

THE HPLD ELF GIVES HOLIDAY ANSWERS!



High Plains Library District

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Wonder Play Bibliotecas Build Maktabadhu Make Read
 Experience. Laugh Explore Create Share Games
 Socialize Imagine Dream Connect Experience

**What do YOU have
 to SAY about our
 newsletter?**

What do you have to say about our newsletter? Think about this as our Letters to the Editor option. If you have something to say about our newsletter, head to mylibrary.us/letters to get your feedback in the right hands.

Rickets' Mailbag

As you may recall, I, Rickets, Santa's Library Elf, opened my mailbag to your questions, concerns, and snacks.

I received no snacks. So I, unlike the mail I received, am a bit salty.

BUT, I did get some good letters, questions from some of you who want to know little bit more about some HPLD stuff.

So let's get right to it:



Dear Rickets,

I like learning about the past, and I really like it when I find out some of those older things are still around today. Your name sounds old, so maybe you are an old dude and you can tell me what kids were reading a long time ago? Say, 100 years ago? Are any of those authors still read today? Are their books still in the library? How would I find out what sort of books the library had back then?

Yours truly,

Young Whippersnapper



Dear Young Whippersnapper,

So, you're a cheeky old soul, huh? I'll forgive your assumptions about my age (this time) because I too enjoy learning about things people were reading and doing 100 (or more) years ago. That's really easy to do if you [visit the Colorado Historic Newspapers Collection \(CHNC\) website](#) where you can find [all of the 1925 Greeley Daily Tribune newspapers digitized from the original print editions](#), which makes them easier to read (The originals are in the High Plains Library District's archive).

If you go to page 8 of the Greeley Daily Tribune for Saturday, December 12, 1925, you'll see a little article titled "Book News." It lists the new books in the Children's Library at the Greeley City Library. One of the titles is *Doctor Doolittle's Zoo* [sic], by Hugh Lofting. HPLD doesn't have that particular book anymore, but we still have several others by Lofting. Other authors mentioned whose works you can still find in our collections today are Enos Mills, Rudyard Kipling, and the Grimm Brothers. Oh, and look at the advertisement on page 3 for The McArthur Hardware Company to see if any of the toys children wanted then are still popular now.



I hope you have a great winter vacation, Young Whippersnapper. Maybe you'd like to visit the Greeley Daily Tribune pages on the CHNC website every day during your break to compare what's different and what's similar to how we celebrate holidays and spend our time now.

Happy Reading,

Rickets



Dear Rickets,

I'm wondering how do you publish a book?

Thanks,

Mary



Dear Mary,

First of all, I suppose this means you've finished a book, so CONGRATULATIONS on that!

I publish a book by writing one, picking up the phone and calling my boys at Penguin Random House. Santa has a direct line, which is tied to a red-and-white striped phone that sits under a dome of sugar glass. Or, at least, most times it sits under a sugar glass dome. Sometimes the coffee needs a little sweetening, and, you know, "sugar" glass isn't just a name.

But I'm guessing that you, not being a librarian elf who's plugged into the old elves' network at the big five publishers, probably need a bit more practical advice.

There are a few different paths that seem popular amongst authors, so let's do a quick overview.

The most traditional path is to start by getting some shorter pieces published in literary journals, magazines, or anthologies, and then using those successes to help you find representation or an "in" in the publishing industry.

A good place to find listings of contests and publications open to submission is [Poets and Writers magazine](#), which is available from HPLD! [You can also view these publishing opportunities on their website](#). In addition, they put out a Complete Guide to Being a Writer, which includes quite a bit of info on publication.

[The Grinder](#) is a website that lets you do a pretty good search for publishers that are open and accepting submissions. It's a great resource, especially for smaller

presses that might not make the cut for P&W.

You'll also see contests and submission windows for full novel manuscripts in P&W and The Grinder, so if that's what you've got, go for it!

One other word on traditional publishing: each publisher or contest will have different submission guidelines that may be as broad as word/page limits or as narrow as requiring certain fonts and file-naming styles. Pay close attention to these guidelines, it's just about guaranteed they won't even look at your manuscript if it appears you've ignored them.

Another route that's somewhat traditional is to try and get in touch with an agent and find someone to represent your book. An agent ends up being a good advocate for your book, provided they're interested in its publication (which usually means the agent thinks there's a decent-sized market for the book). If that sounds right for you, check out [Get Signed by Lucinda Halpern](#) for some practical steps.

