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Julia Golding

What did Dickens ever do for you?

A personal journey through the works of Charles Dickens. Novelist, Julia Golding, finds what he has to teach lies in the dust heaps.

I loved the Olympics Opening Ceremony back in July but it did prompt me to ponder how much was left out from our culture. Imagine you have your I Spy book of Britishness in front of you (a series which in itself is an icon of a 1970s childhood and boring car journeys in the Ford Cortina). Let's consult our list. We had Shakespeare, Bond, Mr Bean, JK Rowling, Peter Pan, Lewis Carroll (spot the Red Queen anyone?), Ian Fleming again in the Child Catcher, Elgar, many varieties of contemporary music – tick, tick, tick. But one glaring exception in this bicentennial year of his birth was a nod to our most famous novelist: Charles Dickens.

I want to take this opportunity to put Dickens in my own opening ceremony. Give him a rousing thump on the Evelyn Glennie percussion kit as he dances around the stadium taking his applause. Let us allow him to take some credit for the first section of industrialisation as a reflection on *Hard Times* (surely the men in stove pipe hats had something of Gradgrind about them?). His Tiny Tim could have been tucked up in bed with the other children in the NHS sequence. His Bill Sykes or Fagin could have numbered among the villains to be defeated.

Why does Dickens deserve to be there? Well, to answer my own question posed in the title, what he has done for me is dazzle me with his ability to weave a tapestry of society from the scraps and oddities – a rag rug that under his own strange magical touch makes the definitive picture. I find many of his lead characters pallid and uninteresting, particularly his girl-women, but my hat goes off to his supporting cast. There are too many to mention and an extraordinary number have entered into our everyday speech, sometimes leaving behind their origins. To be a Scrooge. A Pecksniffian politician. To propose a Gradgrindian policy. Flick through the works of Dickens and you stumble across someone who sums up a way of being, many of them unpleasant.

When was your own introduction to Dickens? Film or book? Stage play or cartoon? Muppets or David Lean? He has been adapted repeatedly for television, partly I suspect because he provides such excellent material for the fantastic character actors with which our country is peculiarly blessed. In preparation for writing this article I searched back through my memory to find the first time I met him on the page. I concluded that I first shook hands with Dickens at the early age of ten. It was a chance encounter; I had worked my way through the classroom library and found some abandoned books on the bottom shelf. Among them was *Oliver Twist*. I admit I found it a tough read (I was expecting the storyline of *Oliver!*) but that experience began a lifelong appreciation for his work and an inkling that stories on the page are different experiences from those that reach the screen – richer, stranger, more complex. The echoes of a doppelgänger in the shadowy character of Monks – entirely missed out of the musical; the callousness of the Poor Law system's baby farms with the unmaternal Mrs Mann; the intricacies of Fagin's gang – so much more than 'You've got to pick a pocket or two'. The Artful Dodger is not a perky chap but an older boy 'grooming' Oliver. Yes, the

dodger is funny – particularly when he is finally caught and sentenced to transportation – but he has more edge than the Lionel Bart version. And one other big difference: Fagin does not dance off into the sunset. He is hanged at Newgate, screaming with horror at his fate. I was struck that the kindly Mr Brownlow deems it suitable to take Oliver to see Fagin in the condemned cell. There is a debate in the book whether the place is suitable for a child but of course we have seen that children do get sentenced and maybe this is a chilling message that even the angelic Oliver could have come to this fate had not Monks tried to destroy him and by mistake been the instrument of his salvation. The dark places Dickens takes us to are very dark indeed.

A second exposure to the works of Dickens came in my secondary school when in Year Nine we read *Hard Times* out loud chapter by chapter. I can't say it went down well with the majority but, for those of us who didn't consider reading akin to taking a dose of castor oil, we enjoyed the grittiness, the ugliness of his portrait of life in a mill town. There has never been a better argument made for the place of the arts and creative thinking in education than in this book. If anything deserves to be on the National Curriculum (or at least the reading list of the ministers and officials who invent the curriculum) then *Hard Times* is the one. I think it was also at this time that I realised just how much of Dickens' writings there were. My school library had a whole shelf and that was not the complete collection. He was an Everest in reading and I was still pottering about in the Munros.

