



English Learning for Curious Minds



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Episode #011

The Book That Made Christmas, Christmas

December 24, 2019



[00:00:02] Hello, hello, hello, and welcome to the English Learning For Curious Minds podcast by Leonardo English with me, Alastair Budge.

[00:00:11] If you're a new listener and hey, this is only the 11th episode we've ever done, so everyone is kind of new, then welcome.

[00:00:19] The good news is that you only have a back catalogue of 10 episodes before you've listened to every podcast we've ever made.

[00:00:28] And to those returning listeners, welcome back. It's great to have you, and thanks for supporting the podcast.

[00:00:35] This is just a very quick reminder, as always, for the most serious of English learners among you, that you can get a copy of the transcript and key vocabulary for the podcast over on the website, which is leonardoenglish.com.

[00:00:50] Okay, it's the 24th of December today, so that means it's just a day until Christmas.



The Book That Made Christmas, Christmas

[00:00:58] I'm currently in Trieste in Italy with our two month old baby. I'm definitely more excited than he is right now, but I [dare say](#)¹ that next year the [tables may be turned](#)².

[00:01:10] Anyway, enough about me.

[00:01:12] Today I am going to tell you the story of the book that made Christmas, or rather a book that has been [instrumental](#)³ in making our current understanding of Christmas what it is today.

[00:01:26] There are of course, plenty of books that have been written that have had an enduring impact on the cultures we live in.

[00:01:35] The religious texts, of course, but even things like Aesop's fables, the Grapes of Wrath, 1939, they've all had a [enduring](#)⁴ cultural impact on the English speaking world and [further afield](#)⁵.

[00:01:50] But today we are going to be talking about another book.

[00:01:54] It's a Christmas Carol by Charles Dickens.

[00:01:58] It is, if you haven't read it, a fantastic story, and depending on your level of English, you could even try reading it in the original, in English.

[00:02:09] It's only a hundred pages or so. Although it was written almost 200 years ago, much of the language isn't actually too complicated.

¹ used to indicate that one believes something is probable

² things may be different

³ very important

⁴ long lasting

⁵ in places or areas other than the nearest or most obvious one



The Book That Made Christmas, Christmas

[00:02:18] Otherwise, just read it in translation. Nobody should judge you for that.

[00:02:22] A Christmas Carol is a book that has had a huge impact on the modern idea of Christmas, not just in Great Britain, but in large parts of the Western world.

[00:02:34] When Dickens wrote it in 1843, of course, he didn't know that it would have this kind of impact, although he was hopeful that it would have a positive impact on how we think about Christmas.

[00:02:48] He wrote the book pretty quickly, apparently in six weeks. It was then self-published because his publisher couldn't actually meet the strict deadline that he was working to.

[00:03:01] He printed 6,000 copies and it was completely sold out by Christmas Eve, on this very day, 176 years ago.

[00:03:09] 6,000 copies might not sound like a lot in the days of Amazon and the Internet, but back in 1843 that was pretty impressive.

[00:03:20] Before a Christmas Carol, there wasn't really a common [consensus](#)⁶ about Christmas, there wasn't really a set of common traditions.

[00:03:30] For many of you, you will have grown up in countries where for as long as you've been around, Christmas has always been celebrated but it wasn't always like this. Not at all.

[00:03:40] Christmas hasn't actually always been celebrated at all.

[00:03:45] Indeed in the 17th century celebrating Christmas was banned in Great Britain as the Presbyterian church, the [puritanical](#)⁷ branch of the church in Great Britain at the

⁶ a general agreement

⁷ having or displaying a very strict moral attitude towards self-indulgence or sex



The Book That Made Christmas, Christmas

time declared that the Bible said you could only celebrate the [Sabbath](#)⁸, not any other Holy days.

[00:04:06] And when the Europeans [headed off](#)⁹ to America - and remember, it was the most [puritanical](#) of the lot, the most [puritanical](#) of the Europeans who went first - they took with them this Puritan or Presbyterian belief that only the Sabbath, only Sunday should be celebrated.

[00:04:25] And it wasn't until the 18th century that they accepted that Christmas could be celebrated as a day.

