Done with Dickens

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Abstract

This article brings a creative-critical approach to bear on my long, and evolving, relationship with Dickens. Through examining the tenacious grip that Dickens has had on my imaginative, emotional, and professional lives, I explore the conundrum of continuing to admire a writer whose ubiquity, personal history, and even style can sometimes cause embarrassment to contemporary publics. In the face of such feelings, and my ambivalence about literary hero-worship, I make a case for Dickens's unique power and lasting relevance. I explore how Dickens has shaped my creative imagination, education, and work as a university lecturer, and how his writing continues to impact on the lives of friends, family, and students. The article takes the form of a creative-critical personal essay, combining autobiographical accounts of growing up in Dickens's Kent, and of engaging with *Great Expectations* at different life stages, with the scholarly perspectives that underpin my publications and university teaching.

Done with Dickens

For a long time, I was embarrassed by my fondness for Dickens. I generally am embarrassed by both literary fandom and single-author scholarship. The over-investment, the raw approbation, the undignified reverence. The misunderstanding, that, as I chose to see it – and largely still do choose to see it – the self shapes history to a greater extent than it is shaped by it. I didn't believe in literary heroes, and I didn't want a relationship with any dead man.

For twenty years, while stealthily reading the complete works, clocking up degrees, and starting to publish my own writing, I tried to shake the attraction or to give evasive answers. Yes, my monograph on emigration literature featured Dickens more than any other canonical author, but it definitely wasn't *about* him. Yes, I was leading a module based on reading *Great Expectations* in serial parts, but it wasn't my idea. My youngest daughter is called Estella, but what of that? Wasn't I a feminist? And didn't I understand exactly what George Henry Lewes meant when he said that Dickens's characters were 'unreal and impossible', like a child's wooden horse (Lewes 146)? Who would wish that on anyone, especially on a girl.

"I'm done with Dickens," I told a colleague who leant me a book to help with a lecture I was writing on Dickens and film, even as the 1901 production of *Scrooge, or Marley's Ghost* – the earliest surviving adaptation of a text by Dickens and one of the earliest films – was flickering its scratchy hauntings on my screen.

Then one morning recently, in that sudden, clear way that sometimes follows a long, scarcely acknowledged period of reflection, my feelings changed. The year had somehow wheeled around to autumn again, and I was preparing a class on literature and the city for my MA group. *Sketches by Boz*: always something of a challenge. Why, I asked myself, did I continually set this quirky, historically contingent, creative set of urban vignettes for my quirky, historically aware, creative groups of Liverpool students?

It didn't take a genius.

It was the beginning of accepting that my ongoing, on and off again – and entirely one-sided – relationship with Dickens was more deliberate than I'd acknowledged. That I was

choosing to set Dickens because I really liked him. That Dickens was a bright, particular, complicated seam in my own personal and intellectual history, as well as so many other people's personal and intellectual histories. And that perhaps we needn't be embarrassed by the histories that shape us. That perhaps, sometimes, the self shapes history after all.

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Thanet. Thanatos. Isle of the Dead. The seaside towns of the Kent district of Thanet stack up along the coast like seagulls perched on the chalk cliffs: sand and the English Channel gaping in between them. Three places ruled my childhood world. Margate, where I was born: then, all ominously rusty funfairs and ambient despair; now, a rapidly gentrifying artists' haven. Ramsgate, where we lived until I turned ten, with its rich fossil pickings and hazy views of France. Then Broadstairs – two miles up the coast and a cut above. On weekends and summer holidays, my mother and I would sometimes walk there, through litter and rockpools and great stretches of tide-turned sand.

There is perhaps – I imagine Dickens as I write – no brighter, prettier, English seaside town than Broadstairs. Its beach is a perfect golden cove. It holds, in memory at least, a dense concentration of characterful, distinctive things: battered mushrooms with salt and vinegar; crystal trees wrought from golden wires on sale in odd boutiques; parakeets wheeling down from the park; snapping hooden horses at folk festivals; coca cola choked with ice. The town boasts that distinctive coastal architecture, far from domestic, that still makes me feel at home: exposed shelters on the promenade, decrepit winter gardens, Italian ice cream parlors like innocent gin palaces, glittering with gelato in glass.

Kent is original Dickens country. Dickens lived in Chatham from the ages of five until ten and often revisited the Kent coast throughout his life (Bentley 293). Deal, Dover, Folkstone, he knew them all, and their watering-places, local characters, houses, and theaters are refreshingly scattered amongst the urban textures of his novels. "It is the hottest long vacation known for many years," he writes in *Bleak House*. "All the young clerks are madly in love, and, according to their various degrees, pant for bliss with the beloved object, at Margate, Ramsgate, or Gravesend" (Dickens 279; ch. 19). "The Tugg's at Ramsgate" is one of the longer 'tales' in the collected 1836 edition of the *Sketches*: another welcome detour from the teeming London streets that shape most of the book, just as so many real Londoners did and do make detours from the city to their nearest coast, my Hackney mother and grandparents among them.