I had another nod in his direction at University when we had a term on 'The Victorians' – an impossible task as the lecturers well knew because almost every novel of this period in length is the equivalent of a director's cut movie, demanding endurance from those who sit through it. I read a few of Dickens' best known at that time, but I did not conquer the summit of reading all of them until I was working for the Foreign Office, on a posting to the Embassy in Warsaw. British classics were among the limited stock in the English Language bookshop so I set myself heading up the north face and got reading.

Standing at the top of the Dickens-Everest, was the journey worth it? Aside from the pleasure of being able to say I had done it, I was surprised by the brilliance of some of his less famous novels. There is a distinct pleasure in reading them in chronological order, to see how he changed as a writer. If you haven't yet given your time to the late work, *Our Mutual Friend*, for example, I would encourage you to do so. The image of the dust heaps, finding value in what has been thrown away, is as powerful as the fog in *Bleak House*. But please take your time. His books are not a Dan Brown thriller. The Victorians never used one word of description when fifty would do. I would speculate that this was because reading aloud or in private was their cinema and television rolled into one. The very wordiness of the books are the equivalent of panoramic Zulu style vistas or Peter Jackson CGI special effects and the readers would be educated in noticing just how cleverly they were handled; in the same way we notice when Gollum is more realistically rendered or Superman seems to fly without strings. In the main, Dickens tells good stories with many twists, keeping you gripped even when you think you know the end. However, my main point, and where I am going to spend the rest of this article, is how reading Dickens can change your mind about what we today dismiss as society's misfits.

Many of the great Russian writers of the nineteenth century share Dickens' approach of taking the bizarre and unlovely as material for their books. Most famous is Roskolnikov, the murderer in Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*; but other examples include the terminally

ill Ivan Ilyich in Tolstoy's novella bearing his name; and most of the characters in Chekov's plays and short stories. In fact, I don't think I like a single character in Chekov but he probably wouldn't care a hoot that I had that reaction. Reflecting on his craft, Chekov writes in his letters:

'A writer is not a confectioner, not a dealer in cosmetics, not an entertainer; he is a man bound under compulsion, by the realisation of his duty and by his conscience. To a chemist, nothing on earth is unclean. A writer must be as objective as a chemist.' ¹

Dickens would heartily disagree with the sentiment that a writer should not be an entertainer, but his compulsion to what others consider 'unclean' matches that of the Russian master of the short story.

Dickens' objectivity is of a very different sort to Chekov's. We are always clear on the moral framework in which Dickens is writing, which you could sum up as a belief that exploitation of the innocent is wrong and that virtue should be rewarded. He would despise objectivity that does not speak out when it sees a wrong; indeed Dickens howls at society when he considers political decisions or societal failings lie behind an individual's suffering. His kind of objectivity is found in the enthusiasm of the Chekovian scientist to examine and dissect what goes on around us. No one is too lowly for his notice – indeed that makes him or her even more attractive to Dickens, you suspect, as an epidemiologist loves a new ugly bug. And he enjoys his creations in all their awful glory. Dickens is not repulsed by even the most greasy, vile villain – rather, he is fascinated.

You don't have to search far for examples. His novels are a compendium of the downright weird. Silas Wegg (*Our Mutual Friend*) is motivated for much of the novel by a desire to get his amputated leg back from the hospital that kept it as a specimen. This leads him to cheat and plot against the affable Mr Boffin, who did him no harm other than give him a job as his reader. Krook (*Bleak House*), the rag and bottle merchant, a malign presence in the boarding house, definitely in need of a serious de-clutter, but who is granted a most spectacular death. Uriah Heep, the devious clerk in *Great Expectations*, who is so very 'umble. Wackford Squeers, *Nicholas Nickleby*, the schoolmaster whose name tells you everything you need to know about him. I could go on.

