

The Inimitable: CHARLES DICKENS

BY LEANNE MILWAY

"Please, sir, may I have some more?"

"God bless us every one!"

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times."

At the start of the 21st century, the master of the novel, Charles Dickens, has become both overexposed and underappreciated. Many readers know him more for the countless incarnations of his work on stage, cinema, and television. In various versions of *A Christmas Carol*, Ebenezer Scrooge has been played by Albert Finney, George C. Scott, Bill Murray, *Star Trek's* Patrick Stewart, Disney's Scrooge McDuck and Mr. Magoo. And that's the shortlist.

For less informed readers, Dickens's plots are easily summed up: Heads roll, mobs riot, and another orphan boy finds his fortune after 800 pages of trials and tribulations. High school students often argue that a far, far better fate would be the quick slice of the guillotine. Savvy readers may pay the necessary homage to Dickens, but decry the thinness of his characters or the now-familiar arc of his plots. This is a strange predicament for one of the world's greatest novelists—a man who, in his time, was the most public of literary figures and appealed to readers from

Parliament to the factory floor.

In Victorian society, the man nicknamed "The Inimitable" would regularly seduce the willing crowds, sending his readers from the depths of despair (Little Nell's death) to the throes of ecstasy (Scrooge's transformation). Dickens was devastatingly popular; he was a crowd-pleaser with a natural dramatic flair and a progressive political agenda. When the author first visited America in 1842, he was privy to the most triumphant reception ever staged for a foreign visitor. Charles Dickens was the world's first literary megastar. Shakespeare who?

At the end of his life, Dickens could lay claim to 15 novels (ten of which were 800 pages or more long), countless short stories, essays, and plays. He was a journalist, a newspaper editor, a social activist, an amateur actor, and father to at least ten children (there is some debate about the final tally). He reinvented 19th-century publishing practices and shaped Christmas cheer into a modern-day legend. All that, and the man routinely walked 20 miles a day.

WHERE TO START

If you're new to Dickens, **GREAT EXPECTATIONS** is one of his most succinct and plot-driven pieces, with a likeable hero and ample examples of Dickens's timeless characterizations. The author's personal favorite was **DAVID COPPERFIELD**, and many readers second this opinion. Count on the book to be consistently engaging, funny, and true. **BLEAK HOUSE** is a richly textured novel, with a heady combination of dual narratives, interwoven plots, weighty symbolism, and lush atmosphere. It's certainly a more serious novel than the other two, but it's Dickens at his most mature.

HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

The second child of eight, Charles John Huffinan Dickens was born on February 7, 1812, and spent a happy ten years

priming his imagination. When he was 12, his father's financial situation became desperate, and young Charles was pulled from school and sent to work. Dickens's few months in a blacking warehouse, where he performed the menial task of pasting labels on bottles of shoe polish, were excruciating and stung of humiliation and neglect. The intensity of those feelings never left him; the novelist would draw on this experience for the rest of his career, especially when writing from the perspective of an unloved orphan boy. Also, the experience set the basis for Dickens's lifelong pursuit of excellence, money, and security.

Dickens eventually managed a few more years of school before going to work as a law clerk and then as a reporter covering Parliament. (All of this was solid background research for later comic scenes about the ineptitudes of lawyers and politicians.) For several years Dickens honed his craft, working on a series of short pieces called sketches. "A Dinner at Poplar Walk" was his first published work, appearing in *Monthly Magazine*. He was 21.

A SERIAL KILLING

Dickens's first novel *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club*—a phenomenal success for the 24-year-old author—was published in monthly installments, an innovation for the time. By printing one chapter a month, the author could assess the public's reaction before committing any plot points to paper. As the momentum built, so

did sales. Only 500 copies of the second *Pickwick* installment were printed; 40,000 copies of the final chapter were published.

All of Dickens's novels were published in this format, creating a reading experience that spanned months and years. Even the most avid fans will admit that this practice occasionally led to mangled plot lines, when Dickens was forced to meet a deadline or make do with something already committed to print. Editing was not an option. But back then, the excitement of reading could cause riots. U.S. fans waiting for a ship to bring the next installment of *The Old Curiosity Shop* are said to have pushed people off the pier in their excitement, clamoring for news about Little Nell's health.