Now, you may also be interested in self-publishing, so let's talk about that for a moment.

[Amazon](#) offers what is probably the simplest platform for self-publishing, both in digital and print formats. This isn't necessarily an endorsement of Amazon (it's a tenuous peace between Santa and Bezos at the moment), but it is genuinely pretty simple.

[Ingram Spark](#) is also a very popular place to create and distribute your books, both in print and digital formats.



Something to look for in self-publishing is whether the publisher offers print-on-demand services or whether you need to print, store, and distribute your own copies. With print-on-demand, your book goes onto online storefronts, and when someone buys your book, it's printed and shipped to the buyer. With the "inventory on hand" model, you would need to buy copies, list them on storefronts online, and then ship and send your own books. I would just caution you against ordering too many copies at once under this model. Many, many of us have boxes and boxes of copies of our novels sitting in a closet or a garage, so try and steer clear of any printers who have high minimums.

Whew, that's a lot, right? I'm going to need an extra afternoon coffee, probably sweetened by a good portion of sugar glass phone dome.

I just want to leave you with this: Publication and your

path really depend on your book and what you want to do with it. If your goal is to see that Random House logo on your book's spine, have Chip Kidd design the cover, and seat your book on the shelves at a bookstore, then you'll probably want to go the traditional route. If your goal is to see your work in print and have something to give to friends, family, and potentially a group of dedicated fans, self-publishing can be a great way to go.

Just remember that writing the book and getting it published are two very different things, so before you embark on publishing, decide what's important to you and how you'd prefer to spend your time.

And make a [Book-A-Librarian appointment](#) if you have questions, get stuck somewhere in the process, or would like to learn more.



Dear Rickets,

I'm a local resident and I recently wrote a picture children's book. I'm wondering if it's possible to get it into the library system.

From,

Judy



Dear Judy,

I'm going to assume this is not Judy Blume, because as we all know, Judy Blume is a proud Jerseyite who more recently splits her time between NYC and Key West, but if this IS Judy Blume and you're just lying about where you live, Yes. Just Yes.

If this is not Judy Blume, the answer is also a Yes, but it's a little more complicated. I mean, come on, when you write Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing, you get to enter through the side door. That's cosmically fair.

If you're a local author with a book that you'd like to see on the library's shelves, [just fill out our general comment form](#), and let us know about it.

Some things to include:

- The book's full title and your name (especially if you use a pen name)
- Links to any online listings where the book may be available (Amazon, Goodreads, etc.)
- Any other info about the book like the ISBN/ASIN, page count, stuff like that
- Let us know about available formats (ebook, print, audio, etc.)
- Please include that you're a local (we do prioritize local authors when we can)

• Tell us a little bit about the book, the audience it's for, brief synopsis, and so on

• If it's something we'd have to buy from you directly, please let us know what you'd like to charge per copy and whether that's a negotiable price (it DOES cost us a lot more to buy from individuals, we usually get a 40% discount from our distributor, plus we have to do some processing on your book, so just keep in mind that a negotiation here isn't an insult on the quality of your work!)

• If it's in other CO libraries (or elsewhere in the world), if you can link us to those listings, it makes it very easy for us to see where it may fit in the collection.

Overall, we love getting suggestions like this from local authors, so please send them in. Just remember: Rickets has promised nothing.

Yeesh, "Rickets has promised nothing,"? Kind of a bummer ending from Santa's Library Elf.





Spirits of the Season: *Reading Toward a Dark* *Academia Yuletide*

by Case Rasek
Library Associate and Library Page
Farr Regional Library

Dark, fogged streets. The rude glow of a tallow candle. Spectral robes flowing upon the termination of a church bell.

What is it about the icy, supernatural atmosphere of [Charles Dickens' A Christmas Carol](#) that makes it so delightful—even festive—to be scared?

Every year I read or watch an adaptation of Dickens' classic Yuletide tale. There's something so satisfying about listening to or imagining the sound of Marley's chains rattling out of a wine cellar and up old, creaky stairs, all while being cozily wrapped up in a flannel blanket on my

own couch in my own home. I crave it, as much as the sweets and Nutcracker ballets and glittery lights draped over trees at the park.

And it seems I'm not alone in this craving.

