

200 years old and still on the front pages

Charles Dickens 1812 – 1870

Charles Dickens was such a good publicist that he no doubt arranged his bi-centenary for the year that London hosts the Olympics Games. His life was interesting enough but his legacy is astounding. His work has been made into films, TV series, stage adaptations, musicals and animations. Even the *Muppet Christmas Carol* is faithful to the book. Why, after all, should anyone want to change such a good plot? So many novels which continue to be read and continue to move us, shock us and make us laugh and so many that remain relevant to life as we live it now. No wonder we are still celebrating his work two hundred years after his birth.

The Life

His novels were not written for children but he is not solely a literary figure. He has become, like Shakespeare, part of our culture and so children learn about him. Some of the books produced for children reflect this. For this special year, several biographies have been published and they are for all ages.

Mick Manning and Brita Granström are known for their colourful picture books which are used to present complex subjects to young children. *Charles Dickens: Scenes from an extraordinary life* uses Dickens's own words very adroitly, the sources being well referenced at the end. These are letters, the journalism, accounts by family members and passages from the novels. His life is traced in a series of large full page illustrations with text in speech bubbles and smaller pictures with conventional text underneath. Small events from his childhood are set against scenes from the London of the times in which he lived so the text reflects the novels in its reference to Victorian society. As the books are published, a summary of the plot is given in the form of a graphic novel. This book is intended for younger readers so the failure of his marriage and the nature of his other entanglements are avoided but the authors do mention the enduring bitterness that Dickens felt about his harsh treatment in childhood. This is an attractive and informative account of his life and a friendly introduction both to Dickens as a writer and to aspects of the nineteenth century.

Charles Dickens: Hard Times and Great Expectations by Alan Taylor is for older children – the publishers refer to “the bright teen



market”. We are reminded that Dickens was a ‘celebrity’ but one with staying power and one with whose works readers become emotionally engaged. This series as a whole is particularly good at setting the individual in a social context and we have a bonus here in that it not only illuminates Dickens's time but the author makes interesting connections with the twenty-first century. It is hard to resist the link he makes between Mr Merdle, the banker in *Little Dorrit* who ruins many others, and Wall Street's Bernie Madoff. He draws attention to the rage and frustration Dickens felt about the oppression of the powerless, especially children, and there are parallels now. The book is principally about the life but the works are constantly referenced and set in context. This is a relatively short biography but one packed with insights. Don't be influenced by the cover. Is that Dickens? Lenin? Or just a man in a false beard? Authors continue to suffer at the hands of their publishers.

Charles Dickens: a very peculiar history by Fiona Macdonald may be described as a small book with a very big personality. Like Queen Victoria, it is small but stout (nearly 200 pages) and engagingly designed. The information is presented in sections, neatly labelled. ‘Why the Dickens?’ offers an explanation of why he is still significant. ‘Who’ deals with the biography but augments the familiar with its ‘Fact and Fiction’ pages where what Dickens said or wrote is examined. For example, his attitude to his father is usually summed up by reference to Mr Micawber but here, there is a quotation from the notes Dickens gave to his biographer John Foster where he remembers his father's kindness. ‘Where’ talks about his restlessness and traces his many addresses, his travels in this country and his visits abroad. The very evident links between his journeys and experiences and his novels are brought out. His homes reflected his growing fame and as he entertained more guests, they gave an account of his driven attitude to writing and the routine of his household. The book constantly uses ‘inside’ information like this. ‘What’ describes the man himself, quoting sources like Mark Twain and Thomas Carlyle and ‘When’ puts the man into the context of his time. Finally, ‘How the Dickens?’ provides an interesting take on his writing and publishing – how the journalism and books were produced and how he wrote them.

The book provides a number of reflections, calling him a “cautious radical”. The author points out that although he supported many causes (there is even a list of novels and the causes they promoted), he wanted gradual improvement. His attitude to women and the people of the colonies shows he was no revolutionary. She also looks critically at his “happy endings”. However much he exposed the horrors of the time, his characters usually attained a conventional happy ending and she refers to both Chesterton’s and E. M. Forster’s criticism of his books. Nevertheless, the balance tips towards a recognition of Dickens’s compassion and involvement which resulted in books which were both popular and could stir the conscience.



A page from Dickens' original manuscript for *Oliver Twist*

Running throughout are ‘Instant Dickens’ pages. These summarise his works in ‘student notes’ style. There are other useful summaries, such as ‘Dickens and the Publishing Industry’ which includes his journalism and minor works, a chronological biography in brief and two indexes. One is a general index and the other relates directly to the novels. There is a great deal packed into this hand-sized book, all in short, direct sections. It is presumably aimed at students in that while it is frank about Dickens’s relationships with women, for example, it explains things in footnotes that an adult might reasonably be expected to know. This is, however, such a quirky, lively and informative book that it will be enjoyed across a wide spectrum.

