

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-85914-1 - The Cambridge Introduction to Charles Dickens

Jon Mee

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

*The Cambridge Introduction to
Charles Dickens*

Charles Dickens became immensely popular early on in his career as a novelist, and his appeal continues to grow with new editions prompted by recent television and film adaptations, as well as large numbers of students studying the Victorian novel. This lively and accessible introduction to Dickens focuses on the extraordinary diversity of his writing. Jon Mee discusses Dickens's novels, journalism and public performances, the historical contexts and his influence on other writers. In the process, five major themes emerge: Dickens the entertainer; Dickens and language; Dickens and London; Dickens, gender, and domesticity; and the question of adaptation, including Dickens's adaptations of his own work. These interrelated concerns allow readers to start making their own new connections between his famous and less widely read works and to appreciate fully the sheer imaginative richness of his writing, which particularly evokes the dizzying expansion of nineteenth-century London.

Jon Mee is Professor of Romanticism Studies at the University of Warwick. With Tom Keymer, he edited *The Cambridge Companion to English Literature, 1740–1830* (2004).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-85914-1 - The Cambridge Introduction to Charles Dickens

Jon Mee

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

The Cambridge Introduction to Charles Dickens

JON MEE



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-85914-1 - The Cambridge Introduction to Charles Dickens

Jon Mee

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore,
São Paulo, Delhi, Dubai, Tokyo, Mexico City

Cambridge University Press

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521676342

© Jon Mee 2010

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception
and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,
no reproduction of any part may take place without the written
permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2010

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Mee, Jon.

The Cambridge introduction to Charles Dickens / Jon Mee.

p. cm. – (Cambridge introductions to literature)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-521-85914-1 (hardback) – ISBN 978-0-521-67634-2 (pbk.)

1. Dickens, Charles, 1812–1870–Criticism and interpretation. 2. Dickens, Charles,
1812–1870–Literary style. 3. Dickens, Charles, 1812–1870–Knowledge–London
(England) 4. Dickens, Charles, 1812–1870–Political and social views.

5. Dickens, Charles, 1812–1870–Adaptations. I. Title. II. Series.

PR4588.M44 2010

823'.8–dc22

2010021908

ISBN 978-0-521-85914-1 Hardback

ISBN 978-0-521-67634-2 Paperback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or
accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in
this publication, and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is,
or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-85914-1 - The Cambridge Introduction to Charles Dickens

Jon Mee

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

For my sister, Rebecca Richmond, and Sharmila, dearest of readers

Contents

<i>List of illustrations</i>	<i>page</i> viii
<i>Preface</i>	ix
<i>Chronology</i>	xii
<i>List of abbreviations</i>	xv
1 Dickens the entertainer: ‘People must be amuthed’	1
2 Dickens and language: ‘What I meanersay’	20
3 Dickens and the city: ‘Animate London ... inanimate London’	43
4 Dickens, gender, and domesticity: ‘Be it ever ... so ghastly ... there’s no place like it’	64
5 Adapting Dickens: ‘He do the police in different voices’	84
Afterword: Dickens’s world	99
<i>Notes</i>	101
<i>Further reading</i>	107
<i>Index</i>	112

Illustrations

3.1 Wrapper for <i>Little Dorrit</i> , no. 7, June 1856	page 49
3.2 ‘Dakin’s Tea and Coffee Company’, <i>Bleak House</i> , no. 6, August 1852	50
5.1 ‘Tom All Alone’s’, <i>Bleak House</i> , no. 14, April 1853	87
5.2 Still from 1917 Fox production of <i>A Tale of Two Cities</i> (1917)	93
5.3 Still from David Lean’s <i>Oliver Twist</i> (1948)	96

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-85914-1 - The Cambridge Introduction to Charles Dickens