BEFORE THE SELF-HELP BONANZA

Modern sensibilities do not always fit well with the melodramatic world of Dickens. Yet it is the sheer humanity of Dickens's work that sets him apart, triumphs over cynicism, and makes his work so compelling over 100 years later:

"Nearly [every Dickens character] can be summed up in a sentence, and yet there is this wonderful feeling of human depth." E.M. Forster.

"No grown-up person can read Dickens without feeling his limitations, and yet...nearly everyone, whatever his actual conduct may be, responds emotionally to the idea

AN OVERVIEW OF CHARLES DICKENS'S WORK

Sketches by Boz, 1836

Dickens's first short pieces are gathered in this collection, published when he was 24 to highly favorable reviews. The 60 sketches (subtitled "Illustrative of Every-Day Life and Every-Day People") center on London, where the narrator prowls prisons, courthouses, theaters and streets, imparting his astute observations.

* *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club*, 1836-1837

Oliver Twist, 1838

A marked departure from the giddy "Pickwick," the novel casts 9-year-old orphan Oliver into a den of thieves, murderers, and prostitutes after his escape from an orphanage. Master pickpocket Fagin and his band of criminals (most notably the Artful Dodger and malicious Bill Sikes) force Oliver to do their dirty work. Oliver risks his life to find love and protection, while several of the book's characters come to a grisly end.

The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby, 1837-1839

Young Nicholas Nickleby arrives in London to seek a living after his father's death. Nicholas uncovers corruption in a Yorkshire school, joins a troupe of actors, befriends a crippled child, and puts a stop to the schemes of his cruel and miserly uncle Ralph, all the while providing for his mother and sister. Energetic and melodramatic tale in which good handily defeats evil.

The Old Curiosity Shop, 1841

Little Nell's grandfather, an obsessive gambler, loses his curiosity shop to Daniel Quilp (a loan shark and a dwarf with the head of a giant). Determined to start a new life, Nell and her increasingly feeble grandfather quit town, with the dwarf in dogged pursuit. When first published, the story's tragic ending sent thousands into a state of mourning and made Little Nell a household name. Today the novel is regarded as

laughably sentimental, but its extremely bizarre characters (which include a cast of dancing dogs) are some of Dickens's most unique inventions.

Barnaby Rudge, 1841

Dickens's first historical novel recreates the vicious mob violence of the Gordon Riots, an anti-Catholic uprising in 1780's London. In a case of mistaken identity, half-wit Barnaby Rudge is arrested as a mob leader and sentenced to death. There's also a murder mystery, an illicit love affair, and Dickens's usual roundup of creative characters.

The Life and Adventures of Martin Chuzzlewit, 1842-1844

Thoughtless Martin Chuzzlewit is disowned by his rich and eccentric grandfather. He travels to the United States, rubbing elbows with aristocrats, soldiers, and tycoons before losing his way in an insurance scam. All of the characters embody different aspects of selfishness, from hypocritical

*Books are discussed in Major Works

of human brotherhood. Dickens voiced a code which was and on the whole still is believed in, even by people who violate it." George Orwell, *Critical Essays*, 1946.

Consider *Great Expectations*. What Pip (and the reader) learns is how to love oneself, even if one is not educated or wealthy. He discovers how to recognize the goodness in others—regardless of whether they have committed crimes, remained uneducated, or haven't garnered great riches.

In one novel are summed up the lessons of a hundred self-help books or countless hours of therapy. It is life—described in both its broadest and most specific terms.

"[Dickens] has inexhaustibly delineated states of mind, emotions, symbols, ideas, the rational life, and the irrational life, but also London and Kent and Manchester and America and Italy and France and Scotland and Sussex and Essex and Norfolk. He is the novelist who comes closest of all novelists to delivering on that illusory promise of the novel-to tell everything there is to know about everyone, and to tell it in an incomparably fresh and delightful way." Jane Smiley, *Charles Dickens*, 2002.

Who else, other than the great philosophers and novelists can presume to uncover "everything there is to know about everyone"? And it's only the rare few, like Dickens, who can turn these life lessons into page-turning adventure.

Pecksniff to murderous Jonas Chuzzlewit. The novel received Dickens's first negative reviews, and U.S. critics were especially offended by its cruel satire of American life.

