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opening extract of

who was...

charles dickens

the man who invented christmas

written by

andrew billen

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CHAPTER ONE
A Carol is Read

Have you ever had a story read to you by someone really good at reading aloud? I don't just mean someone who can hold your attention and doesn't stumble or flick through the pages to see how much further it is to the end of the chapter. I mean someone who can read to a group and make everyone think the story is being told just to them, someone who can do the different voices without sounding daft, someone who actually seems to turn into the characters as they speak. I mean someone who can make you laugh out loud and, the next minute, make you cry.

Perhaps you know a reader as good as that. Now imagine someone who was ten times as talented, a

person so brilliant that they could charge money to read to hundreds of people at once. And now imagine that this fellow – for it is a man I am thinking of – also wrote the story, just as he wrote scores of others, all of them so much admired that people agreed he was the greatest writer in the world. The man you are imagining is Charles Dickens and, as we begin his story, he is about to begin reading.

It does not matter much where he was. It could have been the town hall in Birmingham, which is where in the Christmas of 1853, when he was forty-one, he began this second career performing his own work. But it could have been in any number of towns and cities where he performed in the next sixteen years, earning a great deal of money for himself: London, Reading, Peterborough, Sheffield, Coventry, Rochester, Edinburgh, Dublin, Belfast, Darlington, Huddersfield, York, Halifax, Scarborough, Brighton, Preston, Bradford (where one time 3,700 people came) or Folkestone. Maybe he is not in a town hall, but in a theatre, a warehouse, a bookseller's, a hotel or even a carpenter's shop (as he was that time in Folkestone). As for the audience, anyone might be in it, young and old, famous and unknown, poor and rich. One time Queen Victoria

came. In Birmingham, where it all began, Dickens insisted that tickets should be sold for just a few pennies so that most people could afford to come.



Wherever he was and whoever he was performing to, the staging would be the same. He would stand behind a low reading desk that was covered with a red cloth. On each side of it were small ledges, on the right for his water, on the left for his gloves and handkerchief. At the bottom of the desk's legs was a rail for resting his foot

on. Behind him was a large maroon screen, the same shade as the carpet before him. Against this backcloth, his face would be brightly lit by gas lamps so everyone could see his expressions. In his hand he would hold a copy of the book, its pages marked with notes to himself such as "cheerful" or "stern", but he had rehearsed so carefully he would hardly glance at it. There was one rule he had: no one was allowed to sit behind him. One of his hobbies was hypnotism, and maybe these audiences were half-hypnotised themselves. He wanted everyone to look into his bright, intelligent eyes that half the time crinkled with good humour and half the time were as sorrowful as a spaniel's.

At eight o'clock precisely he stepped on to the stage. He was not a tall man but he was slim and held himself well. His long brown hair was parted on the left and had a tendency to fly away from from his scalp. A moustache almost covered the top of his mouth and then came down the sides to join a raggedy goatee beard that fell so far down his chin that sometimes it hid his bow tie. He would wear a dark suit but a colourful waistcoat, across which stretched the chain of his gold watch. From his buttonhole sprouted a rose or a geranium.

Even when he was not on stage, there was something

very theatrical about Charles Dickens.

As he walked on, he would be met by loud applause. He would pretend not to notice and, only when it had finally died down, would he speak. "My good friends," he'd begin, a slight hissing sound accompanying that final "s". And there would be more clapping because everyone felt they knew him so well that he was a friend. In a way they did know him, for books usually tell us something about the people who have written them and Dickens's do more than most. His are full of versions of the people he met and knew and mocked and loved and feared. Acquaintances would sometimes write to him protesting about how they had been "used" in his novels. His books also contain many versions of Dicken's himself as a boy, a young man, a husband and a father. But on the page these characters take on their own life and become something different again.

Some of the characters have become almost more famous than the books they are in. Even if you had never heard of *The Pickwick Papers,* you would probably recognise Mr Pickwick, that jolly stout figure with a bald head and circular spectacles. If, as I hope you will, you read *Nicholas Nickleby*, you will not forget Nicholas with his scarf and his sweep of dark hair or his

silly, over-chatty mother whom Dickens based on his own. But you are even less likely to forget the horrible schoolteacher – Wackford Squeers, with his single eye when "popular prejudice runs in favour of two". You may not have yet read *Oliver Twist* but you probably know the film *Oliver!*. I bet you remember the name of the shrivelled old thief with the "villainous looking and repulsive face" who captures Oliver and trains him to pick a pocket or two: it's Fagin. Dickens was best of all at thinking up creepy characters. Pip is the young hero who tells the story of *Great Expectations* but just as important to the story is Magwitch, the escaped prisoner he meets on the marshes, a fearful limping man "soaked in water, smothered in blood, and lamed by stones". If Magwitch does not make your flesh crawl then Miss Havisham, whom Pip meets not long after, certainly will. Ditched by her fiancé on her wedding day, she lives alone in an old house where she is dressed in her tatty bridal dress and surrounded by the food and decorations prepared for her wedding reception. At the end of the book, her ragged wedding gown catches on fire. Yet her death is not as grisly as that of Krook, the withered old keeper of the rag and bottle warehouse in *Bleak House*: without anyone's help he just explodes, his "glutinous

ashes" ending up clinging to the walls and ceiling.

A famous painting shows Dickens snoozing on a chair by his desk while around him float characters from his books. It is splendid, but it does not show a fraction of the people he invented. By one calculation his books contain 3,500 characters, good, bad, rich, poor, young, old, tragic, comic – every one different. The books they were born into are still to be found in every library and decent bookshop today: *The Old Curiosity Shop, Barnaby Rudge, Martin Chuzzlewit, Dombey and Son, David Copperfield, Bleak House, Hard Times, Little Dorrit, A Tale of Two Cities* and *Our Mutual Friend.* They were all good enough in themselves to be immediate best sellers but there is another reason why people were so excited by them. In those days it was the custom to publish novels chapter by chapter in a magazine, so that a new episode would appear every month. Like a television soap opera today, the stories got people hooked. On publication day people would queue outside waiting for bookshops to open.

Sometimes the latest chapter would contain terrible news. In the winter of 1840 it seemed as if the whole world was following the story of Little Nell, the thirteen-year-old heroine of *The Old Curiosity Shop*

who wanders the country with her grandfather, the owner of the junk shop. Finally she is worn out by exhaustion and the strain of looking after the old man. In New York, Americans gathered at the harbour waiting for the new chapter to arrive by boat. "Is Little Nell dead?" the crowds called out to the British passengers as they disembarked. In England Lord Jeffrey, a famous judge who liked to read Dickens while juries were out considering their verdicts, broke down in tears when he read that she had, indeed, died. An Irish politician tossed the magazine out of the compartment of the train he was on, yelling: "He should not have killed her!"

So when he read to his devoted fans, Dickens well knew how to move them to tears. Luckily, he knew just as well how to make them laugh. But he also knew how to make them think, particularly about people less fortunate than themselves. There was one story that, above all, he enjoyed reading aloud. It starts with the words: "Marley was dead: to begin with. There is no doubt whatever about that." They are gloomy words but also very well chosen for they introduce the best ghost story ever written, an unusual ghost story with a happy ending but the sort of happy ending that makes you cry and makes you think. The book is *A Christmas Carol.*