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Frozen Tongues and BB Guns



In "A Christmas Story" (*back-to-back airings for 24 hours on TNT, December 24; see "10 Best Christmas Movies," page 44*), all 9-year-old Ralphie (Peter Billingsley, in glasses) wants for Christmas is an Official Red Ryder Carbine Action 200-Shot Range Model Air Rifle. Today, a kid his age might favor the hot new PlayStation game, but 15 years after its release, the film still has viewers howling.

"I think it has that timeless quality because it's real," says Jean Shepherd, who wrote the story on which the movie was based (it comes from his book *In God We Trust, All Others Pay Cash*). "It struck a chord," the 73-year-old author told TV Guide from his home on Sanibel Island, Florida. "Movies like 'It's a Wonderful Life' are fairy tales, and this isn't. MGM didn't even want to release it, it was so different. It was too real, and they didn't think kids would like it."

Dramatizing the blue-collar holiday story was a true labor of love for Shepherd, whose wife, Leigh Brown, cowrote the screenplay and was responsible for the memorable scene in which a kid gets his tongue stuck on the schoolyard flagpole. (Shepherd narrates the film, and he appears with Leigh in a cameo, waiting in line to see a department store Santa Claus.) "We were very proud of the movie," says Shepherd, whose wife of more than 20 years died last summer. "I don't watch it for 24 hours straight. But every year I watch it on TV. This year I'll watch it and lift a glass to Leigh." -S.M.