In recent years, a term has been floating around various social media platforms: Dark Academia Christmas. You probably know what I'm talking about: old-fashioned ornaments, real evergreens, natural materials, reading ancient, heavy books next to a yawning fireplace, candles instead of electric lights, the wind howling something fierce outside, preferably amidst a grove of snow-caked pines. Colors like dark emerald, ruby, and tarnished gold are heavily emphasized. Think: Christmas at Hogwarts, but mix in a touch more shadow, a pinch more quiet contemplation.

This aesthetic trend is not, in fact, an entirely modern creation. It stems directly from stories like *A Christmas Carol*, and it speaks to the abundance of night hours and cold weather that reign at this time of the year. And likely because of these natural phenomena, we've been telling Yuletide ghost stories for centuries. The Victorians in particular were obsessed with spirit tales and séances around Christmastime, especially in the wake of Dickens' dark creation.

During this period, it was customary to play games of Snapdragon on Christmas Eve, with a bowl of brandy and flaming raisins casting an eerie blue glow over the walls of the parlor. You might look into the faces of your company and feel a mixture of horror, awe, and amusement as their features transformed in the firelight from familiar to fey. For many, this was a time of shadows.

Indeed, several aspects and traditions of the holiday season, despite the era they originate from, seem to fall into one of two categories: either they celebrate the return of the light, or they revel in the darkness. For me, the holiday season has always been a kind of frosty extension of Halloween. And as the days grow shorter and darker, I tend to lean into that darkness instead of out of it.

So, I invite you: Put on your best pair of slippers, grab your woven blanket. Light a candle, if you must. The sun has just set beyond the mountains, and we're about to be visited by some spirits.

One of my favorite lesser-known Christmasy ghost stories is one that is mentioned in a chilling fragment of William Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. In the text, a character briefly describes the figure of Herne the Hunter, a spectral horseman with antlers who haunts Windsor Forest and is usually sighted during the winter near a specific oak tree.

With rattling chains and a malevolent penchant for turning cow's milk into blood, the ghastly spirit of Herne is the perfect catalyst for our Dark Yuletide journey. He embodies wintry terror. Scholars aren't actually sure whether Shakespeare created him or if, like so many other Shakespearean characters, his story was borrowed from



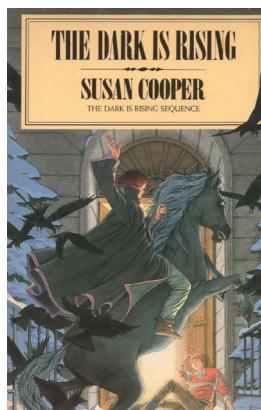
earlier folktales. Nevertheless, he haunts the text, only appearing in brief mentions and caricatured disguises.

Years later, popular folklore would transform this figure into a leader of the Wild Hunt, a spectral procession of mythological beings, hunters, and restless souls that raced across the skies during the dark nights between Christmas and Twelfth Night. If you were caught outside by the party, a number of unfortunate things were said to happen to you.

While the focus of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* may not be on the holiday season itself, the play's famous English setting is undoubtedly steeped in frosty, supernatural allure, and the mere mention of the ghostly hunter is enough to make the text Dark-Yuletide-adjacent in my mind, at least.

Shakespeare's enigmatic Herne also makes an appearance in the Newbery-Award-winning *The Dark Is Rising Sequence* by Susan Cooper, particularly in the titular second novel, which happens to take place during the Christmas season. The blanketing snow, biting temperatures, gleaming talismans, and darkly shrouded spirits have just the right amount of goth to make my macabre soul happy. But

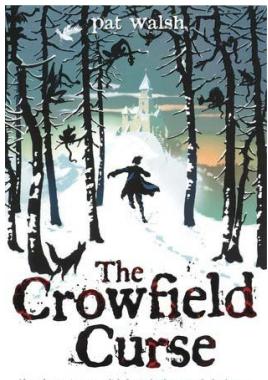
it's also a children's book at heart, and so there's a glint of warmth under the surface of these cold, hard things.



The Dark Is Rising is a book that's meant to be read as the days grow shorter and the cold deepens. It's the perfect Dark Christmas read, especially if you favor more of the mysterious supernatural bits with less of the scary stuff. And Susan Cooper is a beautiful writer. No matter what weather Colorado decides to throw at us, I can count on her prose to transport me into a mystical, wintry fairyland.

