

The Real Dickens

"Why Dickens Wrote *A Christmas Carol*" by Michael Timko, in *Current* (March–April 2002), 1319 18th St., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036-1802.

Almost as familiar as Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* is the received tale behind its creation, how the cash-strapped author cobbled together the redemptive morality play of miserly Ebenezer Scrooge with the Victorian sentimentality of the Cratchit family to create his classic Christmas confection. Timko, professor emeritus of English at the City University of New York, detects a deeper design. His attention is drawn to the disparity between the "evocative scenes of goodwill and peace on earth in the Christmas fiction" and the facts that are now known about Dickens, "the acquisitive author and heartless husband." As Dickens's own daughter once remarked, "Nothing could surpass the misery and unhappiness of our own home."

It's true that when the 31-year-old Dickens wrote *A Christmas Carol* in late 1843, he hoped it would be a big moneymaker. Smarting from the disappointing response to his gloomy novel *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843), Dickens dreamed of reaping "a Thousand clear" on his holiday tale. The initial sales in England brought in just £230, however, and the author's impolitic remarks while on a tour in America hurt sales there as well. Dickens then

turned to giving public readings, which launched *A Christmas Carol*'s enduring popularity.

Dickens, says Timko, often remarked that he wrote "not merely to entertain readers and make himself rich, but to promote individual 'salvation' and bring about social reform." He may well have had his own salvation and reform in mind. He was no prince. His father landed in a debtors' prison when Dickens was 12, and he was forced into miserable labor at a boot-blackening factory. This trauma forever colored his attitude toward money; "like Scrooge, he seemed to put it ahead of everything," says Timko. Early trauma neither explains nor excuses his treatment of his wife, Catherine, mother of his 10 children. His infatuation with a young actress led Dickens to banish his wife to a walled-off section of their own home; eventually she moved out.

Through Scrooge's transformation, Dickens shows "that anyone can be converted from a harsh, complacent, selfish worldview to one in which love, hope, and charity are possible." Maybe even Charles Dickens. That he failed to achieve such a transformation, says Timko, does nothing to lessen the genius of his art.

Reading or Learning?

"Men of Letters: The Decline of 'Amateur Journalism'" by Benjamin Schwarz, in *The Atlantic Monthly* (July–Aug. 2002), 77 North Washington St., Boston, Mass. 02114.

In the United States, the phrase "literary journalism" seems almost a contradiction in terms, yet Britain can point to a long tradition in the field. Schwarz, a senior editor at *The Atlantic Monthly*, explains that in the early 19th century, British literary journalism seized upon the book review as its primary medium. These reviews dominated the cultural scene, "largely defining the terms of debate on and discussion of political, religious, economic, scientific, historical, and biographical subjects as well as literature."

As Schwarz notes in this book review of his own—the book being *Critical Times: The History of the Times Literary Supplement*, by Derwent May—review-essays were strange

creatures: "The book under review often served merely as a peg on which to hang a scintillating essay, and the reviewer was often far more intellectually distinguished than the book's author." Leading periodicals such as *The Edinburgh Review*, *The Fortnightly Review*, *The Spectator*, and *The Economist* were filled almost entirely with review-essays.

Reviews served a crucial function, for readers often lacked the time for scholarship yet needed a way of staying informed. John Morely, editor of *The Fortnightly Review*, described the reviewer as a "writer by profession, who, without being an expert, will take trouble to work up his subject, to learn what is said and thought about it, to penetrate to the real