[00:04:32] There was this feeling that celebration or festivity was [inherently](#)¹⁰ [sinful](#)¹¹ and associated with [degenerate](#)¹² Catholic habits. And even now, some Presbyterians, some real Puritans, especially in the North of Scotland are [reluctant](#)¹³ to celebrate Christmas [wholeheartedly](#)¹⁴.

[00:04:51] In any case, by the 18th Century or so, there were so many different interpretations of Christmas and how it should be celebrated that there was no common, no [underlying](#)¹⁵ consensus about what Christmas meant, or how it should be celebrated,

⁸ (in Christian traditions) Sunday

⁹ Left, set sail

¹⁰ in a permanent, essential, or characteristic way

¹¹ wicked and immoral; committing or characterized by the committing of sins

¹² having lost the physical, mental, or moral qualities considered normal and desirable; showing evidence of decline

¹³ not willing, not wanting to do

¹⁴ showing or characterized by complete sincerity and commitment

¹⁵ fundamental, core



The Book That Made Christmas, Christmas

[00:05:06] So when a Christmas Carol was published 176 years ago it painted such a [vivid¹⁶](#), such a ideal picture of Christmas that it was immediately [seized upon¹⁷](#) by the general population and became the basis for a lot of the traditions that we now take part in today, and that you may even be taking part in now, literally.

[00:05:31] Before we go into exactly what these traditions are I'll just [recap¹⁸](#) on the story of A Christmas Carol, for those of you who haven't read it.

[00:05:42] The central character of the book is a mean spirited, selfish, old man, Ebenezer Scrooge who just hates Christmas .

[00:05:53] He is described as a [squeezing¹⁹](#), [wrenching²⁰](#), [grasping²¹](#), [scraping²²](#), [clutching²³](#), [covetous²⁴](#) [old sinner²⁵](#).

[00:06:03] Don't worry if you don't understand all of those words, it could be summarised by saying that he is nasty and selfish.

[00:06:11] One cold Christmas Eve, Scrooge is nasty and mean to his employees.

¹⁶ very powerful or strong

¹⁷ taken up by, adopted quickly

¹⁸ remind, go over again

¹⁹ pressing with your fingers

²⁰ pulling or twisting suddenly

²¹ avaricious; greedy

²² dragging or pulling

²³ trying to grab or take (something)

²⁴ jealous, wanting to possess something that belongs to someone else

²⁵ someone who sins



The Book That Made Christmas, Christmas

[00:06:17] Two men knock on his door asking for charity for the poor, and he refuses them.

[00:06:23] He is then rude to his nephew Fred, who invites him to spend Christmas together.

[00:06:29] And then when Scrooge gets home, he is visited by the ghost of his old business partner, Jacob Marley. The spirit, the ghost, of his old business partner as a punishment for his greedy and [self-serving](#)²⁶ life has been condemned to wander the earth weighed down with heavy chains.

[00:06:51] Marley said he is trying to save Scrooge from the same terrible [fate](#)²⁷ that has [befallen](#)²⁸ him.

[00:06:58] He tells Scrooge that he will be visited by three different ghosts over the course of the next three nights.

[00:07:06] They are the ghost of Christmas past, the ghost of Christmas present and the ghost of Christmas future.

[00:07:14] And sure enough, over the next three nights, these ghosts do visit Scrooge.

[00:07:20] The ghost of Christmas past takes Scrooge on a journey through Christmases from his past where Scrooge sees himself as an unhappy child and a young man more in love with money than his fiancée.

[00:07:34] The ghost of Christmas present takes Scrooge to see his employee, Bob Cratchit, at home with his family.

²⁶ only caring about themselves

²⁷ destiny

²⁸ happened to



The Book That Made Christmas, Christmas

[00:07:43] At Bob Cratchit's house, Scrooge sees Bob Cratchit's son, a small little boy called Tiny Tim, who's very ill, almost [paralysed](#)²⁹, but still happy, positive and full of Christmas spirit.

[00:08:00] The ghost then takes Scrooge to see his nephew, Fred's Christmas celebrations, which he had been invited to, but rejected with the [infamous](#)³⁰ phrase, 'bah, humbug'.