The distinctive feature of *Charles Dickens: a lifetime of storytelling; a legacy of change* written by Catherine Wells-Cole, is the reproduction of many of the documents relating to his life and works. The presentation is entertaining and takes the form of a ‘compendium’ which opens to reveal a highly illustrated account of not only the novels and Dickens’s life but also what was happening around him. These public events are those which directly relate to his works. Schools, prisons, workhouses, industry, theatres, as well London itself, appear with facsimiles of photos, maps, legal documents, contemporary cartoons and a copy of the playbill for a performance of *The Frozen Deep*, where Dickens is named as both actor and manager. There is a synopsis of each of the major works, but the author takes care to remark that this is no substitute for actually reading them. A great many of the original illustrations are reproduced, with a note on the illustrators. This is a lively scrapbook which emphasises how embedded into his time Charles Dickens was and it will be enjoyed by children and adults alike. And, by the way, the author is to be

congratulated for explaining what a blacking factory was. It must be quite a long time since any modern young reader blacked a stove.

The Novels

When it comes to the novels, they appear in many formats. A large number of publishing houses of various types are producing graphic novels and, essentially, these provide a summary of the plot in pictures, with abbreviated texts. They are intended to have the immediate impact of comic strips and, certainly, Dickens himself saw the value of appealing directly to as wide an audience as possible. These, however, have none of the originality of format as seen from mainland European publishers. They are

not all attractive; there is a sameness in the use of colour and form across the range. For younger children the most pleasing seen is from Marcia Williams. Called *Charles Dickens and Friends* it is a large format picture book which tells the stories of five of the novels: *Great Expectations*, *Oliver Twist*, *A Christmas Carol*, *David Copperfield* and *A Tale of Two Cities*. These are vigorous, picture retellings, both in artwork and words.

For older children, both Puffin and Oxford provide versions of the novels with few or no illustrations. Oxford Children’s Classics has chosen *Oliver Twist* to represent Dickens and this is unabridged. Puffin Classics have unabridged versions and specially abridged editions of the longer novels. There is *A Tale of Two Cities*, *Great Expectations*, *A Christmas Carol* and *Oliver Twist*. There is a second *Oliver Twist*, produced in celebration of Puffin’s seventieth birthday and illustrated by Sir Peter Blake. It must be special but, at £100, I have not actually seen it. Puffin provides a substantial section at the back of the book with extra information. There are brief biographical details, how the book, often produced in instalments, was received on publication, a ‘who’s who’ of characters, some questions, suggestions for ‘things to do’ and some details under the heading of “Charles Dickens’s London”. More interesting are the series of forewords accompanying these editions. Roddy Doyle, who introduces *Great Expectations*, is glad Dickens was born before the invention of the film camera because he is certain he would have been a film director, not an author, and discusses Dickens’s technique in those terms. Garth Nix advocates ‘skipping’ if you have to. Dickens can stand it. Anthony Horowitz recommends not reading him too early but itemises “a huge cast of unforgettable characters.” They all make their enthusiasm clear.



'Dickensian' Novels

Dickens has been an inspiration to many others and there are a number of current stories which owe him a debt. The best use his vigorous characterisation and ability to evoke a setting that has us seeing and sometimes smelling it; certainly always feeling its atmosphere. Others merely pinch the plot but it is hard to blame them.

A successfully 'Dickensian' story is Philip Pullman's *Springheeled Jack*, in its graphic novel form, wonderfully illustrated by David Mostyn. This is a splendidly melodramatic tale in which Jack is a kind of Victorian Superman. He springs to the aid of three children who have escaped from the Alderman Cawn-Plaster Memorial Orphanage and are in search of their father. Pullman has fun with this scenario and we get all the right 'Dickensian' elements: the stormy opening, the dangerous streets, the docks, the pubs. Then we have the right emotional elements: the heart-rending plight of the children, the evil characters pitched against the kind and compassionate, high drama and danger and a happy ending for all the good folk. The format gives paragraphs of text between witty and lively cartoon style strips. This means the reader gets the best of both worlds.

A treatment fans will recognise comes with *Sapphire Battersea* by Jacqueline Wilson. This author has much experience in writing about disadvantaged children today but, here, her setting is the Victorian period. We first met Sapphire when she was Hetty Feather, in the book of that name. The book was partly inspired by Jaqueline Wilson's inauguration as the Thomas Coram Fellow of the Foundling Museum and the books are very strong on this aspect. The first is set during the time when Hetty was an inmate of the Foundling Hospital and the second deals with her leaving there to go into service at the age of fourteen. She hopes that she can now take the name her mother gave her. She aspires to be Sapphire, a famous author, but remains Hetty, a very small maid of all work. The book visits many Victorian features: seances, freak shows, seaside holidays but is perhaps strongest on showing the reader something of the life of servants and, when Hetty's mother dies of consumption, how absolutely alone children could be without the support services we expect now.