And while we're on the topic of children's books, I'll also mention

a few others that have been slowly infusing my soul with their Spooky Christmas magic for years:



snow.

The Snow Queen by Hans Christian Andersen—This story may be crowned with ice and sprinkled with reindeer, but be forewarned: This queen is no Elsa. Other elements, such as crows, robbers, shards of an evil mirror, devilish imps, and a flowery enchantress, combine to make this a dark yet entrancing Midwinter classic.

Books like these have been percolating in my brain for years, growing a whole mycelium of atmospheric Yuletide interconnectedness. And revisiting these favorites as an adult connects me back to that childlike wonder I experienced when first reading them. They make new impressions on my psyche, melding with my increased experience and expanded worldview to deepen the colors of the stories, sharpen their edges. In this way, it's like the stories grow along with me, and I think that's a sort of holiday gift in itself.

Now—back to the macabre.

It's time to dive right into the dark heart of winter. For at the center of Spooky Christmas is, of course, horror.

If you know anything about Krampus, Jólakötturinn, or the Mari Lwyd, you'll know that there exist several

The Rise of the Black Wolf by Derek Benz and J S Lewis—It's got an ancient Scottish castle bedecked with holiday decorations, shadowy villains from the realm of Faery, and even a Dracula cameo. What more could you ask for?

The Crowfield Curse by Pat Walsh—More of a winter read in general, this is the story of an abbey crippled by secrets. Between whispers and bare, twisted branches, something chilling is buried beneath the

Yuletide traditions around the world which fall quite short of cute and cozy. Many of these darkly entrancing parts of winter holiday festivities have inspired numerous stories and pieces of media over the years, such as some of those contained in the fiction collection, ***Christmas and Other Horrors: A Winter Solstice Anthology***, edited by Ellen Datlow. By turns chilling and fascinating, it's a must for those who are unfazed by all three of Scrooge's Spirits and seek something darker—a festive haunting that lingers.

Demons that devour naughty children, spectral horses that come knocking, bird-beaked house spirits with a fatal punishment for untidiness: These are just a few of the terrors contained within. And while I'm not much of a horror fan myself, I do enjoy learning about folklore and history. Both are on display here, sometimes in full force, other times lurking between the lines on the page.

So, fittingly, as we step out of the realm of the truly terrifying, we'll turn toward the academic—toward

literature and tightly scrawled manuscripts—to something you might find in an old, leatherbound book tucked into a corner of the shelf. It's a historical text: ***Sir Gawain and the Green Knight***.

The 2021 film adaptation of this tale is fantastic, but if you missed it, the original story is essentially about a mysterious, ghostly figure called the Green Knight who challenges one of King Arthur's men, Sir Gawain, to a violent duel. Some people might not call this a holiday story, but the symbolism is festive enough. The story begins with a feast and gift exchange during Christmastide (specifically on New Year's Eve), the Knight carries a holly branch, and Gawain later arrives at a duke's castle on Christmas Eve.

And it's in the cold, within the depths of the Green

Chapel, under the shadows of vines and leaves, a full year and a day later, that we find ourselves at the end of this Dark Christmas journey.

Your candle is sputtering. Night has lengthened. But though the air is thick with spirits, there's an undeniable calmness, too, gathered between the dark evergreens.

In these days of Black Friday blowout sales and endless



ugly sweater purchases, maybe reading about characters like the Green Knight, the Snow Queen, or even Herne the Hunter, allows us, for a moment, to quietly contemplate the fantastic. To let it indoors to sit down by the fireside with us, to fill us up to the brim of our wassailing cups with wonder and joy.

Dark Academia Christmas allows us to experience the holidays in their many layers—both the corporeal and the phantom. And this might be the reason why some of us are so enamored with A Christmas Carol and stories like it.

This feeling—the excitement begot of the chilly, the gothic, the supernatural—it's festive. Like slipping through a snowy Narnian woodland in winter, the White Witch close at your heels. You can almost feel the cold sting of her wand at your back, but somehow it makes the beaver's dam seem even warmer, even cozier.

parents would go to a Christmas party for work, and I'd have the whole evening to myself at home. I'd sit in the gloaming and listen to melancholy carols, singing along with improvised harmonies. Later, I'd stare out of the skylights at the white clouds swollen with the promise of a storm.

In those quiet moments, between flakes hitting the sill, I believed in everything. The harsh wind outside had a name, the Wild Hunt raged overhead, and the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come lurked just around the bend in the lane, no moon to catch its breath and spin it silver.

