

Finding meaning in A Christmas Carol

As the Christmas season approaches, people around the Archdiocese of Baltimore are feeling the sting of Ebenezer Scrooge's words, "Bah humbug!" once again.

Charles Dickens' novella "A Christmas Carol," made the miser's catchphrase part of popular lexicon when it was published in 1843.

Since then, countless adaptations have been staged as plays. Movies and television versions have been filmed and it has been recorded for radio.

Even the Muppets and Mickey Mouse have chipped in with their own take on the story.

The story's been translated so much, people can finish Tiny Tim's "God bless us, every one," before the sick boy closes the story.

"They're all generally quite good," said Brian Murray, a professor of writing at Loyola University Maryland in Baltimore. "You can't go wrong with the story. It's the pleasure of the familiar now. You enjoy knowing precisely how it's going to end. People like to see how Jim Carrey or Alastair Sim are going to play those parts."

A Christmas Carol is, outside of the birth of Jesus Christ, the most re-told Christmas-themed story. Yet, as Murray noted, there are few mentions of Jesus or Christianity in Dickens' book.

Murray is an expert on the author and wrote a book called "The Bedside, Bathtub & Armchair Companion to Dickens"

"None of his characters are explicitly Christian," Murray said. "It's a story of secular redemption. The story shows how mortal and how miserable (Scrooge) is. The only way he is renewed is by reconnecting with the community."

Still, Murray said, the characters that dominate the story's landscape are imbued with Christian values.

“The story has this appeal to the idea of doing right and being generous, kind and merciful,” Murray said.

The latest Hollywood version is a motion capture animated film that was released to theaters in early November in various visual formats.

It is playing on the Maryland Science Center’s five-story IMAX screens in 3-D.

The result is an immersive experience where residents of 19th-century London emerge like a pop-up book and ghosts hover above. Moviegoers can hear the clanking of Jacob Markley’s chains in 38 digital speakers.

“If you suspend your disbelief with 3-D glasses, with our surround sound and screen, you do get the feeling you’re in the movie itself,” said Chris Copper, senior marketing director of the Science Center.

During its first week, Copper said the movie averaged about 200 people a show, while the auditorium has a capacity of 330.

The odds are also good that a person can stay home and watch a marathon of movie versions on television in the next few weeks.

Americans and Christians, Murray said, are drawn to the idea of an individual finding the good within.

“(Scrooge) doesn’t join a political party,” Murray said. “He changes his heart. It’s the thought that that if everyone’s heart changes, it will make everyone better.”