

How and Why to Read Dickens

How to Read Dickens – 5 Tips

By Norrie Epstein from *The Friendly Dickens*, 1998

1. Unlike with many contemporary novels, with Charles Dickens' work the destination doesn't matter; it's the journey that counts. Savor each word: don't rush. And don't try to think too logically! You are entering a different universe, where people are the same and yet not the same. And remember that truth is not always literal. (To paraphrase a Zen proverb: Before you read Dickens, a bowl is a bowl and tea is tea. While you are reading Dickens, a bowl is no longer a bowl and tea is no longer tea. And after you've read Dickens, nothing is ever the same again.)
2. Read like a child, i.e., allow yourself to slip into Dickens's world completely. Let go the desire to "find out what happens." The plots are the least interesting part of Dickens—the real pleasure is in the reading itself.
3. If tempted to skip something that looks boring, and it's either skip it or not finish the book, skip it.
4. Expect the author to make mistakes. He is not an impersonal god perfected by dozens of editors at a vast publishing empire. He wrote fast. He wrote to entertain.
5. Read aloud! Dickens spoke his characters' lines as he wrote.

Why Are We Still Reading Dickens?

By Jon Michael Varese, 4 September 2009,
The (London) Guardian

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 BBC1'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.

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 MrMicawbers, the MrsJellybys, 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. ☺



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