaring with malevolent laughter as Scrooge McDuck frantically clutches at roots to keep from falling into hellfire, inevitably plummeting into the flames as he calls out, hoping against hope for forgiveness, "I'll change!" I don't know when I first heard of the concepts of hell or damnation, but I understood that Scrooge was not just facing bodily death, but eternal punishment. Again, I wanted to look away.

Fortunately, the transition to happiness is very sudden, and the emotional cleansing for the audience immediate. Critics of *A Christmas Carol* often complain that Scrooge's transformation

is too sudden to be believable. Additionally, many of the actors who have portrayed Scrooge have struggled to pull off the abrupt transition. This version, however, perhaps because it is animated, achieves the sudden change in Scrooge very well. Perhaps more than any other adaptation, this iteration shows that Scrooge is not really *changing* into a good man, but rather, that a good man was there all along. As much as I had barely been able to watch moments before, I now visually drank in every moment of Scrooge's redemption, especially the part when Scrooge hauls in the toys and Tiny Tim finds a special teddy bear. The film ends in happiness with the haunting joyful/sad melody: "Oh what a joyous Christmas Day!" Scrooge has been saved, Tiny Tim will live, and the other-worldly forces of Christmas had triumphed, leaving "men of the worldly mind" looking foolish and insignificant.

Probably everyone has a work of sf or fantasy they remember from their early childhood that helped shape their view of the world. This was mine. It impressed on me the importance of social reform, and the power of fiction to effect it. For me and for many others, this also served as an introduction to the story Dickens first published in 1843 that has moved generations of readers. It was written the "Hungry 40s" as a way of Dickens asking his audience to consider what sort of a society they wanted to be. The 1980s—a decade that came to be known for its greed—saw three major interpretations of *A Christmas Carol: Mickey's Christmas Carol* (1983), the George C. Scott adaptation (1984), and *Scrooged*, starring Bill Murray (1988). *The Muppet Christmas Carol* (1992) followed soon after. Both *The Muppet Christmas Carol* and *Mickey's Christmas Carol* are notable for their combination of whimsy and sadness, and the George C. Scott version is excellent for its pathos, the menacing nature of the spirits, and the angst that Scott brings to the role of Scrooge. *Scrooged* is an insightful update of the story for a 1980s (not to mention a contemporary) audience. The ability of Dickens's story to be retold again and again in different time periods is a testament

to the power of his writing. These four major interpretations within a decade all began with *Mickey's Christmas Carol*; and, in many ways, even though it was made for a children's audience, it remains one of the most powerful adaptations. Multiple generations now have watched this holiday show as children, grown up, and then shown it to their children. It still resonates with audiences forty years later not just because of the beloved Disney characters, or the sense of wonder it captures, but also because it shows us that change is still possible in a world that so desperately needs an escape from cruelty and greed. It makes us once again believe in the goodness that is possible.