Slowly, softly, I'd crack a window, let the frosty air dance on my skin.

And never once reach for a light.

Did YOU have a great library experience? Like, ever?

If you're reading HPLD's newsletter, we're betting the answer is "Yes." Or possibly even "YES!"

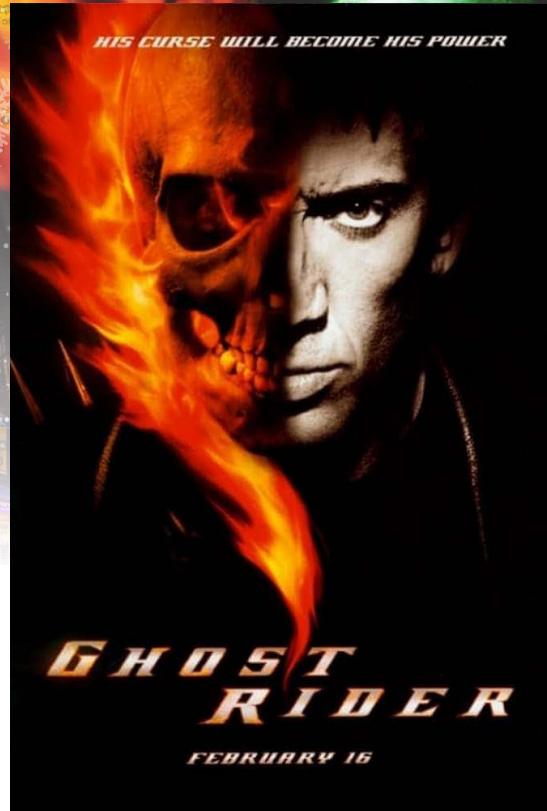
To let our staff know that they're having an impact in your community, we're proposing a quick letter-writing campaign. Write your favorite HPLD staff member a letter, and if they're up for it, we'll ask them to read it out loud for the first time on video. That way, they can see how much you appreciate them, and you can see how much your words mean to them!



Holiday Spirit of **VENGEANCE**

In this Cult Movie Vault Cagemas Edition, we are going with a movie protagonist who is warm (in a strictly objective sense), rides through the night, and who punishes those who have behaved poorly with a little coal in the stocking.

I'm talking about Ghost Rider, a demon who is probably TOO warm, routinely rides through the night, and definitely leaves coal in the stockings of



evildoers, charcoal that used to be their bodies, which have been burned down to cinders.

The Ghost Rider movies don't seem all that festive on the surface, and...you know what? I'm not even going to bother talking you into the idea that they are. Because they're not.

Sure, we could do the whole tenuous connection thing, the whole song and dance where

I try to convince you that a flaming skull man is more holiday-ish than you might think, but let's be real, I'm not buying it, and no amount of Black Friday discount is going to get you to buy it, either.

Maybe before we can get to the Cagemas, film-based portion of this ride, we need to take a little bit of a dive. Because it's not like most people know the origin of Ghost Rider. He's not like Spider-Man where we've seen the origin 5,000 times, where Uncle Ben is cursed to die thousands of deaths in order to facilitate what is honestly the greatest comic book character to ever exist (I mean, we ALL die, very few of us launch the career of a John Romita Jr., so at least his many deaths have meaning).

Let's go back a bit. Bit more. Waaaaay, okay, stop!

The (Chain)Swingin' 60s!

The first Ghost Rider was basically a masked cowboy, meting out justice on the high plains or whatever, and his name was quickly changed to Phantom Rider for reasons I don't fully understand.

We're not talking about that guy, even though he's been retconned to be a part of Ghost Rider lore.

What's a "retcon?" Well... you know how there's that one story your family always argues about, the one about how your family was late to the airport? And at first, the story was light on blame, but over the years, it's evolved to make you look more and more guilty to the point that now everyone blames you entirely, even though you're definitely not to blame because how is it your fault that Wendy's doesn't kick

over from breakfast to lunch until the EXACT MINUTE, and how are you supposed to make an airport trip without a ridin' burger?

When Ghost Rider roared into the pages of comics in Marvel Spotlight #5 in 1972, he continued the proud tradition of well-known characters not showing up first in books that bear their names, giving us comic nerds something to hold over everyone else's heads and occasionally a way to win a bar trivia question or two. "Um, actually, Wolverine did not first appear in Wolverine #1. And though it's popularly held that Wolverine first appeared in *Hulk #181*, he actually shows up in the very last panel of *Hulk #180*."

