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Professor: The Enduring Appeal Of Dickens At Christmastime

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DURHAM, N.H. – This year, another movie based on Charles Dickens’ “A Christmas Carol” hit the theaters, the latest in a long list of film, television, and opera adaptations of the popular novel. Why does the Victorian-era author have such enduring appeal, particularly at Christmastime?

According to James Krasner, professor of English and British literature at the University of New Hampshire, “A Christmas Carol” still appeals to Americans because we still share its values and anxiety of balancing giving and generosity with materialism and consumer culture.

“The descriptions of shopping in the novel are a lot like the experience of going to the mall during the Christmas season, and everybody wants their Christmas dinner to have the same mix of excitement and sweetness that the Cratchets’ does,” Krasner says.

Published in 1843, “A Christmas Carol” tells the tale of greedy Ebenezer Scrooge and his transformation after being visited by four ghosts on Christmas Eve. Considered an indictment of 19th century industrial capitalism, the novel tells how Scrooge becomes compassionate and generous toward others, embracing the “true spirit of Christmas.”

“Dickens was trying to convince people who had just moved from the countryside to the sooty, crowded, crime-ridden, sewage-soaked nightmare that was the Victorian city that Christmas could still work in a capitalist industrial society. So he emphasized what was good about the city -- lots of ‘stuff.’ Great products to buy, lots of people having fun, shopping and celebrating,” Krasner says.

“Dickens was arguing what we now believe, which is that gift giving, with all the hysteria attached to it, is at the center of the Christmas season. Scrooge is the bad guy because he won’t spend money and buy gifts,” he says.

Americans also share the anxiety about materialism that “A Christmas Carol” tries to address. “If you don’t buy anybody presents you’re, well, a Scrooge. Look at all our Christmas specials -- the Grinch, Charlie Brown, A Christmas Story -- they all try to help us figure out how honest family emotion and the lust for toys can somehow go hand in hand,” Krasner says.

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PHOTO
James Krasner, professor of English and British literature at the University of New Hampshire
http://www.unh.edu/news/img/Krasner.jpg

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