Where did Dickens turn up his oddities? I think this may be one of those proofs that real life is often stranger than fiction. The spontaneous combustion of Krook was taken from a newspaper account. Magpie Dickens collected such strange gems and used them, only to be accused of being too fanciful. *This doesn't really happen. Oh yes, it does*, he would argue. And of course, he is allowed to be as elaborate, as Byzantine as he likes for this, after all, is fiction.

Dickens went about his research in a hands-on manner, walking the streets of London late at night with seemingly little fear for his safety. One gets the impression working class city people got used to seeing odd middle class gents peering at them as there were a lot of people doing the same thing at the time Dickens was pounding his beat – Gladstone popping out to save prostitutes; Engels and Marx pondering the working classes' revolutionary potential; Mayhew surveying them; Dr Barnado trying to help them. Dickens, however, stands out as really knowing the characters that inhabit his contemporary's *London Labour and the London Poor*. Henry Mayhew's survey introduces you to the mudlarks, prostitutes, second hand

clothes sellers, the Lucifer match girl. Mayhew interviews them and draws them, while Dickens dramatises them. Mayhew has the tendency to see them as representative of a class of character; Dickens delights in their uniqueness. And what saves these characters from Dickens' cloying reflex towards sentimentality lavished upon his young and innocent protagonists is that the oddballs are stronger than this emotion and, you feel, would laugh Dickens out of court if he turned his gentler treatment on them. Unrepentant, cursing, small minded, cruel – how we love them.

Dickens had become such a familiar part of our culture that we are in danger of ignoring that his decision to anatomise his society in this way was a choice made by the artist, a departure with the past, and one of the chief reasons why he remains worth celebrating. Think what came before him in British literature. The literary lion that dominated the salons a few decades ahead of Dickens was Walter Scott. Dickens would have thought his predecessor's fame unassailable. Have you read any of Scott's novels? I imagine quite a few of you, especially if you are under fifty, will admit that you have not and those of you who have will probably have only leafed through *Ivanhoe*, *Rob Roy* and *Waverley*.

As you will have noticed with my assault on Everest, I like to set myself literary targets and Scott has featured in the past on my 'To Do' list. I must have read about ten or more of his novels before I gave up on the project. They are enjoyable. They are well plotted. There are hundreds of really good reasons why you should read them. So why has Scott faded from public view, even in his homeland of Scotland where he is remembered as a giant of letters but rarely read?

My theory is that the problem for a modern reader is that his characters are far less memorable than those that people a Dickens' novel. Reading a Scott story is like watching an actor playing the role of Rob Roy rather than being the hero. There is an early nineteenth century staginess about everyone in the books, even if they are acting out dramas from much earlier times. I admit there are exceptions – *The Heart of Midlothian* comes to mind – but I struggle to recall names and characters, remembering the books as high-flown speeches laced through plots. I don't experience anything like this difficulty with the sprawling mass of Dickens' novels, though they are unashamedly stogy too – even melodramatic. They fizz and pop with moments that capture your imagination and cannot be forgotten. Scrooge's dismissal of Marley as piece of undigested cheese; Oliver wanting some more; Nicholas taking care of Smike; the little dolls' clothes maker berating her drunkard father. When I stop to think about his books, they crowd into my imagination like the Gad's Hill portrait of Dickens himself surrounded by his characters.