The previous couple of sentences were the headline for my online dating profile for a very long time until the app put in a character limit for headlines and also kicked me off, which they were right to do.

Marvel Spotlight #5 is a pretty great origin story in the bombastic Marvel style of the time: Johnny Blaze (not to be confused with Johnny Storm, who is the Human Torch and would make more sense to have "Blaze" in his name, but this is comics, you just have to live with some nonsense) is orphaned when his father dies doing a motorcycle stunt, and he's adopted by a family of circus performers who specialize in doing stuff with motorcycles, like that thing where they ride around in a big metal sphere, which really tells you a lot about human nature because for about 15 seconds, it's about the most incredible thing you've ever seen, and then for seconds 16 through 120, you are numbed to the danger and leave your seat to get nachos.

Blaze, through a series of convoluted events, refuses to ride in the circus, even though he's the best rider of all time, and when his adoptive father, Crash, contracts some kind of mystery disease, Johnny makes a deal with The Devil to cure Crash.

However, Crash doesn't know he's cured, and in a very metal version of the whole, "Seriously, you sold your hair? I just bought you this comb!" kind of thing, Crash decides to perform an incredibly dangerous stunt because he thinks he's dying and would rather go out doing a big jump as opposed to wasting away in a hospital bed. I say why not both, why not ramp Crash's hospital bed over a shark tank, but, hey, whatever.

Crash crashes during the stunt and dies (maybe we should've seen that coming, based on his name), and so The Devil comes to collect Johnny. However, through more convoluted stuff, The Devil can't just take Johnny's soul, so he crams a demon into him, which manifests as The Ghost Rider, and from then on, whenever there's evil afoot that The Devil wants punished, The Ghost Rider emerges.

Ghost Rider uses fire and a chain to, er, really beat people up with. His most comic-book-y power is The Penance Stare. When he makes eye contact with someone who's done wrong, he can force them to experience all the pain



and suffering they've inflicted on others, permanently damaging their souls.

Fun fact, True Believers: The only three to overcome The Penance Stare are Doctor Strange (who managed to recover from it because he's actually magic, not like Vegas stage magic), The Punisher (who experienced all the pain and suffering he caused others, was basically like, "Good, they deserved it," and just absolutely stunned Ghost Rider), and Me, because when I experienced The Penance Stare, I found it to be tamer than my own constant spiraling thoughts of entropy and bottom-barrel Nic Cage movies.

The mantle of Ghost Rider would stay pretty much the same and later be passed onto other people, a guy name [Danny Ketch](#), an alternate-universe [Space Punisher](#), some person named Alejandra Jones, and of course [Robbie Reyes](#), who has made several appearances in comics and on-screen and who I just can't get behind because Reyes is the first Ghost Rider to use a car instead of a motorcycle.

Third-hand, I heard that the scuttlebutt around Marvel was that "nobody wants to see the motorcycle anymore." If that's true, Marvel, if that's what your friends were all saying, get better friends. We yearn for the bike. Even if it's a Big Wheel, even if it's a penny farthing.

What's next, a sensible Toyota sedan? I mean, sure, the gas mileage is really good, it's a very low maintenance vehicle, but we want to see a Ghost RIDER, not a Ghost Commuter...although, hold the phone, maybe that's my pitch for Marvel...

Anyway, if you're looking for the best Ghost Rider comic, IMO, it's [Ghost Rider #35 from 1973](#)

in which Ghost Rider races against Death not once, not seventeen times, but thrice in order to save the lives of three different people.

And with that background and a bunch of my personal issues exposed, we can get to the movies.

[Ghost Rider \(2007\)](#)

Let me set the scene for superhero movies in 2007, because it's...not apocalyptic, but we were in a tough spot with high highs and abysmal lows.

In the years right around *Ghost Rider*, we had showings like *Batman Begins*, *Spider-Man 2*, *The Dark Knight*, and *Iron Man*.

Aaaaand we also had *Elektra*, *Blade Trinity*, *Spider-Man 3*, *Superman Returns*, and TWO *Fantastic 4* movies.