*** A Christmas Carol, 1843**

Dombey and Son, 1846-1848

A more appropriate title would be "Dombey and Daughter," as it is the strained relationship between the proud widower Mr. Dombey and his neglected daughter Florence that drives the story. Dombey's business is going bankrupt, his second wife is having an affair, and his beloved son and heir is dead. To whom can he turn? This family saga is considered to be Dickens's first mature masterpiece.

***The Personal History of David Copperfield, 1849-1850**

***Bleak House, 1852-1853**

Hard Times, 1854

Hardware merchant Thomas Gradgrind teaches his children Tom and Louisa to respect only what is factual and rational, and deny the worlds

of imagination and beauty. After 300 pages, he eventually comes to realize how he has corrupted their lives. The novel is a hard-hitting social criticism, condemning the Industrial Revolution and the ever-widening gulf between the classes.

Little Dorrit, 1855-1857

A somber study of the physical and psychological effects of imprisonment, in its many different forms. Amy Dorrit is born and raised by her father William in the Marshalsea debtors' prison. She works small jobs outside the prison walls, but returns every night to her father. The novel chronicles her lifelong struggle to free her father and gain financial independence.

A Tale of Two Cities, 1859

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, as the French Revolution and ensuing craze for "La Guillotine" cause political and social mayhem in both London and Paris. Biographers claim the revolution in these pages mirrors his own private

MAJOR WORKS

The Pickwick Papers (1838)

The publisher originally commissioned Dickens to write humorous stories for popular caricaturist Robert Seymour to illustrate. Dickens didn't have much luck confining his work to Seymour's specifications, and he eventually took control of the project. Unable to work with the novelist, Seymour, who was suffering from depression, shot himself.

THE STORY: Wealthy and naïve Samuel Pickwick, an amateur scientist, is the leader of a club of single men who gallivant around London, drinking heartily and stumbling into trouble.

CRITICAL INSIGHT:

"Pickwick is in Dickens's career the mere mass of light before the creation of sun and moon. It is the splendid, shapeless substance of which all his stars were ultimately made. ... He tries to tell ten stories at once ... he adopts designs and abandons them, begins episodes and leaves them unfinished; but from the first page to the last there is a nameless and elemental ecstasy...." G. K. Chesterton, *Appreciations and Criticisms of the Works of Charles Dickens*.

THE BOTTOM LINE: The slapdash novel is weaker than Dickens's more mature work, but it continues to delight readers with its jolly outlook.

turmoil; is it just a coincidence that he shares the same initials as his hero Charles Darnay?

***Great Expectations, 1861**

Our Mutual Friend, 1864-1865

Dickens's last complete novel, considered his darkest and most complex, opens with a riverman searching the body of a drowned corpse for pocket money. This particular dead man was murdered before he could claim a large fortune. Another heir steps forward to claim the prize, amid blackmail plots, a love triangle, and matters of mistaken identity. Even the most reputable members of London society are easily corrupted.

The Mystery of Edwin Drood, 1870

Edwin Drood is missing and presumed dead. John Jasper, an opium addict, is the likely suspect, since he's jealous of Drood's engagement to Rosa Bud. Dickens died just as the plot began to thicken, leaving no clue behind to help later generations solve the puzzle.

DICKENS FOR YOUNGER READERS

Dickens was a champion of children and a strong believer in the power of imagination. Several of his novels detail the coming-of-age of a young narrator who struggles with the injustices of life. Just because his books are about young adults doesn't mean they are easy reading; Dickens's language is prose-heavy and sometimes torturously dated.

DAVID COPPERFIELD was Dickens's own favorite, and many students start with this one in middle school or high school. The first-person narrative makes it generally easy to read, as David seeks his fortune, fights corruption, discovers love, and becomes a man.

Another young lad forced to fend for himself, the title character in NICHOLAS NICKLEBY prevails against the forces of evil (brutal teacher Wackford Squeers and his malicious uncle Ralph). Nicholas's stint with a group of traveling players is a highlight in this episodic and melodramatic novel.

OLIVER TWIST is also popular with younger readers, but it is much darker than the other two, as our hero Oliver becomes involved with some very rough characters. The book includes graphic descriptions of murder and robbery, as well as a dramatic monologue by an imprisoned man. But good-hearted Oliver manages to rise above his humble beginnings as an unloved orphan.

