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Hallmark Christmas Con and The Frenzied, Festive Fandom of Made For TV Holiday Movies

One writers goes deep in the world of concentrated Christmas to find out why the love for TV holiday films just keeps growing.

By Madeleine Deliee DEC 2, 2019



HALLMARK

My sister-in-law loves Hallmark Christmas movies. She starts watching them in the fall and keeps right on going into the holiday season. My best friend loves them, too. She puts them on during the day, while she's doing housework, and appreciates that she can watch them without worrying about her kids' proximity to mature content. Neither of them thought it was very fair that I, someone who had never seen even

one of the many, many offerings, was attending the very first Christmas Con. What's that you ask? It's like ComicCon, but it's all Christmas, all Hallmark — all the time.

A quick visual: tinsel, lights, and greenery everywhere; holiday scents permeating the air; enough plaid to stun a lumberjack. There were a lot of ugly Christmas sweaters in attendance, which probably would have been true even without the official competition. It's Christmas concentrate, and my fellow attendees were gobbling it up -- glitter antlers, endless carols, and all.

The Convention sold out in October — well over 3,000 tickets to superfans eager to spend a weekend in the Edison, New Jersey at the New Jersey Convention and Exposition Center among others who share their enthusiasm for all things holiday movie.

Those present were mostly women, which isn't much of a surprise considering that during last year's Hallmark "Countdown to Christmas" — the nearly two-month-long period when the Hallmark family of channels rolls out all its holiday content — the network was the single most-watched in its time slot, cable or broadcast, for women 25-54. But there were also plenty of men in attendance and, while most of them were there with partners, they sure looked happy to be there in their festive attire.

Such an event — *and what an event it was* — might seem gratuitous, even for something so unapologetically kitschy as the genre of Made for TV movies, but what feels like a sudden outpouring of fanaticism centered on Christmas tree farms and women who discover their crush is royalty has been steadily building for a while.

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Hallmark debuted its first holiday movie in 2000, but it went all-in in 2011 when it launched the enormously popular "Countdown to Christmas." Since then, they've upped the amount of new entertainment each year and show no signs of slowing. Indeed, as popular as these movies are and as quickly as they're made — most cost about $2 million and are shot in about three weeks — there's plenty of growth opportunity (even if the Vancouver area, Hallmark's usual go-to location, is getting a bit pinched on quaint small towns to use). And other networks and streaming services have started to carve out their own piece of the Christmas TV pie.

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At ChristmasCon, one attendee confessed that, as much as she loves Hallmark movies, she watches all the other networks' offerings as well, because, really, there is no shortage of places to get your holiday movie fix. Hallmark is the frontrunner with 40 new viewing options this year, but Lifetime, Netflix, UPTv, and OWN have their entries, too, bringing the total to nearly 100 new movies in 2019.

Clearly, there's a huge demand. But I've never gotten the motive for the passion. As I stood there at the convention, watching people film *Mean Girls* alum Jonathan Bennett, host of *Cake Wars* and *Halloween Wars* — he also hosted the convention's *Gingerbread House Wars* — light the kick-off ceremonial Christmas tree, I wanted to know: Why do people love these movies so damn much?

Jonathan Bennett with attendees of the 2019 Christmas Con
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Turns out I'm not the only one asking this question; a team from the communication studies department at Brigham Young University was there to conduct research and collect data to find out what, exactly, drives the Hallmark movie mania. They won't plan to publish their findings until next year, but as we both explored the convention talking to attendees and talent alike, there were some answers to immediately unearth.

One convention attendee, Joanna Wilson, is the author of four holiday-related volumes, including *The Christmas TV Companion*. Due to her area of expertise, she's spent a lot of time thinking about holiday entertainment. Her work has led her to deduce that people like the feeling of stability during a season when — let's face it — we're not always feeling so stable. "Christmas is a time when we don't always have control over what happens, but as viewers, we can count on our Christmas TV movies including the happy ending we all desire," she says.

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When you consider the potential curve balls thrown at this time of year (family, finances, food allergies, etc.) is it any wonder that a clear and simple resolution to the low-stakes conflicts of holiday movies — an epic snowstorm forces high school classmates together to confront their feelings on Christmas Eve! We have to save the family candy cane company! — is appealing?

Dr. Stephanie Hartselle, associate professor of psychiatry at Brown University, sees a zeitgeisty need that goes beyond just the holidays.

“The news has always been predominantly focused on negativity, drawing on viewers' fears,” she says. “With social media and the near-constant onslaught of current events available to us, many people look for a break from it all.” Christmas movies provide a reliable respite from that “onslaught,” which might feel even more necessary when compounded with seasonally-related stress.

What was clear from the gathering in New Jersey was that, whatever the deep psychological reason, the merriment and brightness promised by these movies is a serious draw.

Tanja Franco, an Italian superfan, spent 16 hours in the air to be there. “I loved all the actors who were present [and] I love Christmas and its atmosphere,” she says.

My teenage heart betrays me for saying this, but sixteen hours of international flight is a lot of love for Jesse Metcalf, Melissa Joan Hart, and Chad Michael Murray; Franco purchased photo opportunities — posed individual pictures — and autographs with the actors, hoping that she’d have a chance to let them know personally how much their movies have meant to her.

Chad Michael Murray attends the 2019 Christmas Con at New Jersey Convention and Exposition Center
BOBBY BANK / GETTY IMAGES

That feeling of shared passion — more commonly associated with sci-fi geeks and events like Comic Con or *Star Wars* Celebration — is what motivated Jane Szabaga to create the Facebook group Christmas Con-versations in advance of the November event. Szabaga, a veteran of the *Doctor Who* fan-fest Gallifrey One, wanted people to meet beforehand to share their excitement and build support.

"I love the community that's involved," Szabaga says. "We all love the same thing and we're all here together. You have the freedom to enjoy what you love without judgment."

Szabaga knows her audience well; her blog, www.hallmarkforallseasons.com, is an offshoot she developed when interest in her Hallmark-related content drove views on her original space past 3,000 hits in October. The site features Hallmark movie Bingo

cards and, as a self-described "spreadsheet nerd," a detailed, evaluative ranking of every Hallmark movie she's watched.

Szabaga was also the wise woman who advised buying early for access to actor Ryan Paevey. "Bring earplugs," she said beforehand. "It's going to be like the Beatles." Why? "He has a rabid fan base," she explained; they're known collectively as the Paevey Pack and they are serious about being near their heartthrob. Szabaga attributes this to the actor's good looks, his soap opera resume, and the Jane Austen connection of his 2016 movie *Unleashing Mr. Darcy*.

"It's the trifecta of women's fantasy," she says.

Maybe it's all about the intersection of fantasy and security that brings people to these films season after season. You take romance, resolvable conflict, a reliable story, mix it up with some picture-perfect holiday magic (and an attractive cast) — and voila, it's the most wonderful time of the year.

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