Barnaby Grime: the curse of the werewolf uses the background but adds currently popular elements. Books in the Barnaby Grimes series always start with a ghastly encounter, whether werewolf, zombie or equally appalling entity. Barnaby then takes on the creature and wins. The successful Dickensian references are the characters and the depiction of the city itself. London is a large part of the story. Since Barnaby himself is a 'highstacker' and travels across the rooftops, he is able to survey the city below him and stops to gaze and comment on how the people live. He has a job as a 'tick-tock' boy – a boy who delivers messages as fast as possible, encountering a cast of people some good, some very bad, as the plot develops. In this title, Barnaby discovers who is profiting from a very nice line in 'Westphalian' fur trims, fast becoming the must-have accessory. This matters because the fur comes from the impoverished souls who are being turned into werewolves and then sacrificed. Barnaby could be said to be the descendant

of the smart and sparky members of the lower orders who serve the toffs without being servile.

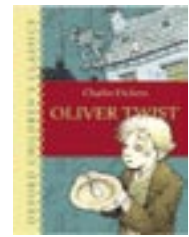
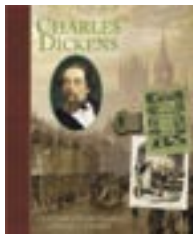
Oliver Twisted by J. D. Sharpe is less convincing. The plot follows *Oliver Twist* closely in structure and the same main characters appear under their original names. At first, it seemed possible that it was a comedy of the Simon Pegg variety. (After eating only hard crusts, Oliver descends to rotten waste and then is reduced to a sip of water from a hoof print in the mud. It is hard not to add a Pythonesque "Luxury!") Then he meets the zombies. Essentially, it is a series of disgusting descriptions with added cannibalism, hung on the Dickens plot. I thought it was more *Charlie Slandered* but maybe horror novel fans do not require empathetic characters and a density of setting. The trouble with using a Dickens plot so closely is that it invites comparisons.

A book which come closer to a 'Dickensian' experience is Matt Barratt's *Joe Rat*. The dirty streets, the gin palaces, the doss houses, the traffic and commerce are convincing, as are the description of how the poor earned enough to eat. The hero is first seen emerging from a sewer. He is a "tosher" who finds objects lost down drains – odd coins, even the occasional piece of silver. These are not his to keep, however, as he has to give them to a character called Mother who returns a coin or two so he can buy food. He meets a girl from the country who ran away when she realised that her mother had brought her to London to sell her. There is no completely happy ending but, together, they help someone else and each other. Thus we have Dickensian scenes which recall the books. When we visit Mother, she is a grotesque, receiving in her four poster bed, a kind of huge, low-life Miss Havisham. Similarly, when the two young people help the man that others call the Madman, his house, once a grand mansion, is now wrecked and full of stuffed wild animals. There is also a mystery concerning identity and we also have a Dickensian morality – not perfect but we know who is right.

Horowitz is correct, some of the books can be left until the reader is older but a good place to start for children is with the beautifully illustrated versions of *A Christmas Carol*. This may not be seasonal but a good story is not just for Christmas. Three books stand out. Robert Ingpen's version is strong on character and Victorian street scenes. There is also a very affordable paperback edition illustrated by P. J. Lynch which includes wonderful landscapes as well as street scenes and interiors and presents the strange world of the spirits in affecting, mysterious, fluid scenes. And then there is Quentin Blake, full of movement and colour. If children read them and enjoy them, then they are on their way to joining the millions of readers who are celebrating Dickens this year.

Pat Thomson





Charles Dickens: Scenes From an Extraordinary Life

Written by Mick Manning Illustrated by Brita Granstöm Frances Lincoln £12.99 ISBN: 978-1847801876

Charles Dickens: Hard Times and Great Expectations Written by Alan Taylor Argyll £5.99 ISBN: 978-1906134679

Charles Dickens: A Very Peculiar History Written by Fiona Macdonald Book House £7.99 ISBN: 978-1908177155

Charles Dickens: A Lifetime of Storytelling; A Legacy of Change Templar £14.99 ISBN: 978-1848771178

Charles Dickens and Friends Marcia Williams Walker £10.99 ISBN: 978-0744592320

Oliver Twist OUP £6.99 ISBN: 978-0192729668

Published through Puffin £6.99

A Tale of Two Cities ISBN: 978-0141325545

Great Expectations ISBN: 978-0141330136

A Christmas Carol ISBN: 978-0141324524

Oliver Twist ISBN: 978-0141324524



Springheeled Jack Written by Philip Pullman Corgi £4.99 ISBN: 978-0440862291

Sapphire Battersea Written by Jacqueline Wilson Doubleday £12.99 ISBN: 978-0385618922

Barnaby Grime: the curse of the werewolf Corgi £5.99 ISBN: 978-0552556217

Oliver Twisted Written by J. D. Sharpe Egmont £6.99 ISBN: 978-1405258173

Joe Rat Written by Matt Barratt Random House £5.99 ISBN: 978-1862302181

A Christmas Carol Illustrated by Robert Ingpen Templar £14.99 ISBN: 978-1840115017

A Christmas Carol Illustrated by P. J. Lynch Walker £9.99 ISBN: 9781406305791

A Christmas Carol Illustrated by Quentin Blake Pavilion £9.99 ISBN: 978-1843651659