Or compare Dickens to a French contemporary, the poet, Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867). His *Les Fleurs du Mal* takes the underworld of Paris as one of his main themes. These are wonderful poems and again, well worth your time if you have never dipped into them. In contrast to Dickens, the voice of the poems (Baudelaire's view? I'm not sure) just doesn't seem to like people very much. Perhaps there is someone reading this who can persuade me otherwise, but as the poet walks through his Paris and finds flowers in the cesspit of life, they seem rotted and twisted like we are: 2

*Tu le connais, lecteur, ce monstre délicat,
–Hypocrite lecteur, –mon semblable, –mon frère!*

There is much to relish in this devilish energy, the Mephistophelian viewpoint. You sense the poet is having jolly good time wallowing with the prostitutes and the drunkards, enjoying his hate. Yet he does not try for the objectivity that Dickens displays – the relishing for relishing sake. The poet is grinding home a message, rubbing our noses in it, so to speak, like puppies that need house training in our own horribleness. Dickens stops earlier in an attitude, which I would sum up as: 'isn't he/she awful and wonderful at the same time?' I don't believe he expects us to see ourselves in a Wegg or a Squeers – he created them too narrow-minded to have such self knowledge – but we are to recognise them as part of the society we share.

Where does this attitude come from in Dickens? Is it a religious one of seeing Christ in your brother even when they are the most terrible of sinners? Thinking about Dickens' religious views as reflected through his novels, you come away with surprisingly little. His characters who are godfearing seem to be so because it was what was expected of decent men and women. They tend to speak in terms of a deity guiding their ends – akin to the novelist plotting out their lives – rather than a personal faith. Jesus Christ is not often mentioned as I recall. 'Goodness' rather than 'God-ness' is the objective of his admirable folk. Claire Tomalin, Dickens' most recent biographer, finds little to say on the subject of Dickens' religion but concludes that

Dickens disliked and mocked displays of piety, but he maintained a reverential attitude towards the idea of God throughout his life. 3

This doesn't say much, does it? I suspect he was too engaged in the here-and-now to have much time for the hereafter. Though he was a man with many personal failings, he cannot be faulted for the small and large kindnesses he did his fellow men and women. His charity was seen in action as well as a message propounded from the pulpit of his novels. And no Christmas would be complete without a showing somewhere of *A Christmas Carol* – his spiritual message that generosity leads to happiness reaches more people every year than the Archbishop of Canterbury's Christmas Day sermon.

If good religious people are just not that interesting to Dickens' imagination, fire lights in his belly when he sees bad people pretending to be good. Dickens is much better at hypocrites, like Uncle Pumblechook (*Great Expectations*) who is able to turn the parable of the Prodigal Son into a lesson in market economics of pigs and the need for young boys to be grateful to them that 'brought them up by hand' like a piglet for slaughter. And Dickens knows exactly how to treat these people: let them hoist themselves with their own petard. Vengeance is unnecessary when the sin entails its own destruction.

But if you are going to look for a spiritual outlook in Dickens, something to enrich your own, I think you can't do better than to think about the way he rehabilitates the refuse – taking his soldering iron and 're-fusing' them back into our social picture. He may not have much time for Jesus but I can't help but think Jesus would have had a lot of time for him as he would have understood the delight in the fragmented, broken pieces of humanity Dickens uses as his material. After all, isn't that the very stuff God uses to build his church?



Essex born author, **Julia Golding**, writes for children and young adults. Married with three children, she lives in Oxford between two rivers, surrounded by gargoyles, beautiful sandstone buildings and ancient trees. Her first novel, *The Diamond of Drury Lane*, won the Waterstone's Children's Book Prize 2006 and the Nestle Children's Book Prize 2006 (formerly known as the Smarties Prize). She was also chosen by Waterstone's in 2007 as one of their 'Twenty-five authors for the future'. *Empty Quarter* was longlisted for the Carnegie Award 2009, as was *Wolf Cry* in 2010. In the US, *Secret of the Sirens* won the honor book medal of the Green Earth Book Award. She also writes under the pen names Eve Edwards and Joss Stirling.

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Endnotes

- 1 Chekov, Letter to Madame M V Kiselyov, 14 January 1887. Available at Project Gutenberg - <https://web.archive.org/web/20130807212444/http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/6408/pg6408.html>
- 2 Baudelaire 1857
- 3 Tomalin 2011: 137