Ghost Rider kind of fits right in the middle, a sludgy, beige medium between the highs of *Spider-Man 2*, objectively the best superhero movie made to this day, don't @ me, I won't be taking any critiques, and the lows of Superman returning in a movie where the highlight is [Parker Posey being bored by all the stuff happening all around her. Which is kind of the highlight of every movie Parker Posey is in.](#)



Ghost Rider pretty much follows the basic plot of the comics: Stunt motorcycle guy sells his soul to The Devil, becomes anti-hero who looks really cool, fights demons of the literal variety, not of the "I'm really battling some demons right now" type that I experience when it's Sunday evening and I debate taking a right turn onto the highway and disappearing forever instead of returning to my keyboard on Monday morning.



The movie centers around Cage getting Ghost Rider powers, the creep from *American Beauty* being a demon or something, Cage beating him up, and also maybe there's a love subplot involving Eva Mendes because if she can marry someone as hideous as Ryan Gosling in real life, she can probably hang with a flaming skull man.

I kid, everyone. With Ryan Gosling's bone structure, he'd still be hotter than me as just a skull with eye sockets that somehow see into the dark depths of your soul.

Ghost Rider isn't without its charm, and it's fun when Ghost Rider is on screen.

Unfortunately, Ghost Rider is on screen for something

like 15 total minutes, which isn't nearly enough. There's a significant lack of Ghosting, Riding, and Ghost Riding. My favorite Nic Cage touch to Ghost Rider is his choice to have his character, Johnny Blaze, "drink" red and yellow jellybeans from a martini glass. This isn't really something that's discussed in the movie, he just does it, and we're left to assume everyone is like, "Geez, that's his fifth glass today, maybe we need to do an intervention, get Johnny off The Beans."

There are bits in here, moments of goodness. When Ghost Rider is riding alongside a cowboy Ghost Rider, who is atop a flaming skeleton horse, and the horse leaves flaming hoofprints on the desert floor, it's exactly the kind of delicious nonsense we crave.

But the movie commits the greatest sin of comic book movies: it's just a little bit boring. I think this may be the fault of writer/director Mark Stephen Johnson. You'd think the guy behind *Jack Frost*, the one where Michael Keaton dies and instead of turning into a Beetlejuice, becomes a sentient snowman, would be able to do a lot here, but maybe Johnson is more of a cold weather plots kind of guy. He did also make *Grumpy Old Men*, which looks so cold that I'm not entirely sure it wasn't a plot to try and kill off Walter Matthau. Matthau WAS hospitalized for something called "double pneumonia" after making the movie, and it'd never even occurred to me that you could have "double" pneumonia.

I like to pick a favorite thing from movies, even when I don't love them, and in this case, the clear choice is this Jackson Hewitt commercial, featuring Ghost Rider, in which Ghost Rider hands over a W-2 so that some guy can prepare his taxes, I guess? "Spirit of Vengeance" is kind of an awesome thing to put under "Occupation," I might have to consider it.

Ghost Rider: Spirit of Vengeance

When you make a sequel and start by cutting the budget and bringing on the directing team responsible for the *Crank movies*, you've really put me in a tight spot.

On the one hand, *Crank* probably has one of the goofiest action movie premises of all time, and I have a bit more faith in the team that brought us *Crank* than I do in the person who brought us *Grumpy Old Men*. I don't feel that statement requires any explanation.

On the other hand, going into a sequel with a halved budget is not a good sign by any stretch.

There are a couple scenes worth noting, like the part where Ghost Rider possesses a giant piece of mining equipment, basically turning it into a huge, flaming chainsaw, and there's a car chase sequence that's alright, but also kind of just makes you wish it'd been directed by George Miller and given us the *Fury Road* flavor this movie needed. But overall, the plot is a little overcomplicated and could use more flaming skeleton men doing the sorts of things flaming skeleton men do.

My favorite bit is a deleted scene which involves a character, essentially The Devil, renting a car. This is neither as funny nor as harrowing as you might expect, I just like it because I kind of imagine it's based on someone's real life frustrations while renting a vehicle, and I hope filming this allowed them to find peace.

After the non-success of the movie, Cage said he was out of the franchise, though he would've liked to see another movie with a female Ghost Rider. Which... when the character is a flaming skeleton, how could you even tell?

