THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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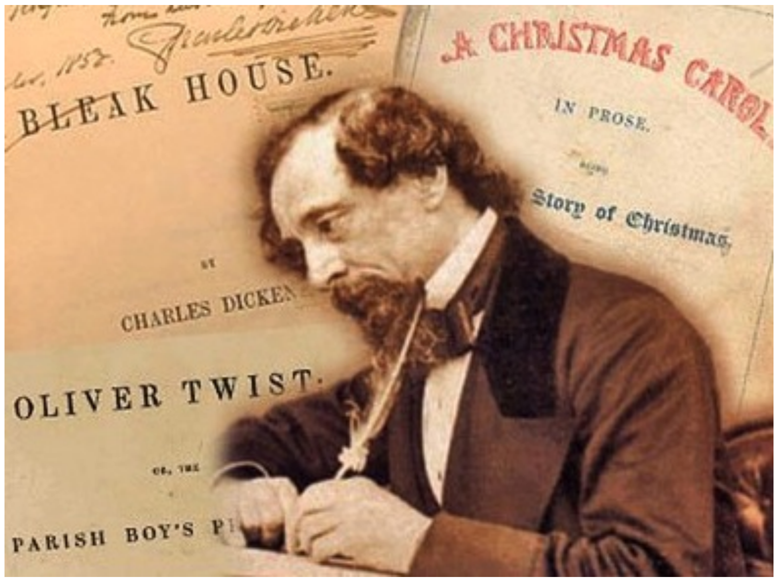

WHY ARE WE STILL READING DICKENS?

The great Victorian is probably even more ubiquitous now than he was in his lifetime. How he remains such vital reading is an intriguing question . . .

It seems that you cannot turn a corner this year without bumping into Charles Dickens. So far we've seen the release of four major novels based on the Victorian icon's life: Dan Simmons's *Drood* (February), Matthew Pearl's *The Last Dickens* (March), Richard Flanagan's *Wanting* (May), and Gaynor Arnold's *Girl in a Blue Dress* (July). Earlier this year BBC's lush new production of *Little Dorrit* was nominated for five Bafta awards in the UK, and 11 Emmys in the US. Newspapers and magazines have run stories on his relevance to the current global economic crisis. And with the Christmas season now only four months away, it seems that there is no getting away from him any time soon.

As someone who teaches and writes about Dickens, the question of why we still read him is something that's often on my mind. But that question was never more troubling than one day, nearly 10 years ago, when I was standing as a guest speaker in front of a class of about 30 high school students. I had been speaking for about 20 minutes with an 1850 copy of *David Copperfield* in my hand, telling the students that for Victorian readers, Dickens's writing was very much a "tune-in-next-week" type of thing that generated trends and crazes, much as their own TV shows did for them today.

Then a hand shot up in the middle of the room.

"But why should we still read this stuff?"

I was speechless because in that moment I realised that, though I had begun a PhD dissertation on Dickens, I had never pondered the question myself.

The answer I gave was acceptable: "Because he teaches you how to think," I said. But lots of writers can teach you how to think, and I knew that wasn't really the reason.

The question nagged me for years, and for years I told myself answers, but never with complete satisfaction. We read Dickens not just because he was a man of his own times, but because he was a man for our times as well. We read Dickens because his perception and investigation of the human psyche is deep, precise, and illuminating, and because he tells us things about ourselves by portraying personality traits and habits that might seem all too familiar. His messages about poverty and charity have travelled through decades, and we can learn from the experiences of his characters almost as easily as we can learn from our own experiences.

Shining a light on his audience ... Dickens giving a reading.

These are all wonderful reasons to read Dickens. But these are not exactly the reasons why I read Dickens.

My search for an answer continued but never with success, until one year the little flicker came – not surprisingly – from another high school student, whose essay I was reviewing for a writing contest. “We need to read Dickens’s novels,” she wrote, “because they tell us, in the grandest way possible, why we are what we are.”

There it was, like a perfectly formed pearl shucked from the dirty shell of my over-zealous efforts – an explanation so simple and beautiful that only a 15-year-old could have written it. I could add all of the decoration to the argument with my years of education – the pantheon of rich characters mirroring every personality type; the “universal themes” laid out in such meticulous and timeless detail; the dramas and the melodramas by which we recognise our own place in the Dickensian theatre – but the kernel of what I truly wanted to say had come from someone else. As is often the case in Dickens, the moment of realisation for the main character here was induced by the forthrightness of another party.