David Copperfield (1852)

Years before he published *David Copperfield*, Dickens attempted to commit his early experiences to paper. He found the task to be so painful, and the results so torturous, that he burned the manuscript. Much later, when the tragic memories of his childhood had time to fade, Dickens masterfully combined pieces of his autobiography with imagined characters and events. He includes a portrait of his father (as the financially troubled Mr. Micawber) and an agonizing account of his job in blacking warehouse (reinvented as Murdstone and Grinby's, a wine warehouse overrun with rats). The tragicomic life-story of young David would be Dickens's biggest hit yet.

THE STORY: "Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show." So begins David's childhood story, as he deals with a cruel stepfather, slaves in a blacking factory, escapes to live with his eccentric aunt, before facing the trials of love and marriage.

CRITICAL INSIGHT:

"Forget the glib one-liner reviews about Dickens's people being caricatures instead of characters. Read this book. This book is one of the few Real Books in this world." Alan

Nelson, Amazon.com.



"I must have been about nine years old when I first read *David Copperfield*. The mental atmosphere of the opening chapters was so immediately intelligible to me that I vaguely imagined they had been written by a child. And yet when one re-reads the book as an adult and sees the Murdstones, for instance, dwindle from gigantic figures of doom into semi-comic monsters, these passages lose nothing. Dickens has been able to stand both inside and outside the child's mind, in such a way that the same scene can be wild burlesque or sinister reality, according to the age at which one reads it. George Orwell, *Charles Dickens*, 1939.

"Back before literature hit that high-low fork in the road, leading on the one hand toward *Ulysses* and on the other toward *Gone with the Wind*, *David Copperfield* was probably the most revered and the best loved novel in the English language. Everyone knows (or used to know) that Dickens himself called it the 'favourite child' among his fictional progeny; but late in life he also acknowledged that it was the "best" of his novels -- a more purely literary judgment. Tolstoy, an impressionable 22 when *David Copperfield* was completed in 1850, considered it the greatest achievement of the greatest of all novelists."

David Gates, introduction to *David Copperfield* in the *Modern Library* edition.

THE BOTTOM LINE: The classic coming-of-age tale, considered by many readers to be Dickens at his best and most readable (and the author's personal favorite).

Bleak House (1853)

In the year between the final installment of *David Copperfield* and the first chapter of *Bleak House*, Dickens achieved one of his long sought-after goals: editorship of a successful weekly magazine. As owner and editor in charge of all submissions, Dickens contributed many pieces himself. These were often critical reports on current affairs such as juvenile illiteracy, sewage disposal, or the new detective branch of crime-fighting. Because of his involvement on such hot-button issues, he was asked to run for Parliament in 1852. Dickens declined, saying he could provide better service as a novelist. So he gave the world *Bleak House*, a novel teeming with topical allusions and at its core a satirical examination of the absurdity of legal proceedings.

THE STORY: The unifying storyline of this vast novel concerns the convoluted law case of "Jarndyce and Jarndyce," which forced several generations of the Jarndyce family to wait in vain for the payoff from a disputed fortune. "This scarecrow of a suit has, in course of time, become so complicated that no man alive knows what it means. . . . Jarndyce and Jarndyce has passed into a joke." In a striking difference from other Dickens novels, *Bleak House* alternates between a third-person narrator and the first-person account of orphan Esther Summerson, a ward of John Jarndyce. Along with Esther's coming-of-age sto-

ry, the novel (in classic Dickensian style) unveils shocking family secrets, murderous intents, and ultimately, the interconnectedness of all levels of society.

CRITICAL INSIGHT:

"No nineteenth-century novelist, not even Tolstoy, was stronger than Dickens, whose wealth of invention almost rivals Chaucer and Shakespeare. *Bleak House*, most critics now tend to agree, is his central work; Dickens had enormous affection for *David Copperfield*, but this was his *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*." Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon*, 1994.

"When Dickens wrote *Bleak House* he had grown up The thing is no longer a string of incidents; it is a cycle of incidents. It returns upon itself; it has recurrent melody and poetic justice; it has artistic constancy and artistic revenge." G. K. Chesterton, *Appreciations and Criticisms of the Works of Charles Dickens*, 1911.