Eh, you know what? I say that before we worry about that, we call Parker Posey's people and see what we can work out here. You tell me Parker Posey is starring in *Ghost Rider 3: Blazing Chains of ReVengeance*, and there's going to be a commemorative popcorn bucket where you eat popcorn out of a flaming skull that's modeled on Parker Posey's actual head, I'm in!

Ghost Riding Into Holidays

I know, it's taken a moment to get around to the holidays, but we're here, we made it together.

Marvel, at some point, decided to put out Holiday Specials, comics anthologies of short, holiday-based stories.

And before we get to the Ghost Rider stories, a couple highlights:

There's one story wherein Punisher dresses as Santa with a spiked breastplate underneath his Santa suit in order to, well, Punish some guy who has apparently been suckerpunching Santas. Which is pretty low. Sometimes Punisher is a bit overzealous, but in this case, I think I'll let it slide.

Another is an action-packed Wolverine story, which we



eventually discover is a tale in the mind of a kid playing with a Wolverine action figure, which is not too far off from the genesis of many a Marvel yarn, I reckon.

We have a story where Doc Samson relates the history of Hannukah, but it goes off the rails and includes several superheroes and, at one point, Elvis.

And, of course, who could forget the holiday cheesefest of a story about Daredevil delivering a present, narrated by a tiny toy lamb? Even I, a noted Scrooge, feel a surge of holiday spirit when I read that one.

But amid X-Men shopping at the mall and loving renderings of Deathlok dragging Santa's sleigh through the snow, we get two different Ghost Rider stories.

In the first, some truly terrible people kidnap a child, who is blind, on Christmas Eve, really cementing themselves as true villains.

The kidnapped child calls out to Santa for help, and while Santa is busy at the moment, Ghost Rider happens by and rescues the kid.

The child, based on all senses other than sight, assumes Ghost Rider is Saint Nick.

Chains? No, no. Those must be jingle bells. Jingle bells that Santa uses to beat a man severely, but the jingles are audible above the man's screams.

How about the flames? Well, of course Santa is warm, what with the rosy cheeks.

And the sound of a motorcycle that's got flame for tires? Boy, the reindeer sure must be hungry. I can hear their tummies growl.

That one is a bit of a stretch, but it's hard to argue believability in the context of a story where there is a Ghost Rider.

In the end, the child is returned home, assumes he's had an encounter with Santa, which is probably for the best, and all is well.

There's a second Ghost Rider tale, this one from 1993's special, titled, "Harvey Teabiscuit's Yule Log."

Harvey is a lovable loser. He wakes up and is berated by his mother, then goes to work where his boss is a huge jerk, then Harvey catches Ghost Rider "dealing with" some bad guys, and Harvey is, understandably, terrified.

Of all the things to say about all the Ghost Rider stories, I would pose that Harvey Teabiscuit is the first person I noticed who, upon seeing Ghost Rider, had an appropriate reaction. How is Harvey Teabiscuit the only one who sees Ghost Rider and is shaken to the very core, his understanding of how the world works shattered?

Anyway, in the brief moment when the two locked eyes, Ghost Rider saw that Harvey was in need of avenging, sort of. I mean, Ghost Rider definitely extends some definitions, makes a few edits to his normal operations manual. I don't think being badmouthed by your boss typically makes the Ghost Rider vengeance list, seems more like a job for Ghost Commuter, but for Harvey, during the holidays, sure, why not?

Ghost Rider shows up at Harvey's office, scares the tailored slacks right off of Harvey's boss, and Harvey invites the rider over to have a Christmas drink. Whether a flaming skeleton is capable of drinking anything is unknown, but the story serves as a cautionary tale to bosses everywhere: Be nice to your staff, otherwise a flaming skeleton might show up at your office and make you feel like real trash.

~

And thus we've connected Cagemas, Ghost Rider, and the holiday season once more. Yes, it was a long way round, and, yes, it's about as tenuous as it gets, but if Ghost Rider has taught me anything, it's that perseverance against all odds is the path to greatness and a lucrative Jackson Hewitt endorsement deal.

Though I have to say, I wouldn't mind if next year's Cagemas felt a little less like penance and was a bit more straightforward.

Cage, my guy, would it KILL you to make a holiday movie?

What's that...I'm hearing now that the movie *Family Man* is a Christmas Cage film we've never talked about here, and it's been suggested multiple times for Cagemas.

Huh. Well, next year for sure. Probably. I'll just make a note here. Hmm, can't find my pen. Oh, well. Surely I'll remember.



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