

Why Dickens Self-Published "A Christmas Carol" N. Hawthorne

Dickens wrote "A Christmas Carol" in six intense weeks. He was struggling for money - he had a large mortgage payment, his parents and siblings were asking for money, his wife was expecting their fifth child, and sales from his most recent novel, "Martin Chuzzlewit," were disappointing. He rushed through "A Christmas Carol" in time to get it printed for the holiday season, finished it in early December, wrote "The End" in huge letters, and underlined it three times.

Dickens was angry with his publisher over how little money he had made from "Martin Chuzzlewit," so he refused the lump-sum payment that his publisher offered for "A Christmas Carol." Instead, he decided to publish it himself. He oversaw every detail of the publication, and he had a very specific vision for the book: he wanted a gold-stamped cover, woodcuts, and four hand-colored etchings, a fancy binding, gilt-edged pages, title pages in red and green, and hand-colored green endpapers. He examined the first copies and decided that he didn't like them, after all - the green on the title pages was not bright enough, and the endpapers smudged. So he demanded a new version: red and blue title pages, and yellow endpapers. All the changes were made to Dickens's satisfaction by December 17th, two days before the book was to go on sale.

Dickens wanted as many people as possible to purchase the book, so he charged five shillings, and sure enough, it was a huge bestseller -the first edition of 6,000 copies sold out by Christmas Eve. By the following spring, the book had run through seven editions.

For even more of the "behind-the-pen" story, we wholeheartedly recommend Les Standiford's excellent "The Man Who Invented Christmas: How Charles Dickens's A Christmas Carol Rescued His Career and Revived Our Holiday Spirits." (Copyright © 2015, Writer's Almanac)