

It's a Wonderful Life!



New Brunswick Rutgers alumnus, Philip Van Doren Stern, Class of 1924, was shaving one morning in the winter of 1938 and had an idea for a story. The author and publishing executive had fully formed a story in his mind about a despondent man who rejects suicide and embraces life after a mysterious stranger allows him to see **how the world would be had he never been born.**

It took Stern five years to develop a draft he felt comfortable sharing with his agent. After unsuccessfully shopping it around to magazines, he decided to self-publish the story, called ***The Greatest Gift***, and send it to 200 people as a 1943 Christmas card. A few months later, Stern received a telegram from Hollywood, announcing that his story had been sold for \$10,000.

Movie director Frank Capra's Liberty Films acquired the rights in 1945 and things really took off. Capra wrote, "It was the story I had been looking for all my life! Small town. A man, a good man, ambitious. But so busy helping others, life seems to pass him by ... Through the eyes of a guardian angel he sees the world as it would have been had he never been born." Capra approached Jimmy Stewart, who immediately signed on to play the lead, George Bailey, in what was now called ***It's a Wonderful Life***. The movie, which opened in December 1946 acknowledged Stern in the opening credits with the words: "Based on a story by Philip Van Doren Stern." The film went on to be nominated for five Academy Awards. Today it is an American classic.

The original story that inspired it all is still in print. Three editions of *The Greatest Gift* have been published: in 1944, in 1996, and the newest edition in 2011—a replica of the original version.

Philip Van Doren Stern died in 1984. He was a respected historian who authored more than 40 books, most Civil War accounts. Stern maintained close ties with his alma mater and helped to launch the Rutgers University Press in the late 1930s. In 1940, upon publication of what is probably his most highly regarded work, *The Life and Writings of Abraham Lincoln*, Stern received an honorary Doctor of Letters from Rutgers during a convocation held on Lincoln's birthday.