[00:08:13] Finally, the ghost of Christmas future shows Scrooge visions of his own death.

[00:08:19] Scrooge is terrified and begs the ghost to [alter](#)³¹ his [fate](#)³², promising that he will change his ways, saying he will honour Christmas and be full of Christmas spirit.

[00:08:32] And sure enough, he does keep his promise.

[00:08:34] When he wakes up on Christmas day, he is full of excitement and buys the biggest turkey in the shop for the Cratchit family before spending the day with his nephew, full of renewed joys of Christmas.

[00:08:48] So in the end, it's a happy story with Scrooge realising the error of his ways.

[00:08:54] But how did this one story have such a large cultural impact and help define what we understand as Christmas today?

[00:09:02] As I said, there are elements of the story that immediately [resonated](#) with people at the time and have now just been adopted into people's understanding of what Christmas is.

²⁹ (of a person or part of the body) partly or wholly incapable of movement; disabled

³⁰ well known for some bad quality or deed

³¹ change

³² (of an idea or action) meet with agreement



The Book That Made Christmas, Christmas

[00:09:15] Firstly, the association of Christmas with the ideas of charity, compassion, and kindness.

[00:09:22] Dickens, the author, was deeply troubled by the working conditions for the poor in Victorian Britain, which were [utterly³³](#) [horrific³⁴](#).

[00:09:31] The story highlighted that Christmas had lost its former purpose, that of charity and kindness towards those less fortunate than us.

[00:09:40] The publication of a Christmas Carol was a sort of [rallying call³⁵](#) for the rich to take better care of the poor, to have more compassion towards those less fortunate than them.

[00:09:54] I'm by no means saying that today the world is equal and we've fixed all of this, of course, far from it, but the fact that most people associate Christmas with some sort of charity and compassion is largely thanks to Dickens and A Christmas Carol.

[00:10:11] Also from a visual point of view, the picture of Christmas that you might imagine, of a table with lots of food on, a Christmas tree, snow and presents, these images are all central to A Christmas Carol and are still now 176 years later, the basis of how a lot of us imagine Christmas.

[00:10:33] I guess if I asked you to close your eyes and imagine what a Christmas scene might look like, it might look something like that.

[00:10:42] Thirdly, from a linguistic point of view A Christmas Carol has left a lasting impact on the English language .

³³ very

³⁴ terrible, horrible

³⁵ something such as a word, phrase, event, or belief that encourages people to unite and to act in support of a particular group or idea



The Book That Made Christmas, Christmas

[00:10:51] The phrase Merry Christmas had been in use since the 16th century, but it was [stamped](#)³⁶ in people's minds after appearing in A Christmas Carol.

[00:11:01] Merry Christmas is now the traditional way to greet people on Christmas, although of course, Happy Christmas works as well.

[00:11:09] A Scrooge, remember that's the main character from the book, so a Scrooge is someone who is mean who doesn't want to celebrate, and normally someone who is overly tight with money too.

[00:11:20] And a Tiny Tim, the poor [crippled](#)³⁷ child in the book has become another way to refer to [vulnerable](#)³⁸ innocent people, normally children, normally a child.

[00:11:33] Even though it was such a [smash hit](#)³⁹ of a book, Dickens didn't really make any money from it. He published it himself, as I said, to a very high standard, so it was very expensive to produce, and then he sold it very cheaply to make it accessible to the poor.

[00:11:51] But it was such a hit, and Charles Dickens became [inexorably](#)⁴⁰ linked to Christmas in people's imaginations.

[00:11:58] So much so that it's reported that in 1870 when Dickens died, a young girl in London said, Mr Dickens, dead? Then will Father Christmas die too?

³⁶ imprinted, marked on

³⁷ disabled, crippled

³⁸ (of a person) in need of special care, support, or protection because of age, disability, or risk of abuse or neglect

³⁹ an overnight success

⁴⁰ in a way that is impossible to stop or prevent



The Book That Made Christmas, Christmas

[00:12:11] Okay. I hope you will forgive my impression of a young girl in London in 1870 but that is what was supposedly said.

[00:12:19] Luckily, Father Christmas didn't die with Dickens, and I dare say that he may be visiting some of you, or I guess probably more likely your children tonight.