Jon Mee

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Preface

Years ago now, when, like Magwitch, I arrived back in England from Australia, I was plunged into the experience of teaching Dickens at University College, Oxford. Unlike the returned transportee, I didn't come to serious harm beneath the grinding wheels of the paddle steamer, although it was something of a close call. Nor did I find myself confined in prison. Far from it, in fact, as the experience of encountering the novels afresh (I had not taught them in Australia) was to prove one of those painful pleasures that proliferate in Dickens. Painful because, like Matthew Pocket, I had become a tutorial 'grinder'. Trying to teach various combinations of the novels to individual students over the course of a single week could culminate in a final hazy Friday afternoon tutorial, where every character seemed to have crowded together in one huge canvas. Mrs Gamp and Mr Micawber, to name but two, may have turned up in more than one novel – sometimes, I'm afraid, together. The pleasure, of course, was in the sheer imaginative richness of the writing, and listening to undergraduates respond to it with such obvious enthusiasm. This book is conceived of as an 'introduction' to this wonderful diversity rather than a guide that painstakingly offers a commentary on each novel. Guides of that kind are numerous, and many of them are excellent, but I've attempted a more inductive approach by using five topics to open up the richness of the Dickens world, including the question of adaptation, something that started while Dickens was alive and to which Dickens himself contributed via public performances of his work. My aim has not been to consecrate great works, which they are by any measure, but to open them up to new pleasures in the experience of new readers, including you, I hope, dear reader. The five chapters focus on the issues that have always attracted me as a reader and teacher of Dickens. As a set of concerns, each has grown out of and relates back to the others, partly through associations that have often been unconscious to me, but which I hope are made more explicit here, and make sense to readers as you make connections for yourselves. As a consequence of this form of address to my subject (and to you), the aim is that the parts should not be detachable but that

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-85914-1 - The Cambridge Introduction to Charles Dickens

Jon Mee

Frontmatter

[More information](#)x *Preface*

the book will have to be read whole as an introduction. It's been written with readability in mind, although I hope not at the expense of the seriousness of some of the issues it develops. I have written in a way that I still believe will be useful to students and general readers, but not in a way that allows you to read just one section, for instance, if you have an essay to write on *A Tale of Two Cities* (not, of course, that I can stop you using the index!). As a consequence of this more personal method, some novels are given more attention than others, especially perhaps *Oliver Twist*, *Dombey and Son*, *Bleak House*, *Great Expectations*, and *Our Mutual Friend*. I have not made these choices on the basis of canonicity, or 'greatness', or even popularity. The choices have been made on the basis of which seems best to enable me to say what I think needs to be said to introduce Dickens. Some readers may, for instance, find rather more of *Barnaby Rudge* than is often the case in books about Dickens. That instance grows out of the peculiar trajectory by which I have come to know and love Dickens, reflecting the fact that, as a professional academic, most of my work has been in the Romantic period rather than the Victorian. No doubt some readers and many experts will find this approach to result in a distortion of *their* Dickens. Even so, my hope is that these readers and experts will find something useful in these pages, even if they don't subscribe to the whole package.

The book is the product of those experiences teaching in Oxford. I am grateful to the undergraduates of University College, who, for ten years, put up with my grinding and sharpened my own wits in return. I also benefited from a series of American summer schools, most especially three sessions of the British School At Oxford (BSAO) under the benign direction of Mike Leslie. Students in all these contexts helped me immensely in understanding Dickens and questioning my own assumptions. My fellow faculty on the BSAO programme were a constant source of encouragement. I am also grateful to Judith Luna for giving me the opportunity to co-edit *Barnaby Rudge* for Oxford World's Classics, my first opportunity to explore my Dickens teaching in print, and to my co-editors Clive Hurst and Iain McCalman. Clive also very helpfully provided access to the Bodleian's holdings of the novels in their weekly or monthly parts. My relationship with Dickens was given an important fillip by co-convening the conference on *A Tale of Two Cities* and the French Revolution held at St Anne's College, Oxford, in July 2006. Colin Jones and Jo McDonagh made the job of running a conference and co-editing the resultant collection of essays an exercise in conviviality. The contributors to the volume considerably expanded the range of my knowledge on a series of fronts, especially, again, in relation to cinema and theatre adaptations. The sad death of one of the contributors, Sally Ledger, just before the collection was published was a terrible loss, not only personally but also for future Dickens scholarship. Academically, I gained

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-85914-1 - The Cambridge Introduction to Charles Dickens

