



## Take a Break Book Club

### Discussion Guide for *A Christmas Carol*

December 2021

#### Author Background

Well, Charles Dickens may be one writer who doesn't need much of an introduction...but we're going to try! There's a lot to say about the life of this great writer, but here are just a few highlights: Charles Dickens (Charles John Huffam Dickens) was born in Landport, Portsmouth, on February 7, 1812, the second of eight children. The Dickens family moved to London in 1814 and two years later to Chatham, Kent, where Charles spent early years of his childhood. Due to the financial difficulties they moved back to London in 1822, where they settled in Camden Town, a poor neighborhood of London.

The defining moment of Dickens's life occurred when he was 12 years old. His father, who had a difficult time managing money and was constantly in debt, was imprisoned in the Marshalsea debtor's prison in 1824. Because of this, Charles was withdrawn from school and forced to work in a warehouse that handled 'blacking' or shoe polish to help support the family. This experience left profound psychological and sociological effects on Charles.

In 1833 Dickens began to contribute short stories and essays to periodicals. The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club was published in monthly parts from April 1836 to November 1837. Pickwick became one of the most popular works of the time, continuing to be so after it was published in book form in 1837. After the success of Pickwick Dickens embarked on a full-time career as a novelist, producing work of increasing complexity at an incredible rate: *Oliver Twist* (1837-39), *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838-39), *The Old Curiosity Shop* and *Barnaby Rudge* as part of the Master Humphrey's Clock series (1840-41), all being published in monthly instalments before being made into books.

Dickens's series of five Christmas Books were published starting in 1843 with *A Christmas Carol*, followed by *The Chimes* (1844), *The Cricket on the Hearth* (1845), *The Battle of Life* (1846), and *The Haunted Man* (1848). In 1858 Dickens began a series of paid readings, which became instantly popular. In all, Dickens performed more than 400 times. In the closing years of his life Dickens worsened his declining health by pushing himself to give numerous readings. During his readings in 1869 he collapsed, showing symptoms of mild stroke. He retreated to Gad's Hill and began to work on *Edwin Drood*, which was never completed. Charles Dickens died at home on June 9, 1870 after suffering a stroke. Contrary to his wish to be buried in Rochester Cathedral, he was buried in the Poets' Corner of Westminster Abbey.

#### Discussion Questions, Facts, and Activities

1. What do you think of the first few paragraphs of the story? Especially Dickens' choice of language such as, "Old Marley was as dead as a door-nail. Mind! I don't mean to say that I know...what there is particularly dead about a door-nail."?  
What sort of tone is Dickens setting? For those who read *The Turn of the Screw* consider how very different the two stories are particularly in terms of their tone or mood.
2. There are seemingly countless adaptations of *A Christmas Carol* out there at this point. Do you have a favourite version of the story? If so, why is it your favourite?
  - a. The original text by Dickens
  - b. Muppet's Christmas Carol
  - c. Scrooge, the 1951 film with Alistair Sims
  - d. Neil Gaiman's reading at the New York Public Library

- e. The 2009 film adaptation featuring Jim Carrey
- f. Something else? Please share!

3. For a special treat, listen to the 2013 recording of Neil Gaiman's spirited performance of A Christmas Carol at the New York Public Library: [www.nypl.org/blog/2014/12/19/podcast-neil-gaiman-christmas](http://www.nypl.org/blog/2014/12/19/podcast-neil-gaiman-christmas).

Gaiman used Dickens' only surviving "prompt" copy of the book. Rather than simply read extracts from his stories, Dickens loved to perform them—so he created a special version of A Christmas Carol for exactly that purpose. He tore the pages out of an original book, and stuck them into a new, large leafed, blank paged book. Then he filleted the text, cutting out descriptive scenes to create a performance script. He added stage directions for himself all over the text. Such an annotated copy is called a prompt copy. Dickens spent decades taking his A Christmas Carol act on the road.

I think Gaiman does an amazing job channeling Dickens' spirit in his lively reading, and I personally love listening to this recording every year!

4. Every culture – and, it seems, every family – has traditions for that time of the year when the sun grows weak, when so much of the living world can seem at rest, when a little warmth around the hearth is especially welcome.

I've heard of families reading A Christmas Carol aloud, together, every December, and I know one personally that recites the entirety of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight every Christmas Eve (or so they claim). I know of people who, for holiday gifts, exchange books and books only (gift cards verboten). My cousin watches the first Die Hard movie every chance he gets, and somehow packages Star Wars into annual holiday viewings.

Do you have winter holiday traditions? Bookish or otherwise?

5. Apart from being fantastically entertaining and heartwarming, A Christmas Carol is full of inspirational messages. Which is your favorite take-away message?
- a. Getting into the spirit of the holidays does ourselves and society so much good, so put aside your troubles and get into the spirit!
  - b. Be generous and kind to everyone because we are more alike than different and are all "fellow passengers to the grave"
  - c. It's never too late to change, Scrooge is overwhelmed with joy and energy after his change of heart
  - d. The greatest source of our own happiness is making others happy
  - e. Other? Have we missed a good one?
6. Here's a fun fact for you! On reading days, Dickens would drink two tablespoons of rum mixed with cream for breakfast, a pint of champagne for tea and, half an hour before he went on stage, he would knock back a sherry with a raw egg beaten into it. During the interval of his reading he would sip beef tea, and at bedtime he'd have a bowl of soup (from [www.mentalfloss.com/article/54245/10-things-you-might-not-know-about-christmas-carol](http://www.mentalfloss.com/article/54245/10-things-you-might-not-know-about-christmas-carol)). That's quite the ritual!
7. As well as being entertaining and heartwarming, A Christmas Carol is very political. Do you think Dickens succeeds in influencing readers to care about improving poverty? Which part of the story do you think he does this most effectively? Which part moves you the most when considering the plight of the poor?
8. British newspapers in 1844 attributed a spike in Christmastime charitable donations to the popularity of Dickens' novella. While giving to the needy wasn't a new concept at Christmas time, it seems that Dickens' book inspired

many people— especially the nouveau riche of the industrial revolution— to dramatically increase their generosity. (from [www.redlandssymphony.com/dickens-christmas-carol-facts](http://www.redlandssymphony.com/dickens-christmas-carol-facts))

**Readalikes:**

The deal of a lifetime & other stories / Fredrik Backman ; translated by Alice Menzies & Vanja Vinter

<https://bit.ly/3FNOVud>

The ghost of Christmas past / Rhys Bowen <https://bit.ly/3cLWrcz>

One who saw: a ghost story for Christmas / A. M. Burrage; designed and decorated by Seth <https://bit.ly/3DOGcqu>

A Redbird Christmas: a novel / Fannie Flagg <https://bit.ly/3CNhdmB>

The afterlife of Holly Chase / Cynthia Hand <https://bit.ly/3kIKOrp>

The Shepherd and other Christmas Stories / Alan Maitland <https://bit.ly/3oEgqiK>

Half spent was the night: a witches' yuletide / Ami McKay <https://bit.ly/3CREI3m>

Ghosts at Christmas / Darren Ritson <https://bit.ly/3kUxBMf>

A little Christmas spirit / Sheila Roberts <https://bit.ly/3CLYmZi>

Supernatural Christmas ghost stories / Barbara Smith <https://bit.ly/3DGapZe>