And who was I, that I needed to be told why I was what I was? Like most people, I think I knew who I was without knowing it. I was *Oliver Twist*, always wanting and asking for more. I was *Nicholas Nickleby*, the son of a dead man, incurably convinced that my father was watching me from beyond the grave. I was Esther Summerson, longing for a mother who had abandoned me long ago due to circumstances beyond her control. I was Pip in love with someone far beyond my reach. I was all of these characters, rewritten for another time and place, and I began to understand more about why I was who I was because Dickens had told me so much about human beings and human interaction.

There are still two or three Dickens novels that I haven’t actually read; but when the time is right I’ll pick them up and read them. I already know who it is I’ll meet in those novels – the Mr Micawbers, the Mrs Jellybys, the Ebenezer Scrooges, the Amy Dorrits. They are, like all of us, cut from the same cloth, and at the same time as individual as their unforgettable aptronyms suggest. They are the assurances that Dickens, whether I am reading him or not, is shining a light on who I am during the best and worst of times.

Posted by Jon Varese, September 2009 guardian.co.uk

Clifford Harper illustration of Charles Dickens

CHARLES DICKENS BY MICHAEL SLATER

***Simon Callow** welcomes an incomparable portrait of an awesome writer . . .*

In terms of what we know about them, the contrast between our two greatest men of letters, William Shakespeare and Charles Dickens, could scarcely be sharper. Of Shakespeare, we know next to nothing; of Dickens we know next to everything. Dickens might well have wished it otherwise: speaking of his great predecessor, he wrote to a correspondent: "It is a great comfort, to my way of thinking, that so little is known about the poet. It is a fine mystery, and I tremble every day lest something should come out."

The mystery of Charles Dickens is quite as profound as that of William Shakespeare, but it is essentially the mystery of art itself and of its roots in the deepest layers of experience and personality. Of the writer's external life, there is almost an embarrassment of riches. It was a life lived at full tilt. There are times in Michael Slater's indispensable new biography when one simply has to close the book from sheer exhaustion at its subject's expenditure of energy. It's like being sprayed by the ocean. Even Dickens was astonished at it: "How strange it is," he said, "to be never at rest!"

He started *Oliver Twist* halfway through writing *The Pickwick Papers*, and halfway through writing *Twist* he began *Nicholas Nickleby*, shooting off a constant volley of journalistic fireworks the while. Nor did he confine himself to literature. From the beginning, he took up cudgels on behalf of the socially disadvantaged. He flung himself into social life – dancing, horse-riding, performing conjuring tricks, and putting on shows for his family and friends. He walked 10, 12, 15 miles a day, communing with his imagination, but also seeking out the hidden truths of his society, throwing himself into the darkest recesses of human life. On holiday in Italy, he climbed up Vesuvius in full eruption, then witnessed a public execution, getting as close as possible to the severed head. No wonder he observed, when planning the alterations to his new house on Tavistock Square, that "a Cold Shower of the best quality, always charged to an unlimited extent, has become a necessary of life to me."

A global, all-inclusive biography of such a man is an impossibility. Recent biographies have each approached their task from a different angle, the most striking, by Peter Ackroyd, being Dickensian itself. Michael Slater, a seasoned Dickens hand, is altogether more measured, but no whit less exciting. He assembles a million accumulated details, minutely examining the genesis of each work and demonstrating the thing on which the writer himself so passionately insisted: "My own invention or imagination, such as it is . . . would never have served me as it has but for the habit of commonplace, humble, patient, daily, toiling, drudging attention."

In the earlier books, Dickens wrote out of brilliant improvisation (Slater is riveting on the evolution of *Oliver Twist* out of a piece that was essentially a Boz sketch), but from *Dombey and Son* on, they were meticulously planned. Making telling use of Dickens's notes to self ("Jo. Yes? Kill him . . . No. Decide on no love at all"), Slater carefully shows how, as each new novel comes to life, their author creates a force field of imagery and thought, feeding the process with current events, preoccupations and accidental meetings.