Jon Mee

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Preface* xi

greatly from being present at the workshop she hosted on Dickens and America at the 'Idea of America' conference held at the Institute of English Studies in June 2008. I am grateful to the convenors Ella Dzelainis and Ruth Livesey for inviting me to speak. I have also benefited from conversations about Dickens with Luisa Calè, David Goldie, Peter D. McDonald, and David Paroissien. David Fallon helped immensely with the final presentation of the manuscript. I am grateful for his advice and his enthusiasm. The final version of the typescript was prepared in the Humanities Research Centre of the Australian National University. Magwitch, in this adaptation, makes it back. I am grateful to the Director, Debjani Ganguly, for finding space for me, and to Leena Messina for all her help and support. Gillian Russell very kindly bought me a copy of Michael Slater's excellent biography almost as soon as it arrived in Canberra. Finally, Linda Bree has been a model of patient encouragement as an editor. Any mistakes in what follows, together with all its opinions, remain my own responsibility. Dickens always wished his readers to be companions but had to accept they would go their own ways. I publish this book with the hope that even you recalcitrant readers who disagree with what follows will still want to go on to read and re-read the novels.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-85914-1 - The Cambridge Introduction to Charles Dickens

Jon Mee

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Chronology*

- 1812 Born Charles John Huffham Dickens in Portsmouth (7 February) to John and Elizabeth Dickens.
- 1817 Family moves to Chatham, near Rochester in Kent, where they stay for four years.
- 1821 Dickens begins education at the school of William Giles, a Baptist minister.
- 1822 John Dickens transferred to London. Family moves to 16 Bayham Street, Camden Town.
- 1824 Charles is sent to work at Warren's blacking factory, probably early in February. John Dickens imprisoned for debt in the Marshalsea Prison (20 February – 28 May).
- 1825 Attends Wellington House Academy on Hampstead Road for two years.
- 1827 Family evicted for non-payment of rates (March). Dickens leaves school in May and becomes a clerk at a firm of solicitors, Ellis and Blackmore in Gray's Inn.
- 1828–9 Learns shorthand and works as a freelance court reporter at Doctors' Commons.
- 1830 Falls in love with Maria Beadnell, daughter of a banker.
- 1831–4 Follows his father in starting work as a parliamentary reporter.
- 1832 Considers a career in acting but fails to keep his appointment for audition at Covent Garden Theatre through illness.
- 1833 Publishes first story, 'A Dinner at Poplar Walk', the first of several in the *Monthly Magazine*.
- 1834 Becomes reporter for the *Morning Chronicle*. Meets Catherine Hogarth (August). Publishes stories in various periodicals.
- 1836 Collects previously published stories into his first book, *Sketches by Boz*. Marries Catherine Hogarth (2 April). Serialization of *The Pickwick Papers* from 31 March. His burletta *The Strange Gentleman* opens at the St James's Theatre (29 September) followed

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-85914-1 - The Cambridge Introduction to Charles Dickens

Jon Mee

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Chronology xiii

- by the operetta *The Village Coquettes* (6 December). *Sketches by Boz*, Second Series, published at the end of the year. Resigns from the *Morning Chronicle* to become editor of *Bentley's Miscellany*.
- 1837 Charles Culliford Boz (Charley) Dickens, first of his ten children born (6 January). Death of Mary Hogarth (7 May). *Oliver Twist* serialized in *Bentley's* from February.
- 1838 Edits *Memoirs of Joseph Grimaldi*. First monthly part of *Nicholas Nickleby* published 31 March.
- 1839 Resigns editorship of *Bentley's Miscellany* (31 January).
- 1840 *The Old Curiosity Shop* serialized in *Master Humphrey's Clock* from late April.
- 1841 *Barnaby Rudge* serialized in *Master Humphrey's Clock* from 13 February.
- 1842 In the USA for the first half of the year. *American Notes* published.
- 1843 *Martin Chuzzlewit* published in monthly parts from January 1843. First of his annual Christmas stories, *A Christmas Carol*, published (19 December).
- 1844 Lives with his family in Italy for a year from July. *The Chimes* published (16 December).
- 1845 *The Cricket on the Hearth* published (20 December). Begins composition of the autobiographical fragment (c. 1845–8) finally published in *Forster's Life*.
- 1846 Edits the *Daily News* but resigns abruptly early in February. Family leaves in May to live part of the year in Switzerland and Paris. *Pictures from Italy* published (18 May). *Dombey and Son* published in monthly parts from October.
- 1848 *The Haunted Man* published (19 December).
- 1849 *David Copperfield* published in monthly parts from May.
- 1850 Founds and edits the weekly journal *Household Words* from March.
- 1851 Dickens family moves to Tavistock House (November).
- 1852 *Bleak House* serialized in monthly parts from March.
- 1854 *Hard Times* serialized in *Household Words* from April.
- 1855 Meets Maria Beadnell (now Mrs Winter) again. Lives in Paris (October 1855 – April 1856). *Little Dorrit* published in monthly parts from December 1855.
- 1856 Purchases house at Gad's Hill Place, near Rochester in Kent. Collaborates with Wilkie Collins on *The Frozen Deep*.
- 1857 Directs and acts in *The Frozen Deep* (January). Meets and falls in love with the actress Ellen Ternan.