THE BOTTOM LINE: Incisive entry in Dickens's "Dark Period" of social criticism in which the novelist achieves his first fully mature work.

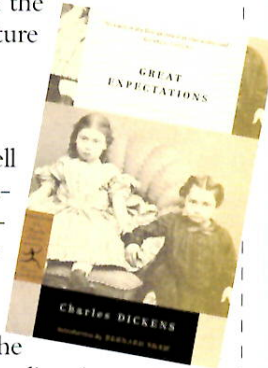
Great Expectations (1861)

Dickens's love of theater was well documented, and used public speaking engagements to show off his natural flair for storytelling. During the time *Great Expectations* was being written, he embarked on an exhaustive reading tour; because of the physical effort involved in giving 87 readings in one tour, his productivity suffered. The story of Pip's journey from a tormented orphan to a proud gentleman marks one of Dickens's last, and greatest, triumphs.

THE STORY: On page one, Philip Pirrip (aka Pip) helps an escaped convict in a meeting that would have reverberations for the rest of his life. Soon he is taken to meet Miss Havisham, an aging and jilted woman whose purpose in life is to "wreak havoc on the male sex." Miss Havisham uses Estella, her daughter, to manipulate Pip's affections as part of this plan. Pip aspires to be a gentleman and sudden wealth from an unknown benefactor sets him on his way. But Pip's past generosity to the convict is not forgotten, and Pip's fate and destiny is ultimately shaped by the convict's friendship.

CRITICAL INSIGHT:

"The book is, indeed, an artistic creation, and not a mere succession of humorous and pathetic scenes, and demonstrates that Dickens is now in the prime, and not in the decline of his great powers.... We take great joy in recording our conviction that *Great Expectations* is a masterpiece." Edwin Whipple, *The Atlantic Monthly*, Sept. 1861.



"*Great Expectations* is the first novel I read that made me wish I had written it; it is the novel that made me want to be a novelist - specifically, to move a reader as I was moved then. I believe that *Great Expectations* has the most wonderful and most perfectly worked-out plot for a novel in the English language; at the same time, it never deviates from its intention to move you to laughter and to tears." John Irving.

"[Dickens's] most completely perfect book." George Bernard Shaw.

THE BOTTOM LINE: One of the best examples of a rags-to-riches bildungsroman. Includes some of Dickens's most unforgettable characters, especially creepy Miss Havisham and the convict Magwitch.

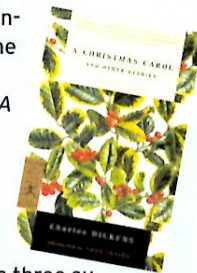
BAH HUMBUG

Christmas wouldn't be the same without Dickens Dickens revisited the Christmas theme time and time again during his writing career, imagining himself an official proprietor of the Christmas spirit. He would earn the right to that title when he published *A Christmas Carol* in December 1843 and effectively reinvented the holiday (and created a monster).

Of course you know the story: cranky Ebenezer Scrooge couldn't care less about charity until he meets three supernatural spirits one Christmas Eve. The ghosts scare him, teach him the difference between love and greed, and convince him to help less fortunate souls, including Bob Cratchit and his family. It ends with a hearty feast, a crackling fire, toys for the little ones, and an excess of good cheer.

A reviewer in 1843 wrote that anyone who wants to "understand what the real enjoyment of Christmas is ... will have to read" this story. Before *Carol* made it to print, Christmas wasn't a national holiday in England. Centuries-old traditions were dying; poverty and misery were rampant in London -- even the children were suffering. Poor Tiny Tim!

A spirit of charity infected Victorian readers (no one wants to be a Scrooge). Charitable donations increased and "Tiny Tim" beds for disadvantaged children were set up in London hospitals. Even the illiterate of the day knew the story due to copious stage adaptations. It was also a vital part of the author's public reading tour. Thus, Dickens's *Carol* became a myth and a reality.



Further reading: Though *A Christmas Carol* is by far Dickens's best holiday number, *The Chimes* (1845) shouldn't be ignored. In this story, a kindly ticket porter starts to believe what the aristocrats are saying, that the poor have only themselves to blame for their dismal situation. Goblins living in the church bells teach him to have faith in his class. Also very popular, but much much more sentimental is *The Cricket on the Hearth* (1846).