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Opening extract from

Charles Dickens: A Life of Storytelling

Written by

Catherine Wells-Cole

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A chimney sweep and his boy



[K.] No. 1. Ground Plan.





Acknowledgements

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Baby 'Phil' in the Workhouse





Fagin in his cell, from Oliver Twist



Mrs Bumble and Mrs Corney Taking Tea, from Oliver Twist

Publisher's Note

This book has been compiled with reference to the many facsimiles and transcriptions of Dickens's work. Slight amendments have been made to the original source material for the ease of the modern audience. The original manuscripts of most of Dickens's novels were bequeathed to his friend John Forster. They are now conserved at the National Art Library in the Victoria and Albert Museum. The story synopses featured in this book are intended only as snapshots of the works. There is no substitute for reading the novels in their entirety, and savouring the many detailed characters and stories.

Charles Dickens

A Lifetime of Storytelling; a Legacy of Change



Written by Catherine Wells-Cole

Including extracts from the works of
Charles Dickens

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Christmas

Before Dickens's time, Christmas was not the major festival it is now. Although houses were often decorated and children received some presents, it was otherwise a very quiet day. People did not give parties, or send each other Christmas cards; they did not have Christmas trees, or eat turkey and plum pudding. But the vast success of *A Christmas Carol* persuaded the Victorians that this was how Christmas should be. Dickens has sometimes been called 'the man who invented Christmas', and while this is an exaggeration, it is true that the way Christmas is celebrated now owes an enormous amount to him.

Happy, happy Christmas, that can win us back to the delusions of our childish days; that can . . . transport the sailor and the traveller, thousands of miles away, back to his own fire-side and his quiet home!

THE PICKWICK PAPERS





In A Christmas Carol, *Ebenezer Scrooge is warned of the perils of his miserly behaviour and shown the joy of Christmas by a series of ghostly visitations. These 1843 illustrations are by John Leech.*

On the Christmas Pudding

Oh, a wonderful pudding. Bob Cratchit said, and calmly too, that he regarded it as the greatest success achieved by Mrs Cratchit since their marriage… Everybody had something to say about it, but nobody said or thought it was at all a small pudding for a large family. It would have been flat heresy to do so. Any Cratchit would have blushed to hint at such a thing.
Then Bob proposed:
'A Merry Christmas to us all, my dears. God bless us."
Which all the family re-echoed.
"God bless us every one," said Tiny Tim, the last of all.

A Christmas Carol

Christmas Traditions

Christmas trees first became popular when Prince Albert, Queen Victoria's husband, brought one to England from his home country, Germany, and decorated it for the royal children. Dickens played a role in popularising these trees, including them in his scenes of Christmas celebration. He created an image of Christmas as a time of roaring fires on snowy nights; of families celebrating cosily together; of good cheer, fun, hospitality and, most importantly, of charity towards those less well off.





Childhood

Charles John Huffam Dickens was born in Portsmouth on 7 February 1812. His father John earned a good wage as a civil servant in the Navy – enough to mean his family was respectable, though not enough to class them as rich. During Charles's childhood, their fortunes were to change, taking him from comfort to drudgery, through experiences that would haunt his work for the rest of his life.



Charles Dickens was born in this modest house in Portsmouth, England. In 1814, his father's job demanded that the family move to London and then to Chatham in Kent.

Happiness in Chatham

The Dickens family moved to the naval port of Chatham when Charles was five years old. The years at Chatham were the happiest of Charles's childhood as he loved playing at soldiers and watching the sailing ships and military parades in the naval dockyard. He was quite a sickly little boy and small for his age, but he was also bright and very fond of reading. He enjoyed school and his imagination was fired by books like *Robinson Crusoe* and *The Arabian Nights*.



Even now, famous and happy... in my dreams I wander desolately back to that time of my life.
CHARLES DICKENS

Dickens worked at Warren's Blacking Factory from the age of 12. Conditions in the warehouse were harsh; Dickens later described it as a 'tumble-down old house, literally overrun with rats'. His job was to cover the sticky pots of blacking with paper, tie them with string and cut the paper to fit, working for long hours and earning very little money.

Dickens purchased his own food from the six shillings a week he earned at the blacking factory. He remembered buying half-price stale buns at confectioners' shops to keep himself fed.

Family Life

From an uncertain beginning, Charles Dickens was to become the most famous writer of the Victorian age. He married and had a large family, and while his sons seemed to inherit their grandfather's lack of financial judgement, Charles himself was hardworking and extremely creative. From the autobiographical *David Copperfield* to the Pocket family in *Great Expectations*, Dickens drew upon his own life to explore the theme of Victorian family values in his novels.

Home is a name, a word, it is a strong one; stronger than magician ever spoke, or spirit ever answered to...
MARTIN CHUZZLEWIT



As a child, Dickens had seen Gad's Hill Place and admired it. By 1856 he was able to buy the mansion, originally as an investment, but it soon became his country retreat.

Enduring Themes

Dickens wrote very directly about family life – detailed observations of the comedy and tragedy of the home, often with a warmth and tenderness that was missing from his own experiences. He did not underestimate public interest in the details of private lives. This made his work extremely popular in its own age, and it has also stood the test of time.

Charles fathered seven sons and three daughters with his wife, Catherine Hogarth. All survived past childhood, except his youngest daughter, Dora. Dickens named all of his sons after great English writers, except the first, who took his own name. Sir Henry Fielding Dickens and Mary 'Mamie' Dickens both wrote memoirs of their father and some of his later descendents continue to follow literary careers.

...brought up the largest family with the smallest disposition for doing anything for themselves...
CHARLES DICKENS



The Pawnbrokers — Sketches by Boz

Fatherhood

In *Great Expectations*, Dickens refers to the children of the Pocket family 'tumbling up', rather than being brought up. He had ten children with his wife Catherine, and was a kind father but held a strict regime of work. His marriage ended in 1858 under rumours of his unfaithful behaviour. Before her death, Catherine gave her collection of letters to her daughter Kate, asking her to "Give these to the British Museum, that the world may know he loved me once."



Grip the raven – Charles Dickens owned several birds, but Grip was his favourite. He appears in Barnaby Rudge *and went on to inspire Edgar Allen Poe's poem* The Raven. *After his death, Grip was stuffed by a taxidermist.*



John Dickens – Charles's father. John was the source of the character Mr Micawber in David Copperfield.



Elizabeth – Charles's mother. Charles was the second of her eight children. He used her as the source of Mrs Nickleby in Nicholas Nickleby.



Catherine – Charles's wife. Together they had ten children before a very public separation in 1858.



Charles's four eldest children, with Grip the raven. The children loved him for his antics and mimicry.



Charles with two of his daughters, Kate and Mary (Mamie).