xiv	<i>Chronology</i>
1858	Gives his first professional public readings (April). Legal separation from Catherine (May). First provincial reading tour (August – November).
1859	Founds and edits the weekly <i>All the Year Round</i> from April. First number features the first part of <i>A Tale of Two Cities</i> .
1860	<i>Great Expectations</i> serialized in <i>All the Year Round</i> from December and succeeds in reviving its flagging sales.
1864	<i>Our Mutual Friend</i> published in monthly installments from the end of April.
1865	Staplehurst train wreck in Kent (9 June). Dickens injured but helps with injured and dying. Later has recurring nightmares about the crash.
1867	Final American reading tour (November 1867 – April 1868).
1870	Resumption of farewell readings in London (January). Audience with Queen Victoria (9 March). Begins serializing <i>The Mystery of Edwin Drood</i> (April). Dies at Gad's Hill on 9 June from a brain haemorrhage.

Abbreviations

<i>Collins a</i>	Philip Collins (ed.), <i>Charles Dickens: The Critical Heritage</i> (London and New York: Routledge, 1971)
<i>Collins b</i>	Philip Collins (ed.), <i>Charles Dickens: The Public Readings</i> (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975)
<i>DSA</i>	<i>Dickens Studies Annual: Essays on Victorian Fiction</i>
<i>Forster</i>	John Forster, <i>The Life of Charles Dickens</i> , 3 vols. (London: Chapman & Hall, 1872–4). New edition, with notes and index by J. W. T. Ley (London: Cecil Palmer, 1928)
<i>J</i>	Michael Slater and John Drew, eds., <i>The Dent Uniform Edition of Dickens’ Journalism</i> , 4 vols. (London: Dent, 1994–2000)
<i>L</i>	<i>The Letters of Charles Dickens</i> , ed. Madeline House, Graham Storey, Kathleen Tillotson et al., 12 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965–2002)
<i>Speeches</i>	<i>Speeches of Charles Dickens</i> , ed. K. J. Fielding (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960)
	References to these sources will be given in the main text. Quotations from the novels are taken from the Penguin paperback editions, published in London, and given in the text, sourced to volume (where relevant), chapter, and page(s) in the format ‘(1: 2, 3)’, and with the following abbreviations:
<i>BH</i>	<i>Bleak House</i> , ed. with an introduction and notes by Nicola Bradbury. Preface by Terry Eagleton (2003)
<i>BR</i>	<i>Barnaby Rudge</i> , ed. with an introduction and notes by John Bowen (2003)
<i>DC</i>	<i>David Copperfield</i> , ed. with an introduction and notes by Jeremy Tambling (2004)
<i>DS</i>	<i>Dombey and Son</i> , ed. with an introduction and notes by Andrew Sanders (2002)
<i>GE</i>	<i>Great Expectations</i> , ed. with an introduction by David Trotter and notes by Charlotte Mitchell (2003)

xvi	<i>List of abbreviations</i>
LD	<i>Little Dorrit</i> , ed. with an introduction by Stephen Wall and notes by Helen Small (2003)
MC	<i>Martin Chuzzlewit</i> , ed. with an introduction and notes by Patricia Ingham (2004)
MED	<i>Mystery of Edwin Drood</i> , ed. with an introduction and notes by David Paroissien (2002)
NN	<i>Nicholas Nickleby</i> , ed. with an introduction and notes by Mark Ford (2003)
OCS	<i>The Old Curiosity Shop</i> , ed. with an introduction and notes by Norman Page (2003)
OMF	<i>Our Mutual Friend</i> , ed. with an introduction and notes by Adrian Poole (1997)
OT	<i>Oliver Twist</i> , ed. with an introduction and notes by Philip Horne (2003)
PI	<i>Pictures from Italy</i> , ed. with an introduction and notes by Kate Flint (2006)
PP	<i>The Pickwick Papers</i> , ed. with an introduction and notes by Mark Wormald (2003)
TTC	<i>A Tale of Two Cities</i> , ed. with an introduction and notes by Richard Maxwell (2003)