Forging all this into the massive and complex structures of the later novels became increasingly arduous. Small wonder that he loved to throw off simpler pieces for the magazines he edited. These journals, one weekly and one monthly, were absolutely central to his practice as a writer. It is astonishing to think of books of the scale and integrity of the great last novels being written according to the demands of this form. No doubt the absolute need to produce copy, to length and on time, suited Dickens's adrenaline-hungry temperament, but the profundity and brilliance of the writing in the circumstances is awe-inspiring. He was indifferent to his often frail physical condition: the last chapters of *Bleak House* were written immediately after an operation, without anaesthetic, on a fistula.

The force of his will is alarming, and often annihilating: he swept up the young actress Ellen Ternan and, because of the necessary secrecy of their life together, made her in effect a prisoner of love, robbing her of her youth and her autonomy; not for nothing did he call her The Patient in his letters. Sometimes his willpower is almost comic: when his friend Douglas Jerrold died, he whipped up a huge fund-raising campaign to provide for his widow and children, despite their protests that they were perfectly well-off. The story of his relationship with his wife Catherine, on the contrary, makes ugly reading: her one jealous reproach of him, when he practised hypnotism on the wife of a friend, is clearly the root of his increasingly savage rejection of her ("he wrote her out of his life," says Slater), while his children, especially his sons, were the subject of brutally expressed disappointment: "they have," he wrote, "the curse of limpness on them."

His feeling for his readers was, by contrast, entirely positive. His connection with them was like that of no other writer before or since. The famous public readings were the consummation of this relationship, making him the most celebrated and best loved man of his time. "To stimulate and rouse the public soul to a compassionate feeling that this must not be", he unleashed electrifying assaults on poverty, ignorance and injustice, "sledge-hammer blows" delivered in print and in person against government, business interests, moralists. His warnings to charitable organisations about spending their money on the people they were supposed to benefit, his hatred of statistical manipulation, his denunciation of the incompetent prosecution of military campaigns to the detriment of soldiers, his loathing of the profiteering convolutions of lawyers, his contempt for bankers ("slobbering, bow-paunched, overfed, apoplectic, snorting cattle") all ring loud bells today. Against this, Slater carefully sets Dickens's entrenched racism, his derision for the idea of female emancipation and his enthusiastic endorsement of capital punishment.

Slater, who has a nice line in droll asides ("Dickens can never keep wooden legs out of his writing for long"), rarely offers a judgment, but insights abound: noting the triumphant arrival of Sam Weller in *The Pickwick Papers*, he writes that if Pickwick were "to metamorphose into a Dickens version of Don Quixote, he would need a Sancho Panzo to ground him in reality". He takes us compellingly through all the great shocks of Dickens's life – the blacking factory; first love; second love; the railway accident – but he doesn't dwell on them, nor does he speculate on the psychological aspects of his relationship with his father and mother or with Nelly. Nor does he mention magic, Dickens's life-long obsession. All this can be found elsewhere.

His quarry is the writing. The novels are the tip of a vast iceberg, and Slater introduces us to some miraculous pieces – stories, essays, sketches – and shows how closely connected they are to the novels. It is especially pleasing that he turns the spotlight on the masterly monologues that Dickens derived from his All the Year Round serials: “The Boy at Mugby”, “Mr Chops the Dwarf”, “Mrs Lirriper” (in the opening of which he virtually invents stream-of-consciousness writing), and his masterpiece in this form, “Doctor Marigold”.

The book is an incomparable portrait of the writing life of Dickens. Cumulatively, it is profoundly moving, chronicling the constant restless interaction between the life and the work. Slater quotes to immensely touching effect the account by Forster, Dickens’s best friend and first biographer, of a day trip up river, undertaken to furnish him with material for a chapter he needed to write for *Great Expectations*: “he seemed to have no care, all of that summer day, except to enjoy [his friends’ and family’s] enjoyment and entertain them with his own in the shape of a thousand whims and fancies; but his sleepless observation was at work all the time, and nothing had escaped his keen vision on either side of the river.”

Simon Callow’s book *Dickens’ Christmas* has just been reissued by Frances Lincoln.

We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.

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