[00:12:30] We've just got time to talk about one last Christmas tradition, and this actually isn't directly related to a Christmas Carol, but did happen at exactly the same time.

[00:12:42] You might not know that the Christmas card, which perhaps you've been sending and have received this year was only invented in 1843, the same year that a Christmas Carol was published.

[00:12:54] Previously, people used to write long letters to each other at Christmas and one [frantically](#)⁴¹ busy [civil servant](#)⁴² Henry Cole, who didn't have time to write a mountain of letters, had a thousand cards printed and those he didn't need, he made them available for sale.

[00:13:11] Immediately this trend [caught on](#)⁴³ as people liked the simplicity of it and the fact that they were prettier than a letter.

[00:13:19] Now imagine , many people now might not even send Christmas cards because they say they don't have enough time and they were invented as a time-saving measure. Well, I hope that you have an absolutely fantastic Christmas or a very Merry Christmas, I should say, and if you want some holiday reading and you feel in need of some Christmas cheer, then you could definitely give A Christmas Carol [a shot](#)⁴⁴.

⁴¹ in a distraught way owing to fear, anxiety, or other emotion

⁴² government employee, bureaucrat

⁴³ become fashionable

⁴⁴ try, attempt



[00:13:43] I saw it's actually available on Amazon Kindle for 50p and it's just a hundred pages long.

[00:13:50] As always, I hope you've enjoyed the show. If you're feeling the Christmas spirit and wanting to do a good [deed](#)⁴⁵ to the English Learning for Curious Minds podcast, then why not leave a review of the show? Each review helps more people find out about it and will leave me with some Christmas cheer.

[00:14:07] You've been listening to the English Learning For Curious Minds podcast by Leonardo English. I'm Alastair Budge and I'll catch you in the next episode.

[00:14:16] And once again, Merry Christmas.

[END OF PODCAST]

⁴⁵ act or action



Key vocabulary

<u>Word</u>	<u>Definition</u>
Dare say	used to indicate that one believes something is probable
Tables may be turned	things may be different
Instrumental	very important
Enduring	long lasting
Further afield	in places or areas other than the nearest or most obvious one
Consensus	a general agreement
Puritanical	having or displaying a very strict moral attitude towards self-indulgence or sex
Sabbath	(in Christian traditions) Sunday
Headed off	Left, set sail
Inherently	in a permanent, essential, or characteristic way
Sinful	wicked and immoral; committing or characterized by the committing of sins
Degenerate	having lost the physical, mental, or moral qualities considered normal and desirable; showing evidence of decline
Reluctant	not willing, not wanting to do
Wholeheartedly	showing or characterized by complete sincerity and commitment
Underlying	fundamental, core



The Book That Made Christmas, Christmas

Vivid	very powerful or strong
Seized upon	taken up by, adopted quickly
Recap	remind, go over again
Squeezing	pressing with your fingers
Wrenching	pulling or twisting suddenly
Grasping	avaricious; greedy
Scraping	dragging or pulling
Clutching	trying to grab or take (something)
Covetous	jealous, wanting to possess something that belongs to someone else
Sinner	someone who sins
Self-serving	only caring about themselves
Fate	destiny
Befallen	happened to
Paralysed	(of a person or part of the body) partly or wholly incapable of movement; disabled
Infamous	well known for some bad quality or deed
Alter	change
Resonated	(of an idea or action) meet with agreement



The Book That Made Christmas, Christmas

Utterly	very
Horrific	terrible, horrible
Rallying call	something such as a word, phrase, event, or belief that encourages people to unite and to act in support of a particular group or idea
Stamped	imprinted, marked on
Crippled	disabled, crippled
Vulnerable	(of a person) in need of special care, support, or protection because of age, disability, or risk of abuse or neglect
Smash hit	an overnight success
Inexorably	in a way that is impossible to stop or prevent
Frantically	in a distraught way owing to fear, anxiety, or other emotion
Civil servant	government employee, bureaucrat
Caught on	become fashionable
(give) a shot	try, attempt
Deed	act or action

We'd love to get your feedback on this podcast.

What did you like? What could we do better?

What did you struggle to understand?



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