Broadstairs – shabby genteel to its core and full of junkshop clutter and sentimental ballads – is the most Dickensian of all the Kent towns and where Dickens regularly spent his summer holidays from 1839 (MacLeod 41). It is here I first got wind of him. Up on the cliffs is Fort House, where Dickens stayed and wrote much of *David Copperfield* and possibly *Bleak House*. It was what Dickens once termed his "airy nest" and part of the weird seaside architecture I treasured, with its fortress-like walls and eerie elevation (*Letters* 405). Certainly more "Bleak House", its nickname, than Peggotty's boat home, however the facts really lie.

My mother pointed Fort House out to me on our walks, as good mothers do point out features of cultural interest in the hope one might stick.

I scarcely registered it at first: its follyish shape, its daft crenelations, its glamorous history of ink.

But it was there in the background, and, over time, the background has a habit of becoming the foreground. My mother's efforts took root. Here, in Broadstairs, was a writer of note. Dickens was definitely here and materially so: in the clutter, the density, the themed curiosity shops, the local particularism. Who could not imagine some stroller in a great-coat haunting the streets, twirling an umbrella in the thick sea fog or tapping a tattoo with his cane?

Fort House whetted my interest, my sense of the possible. Could you write in a real, everyday place and transcend it at the same time? Could you feed the literal world through the engine of your imagination and bring it out altered and fresh?

A mote of Broadstairs particular got lodged in my eye and has shaped what I've seen ever since.

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It is 1997 and my friend and I are revising for our A' levels before hoping to go to university. Her home – an ordinary, spacious house on the poorer side of the small Shropshire town my family has moved to – is full of interest to me. It is crammed with siblings and cousins, constant TV and chatter, and prohibitions and customs that pose very different challenges to the unprotected freedoms I contend with. When we aren't revising, we watch both Bollywood and Hollywood movies or eat complex meals seated on the floor, prepared by my friend's shy girlish mother, who doesn't speak English very readily, though I think she understood.

If Dickens already means something to me, then he means something to my friend as well. I wouldn't presume to say what. But she reads Dickens before our exams, one of which is on *Great Expectations* anyway, and tells me that it helps her to get a sense of voice, a standard

she can aspire to. She has a habit of shaking her legs when she studies, easing the nerves. So much is at stake for us both it seems – though I only know the half of it. Diligent bluestockings as we are, we play chess on her eighteenth birthday: a welcome break from the boozier going-out crowd I often hang around with. The wait seems interminable, and then suddenly we're through. For one manufactured, impossible moment we are those smiley, glossy-haired girls in the local newspaper – a picture of the possible, clutching special recommendations from the examination board and strings of matching A's. I go to study English; a little blindsided by my surfeit of success. My friend studies law and does not, yet, get married. We stay in touch often, and then from time to time.

The feelings of *Great Expectations* are the feelings of childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood encapsulated. The lack of frivolity with which Dickens presents Pip's fear on the marshes, guilt at stealing a pie, self-hating love for Estella, and disavowal of Joe show Dickens at his least characteristically "Dickensy", to borrow Elizabeth Gaskell's arch term for her editor's house style (Gaskell 538). But this emotional depth is always there in Dickens's range: with Fagin in his cell on his last night alive after all the theatrics of pickpocketing have faded, just as it is there in the undeniable heartbeat that has propelled *A Christmas Carol* into the realms of "cultural myth" via 120 years of film adaptation (John 211).

Great Expectations can mean something to most of us. It speaks of love and loss; expectance and longing. Pip is both everyone and distinctly himself: "a good fellow, with impetuosity and hesitation, boldness and diffidence, action and dreaming, curiously mixed in him" (227; vol.2, ch.11).

It is the novel I have read the most times in the most different contexts: for those school exams I sat at seventeen and my "Victorian Literature" university exams at 21; for four years' worth of teaching as a doctoral student on the University of Exeter's Dickens module and for dozens more classes as a lecturer. It forms part of my first published academic book chapter on serialized novels and settler emigration, and of the monograph that chapter went into. Not this again, I groan each time – yet it is this again, and it always passes muster. It is the bildungsroman most intertwined with my own life, its original serial rhythms intersecting at intervals with the streams of my personal history at its different stages. It tells "The Story of Our Lives from Year to Year", just as *All the Year Round*'s tagline proclaims.

Great Expectations changes with each reading, as a good book should, becoming almost unrecognizable from one decade to the next. When I read it last it was all about "the little world in which children have their existence, whosoever brings them up"; that world in which a "rocking-horse stands as many hands high, according to scale, as a big-boned Irish

hunter" (57; vol.1, ch.8). Whatever made me think, new mother as I was, that it had ever been about romance? For my latest batch of undergraduate students, it meant something different still. In the midst of debates about decolonization of the curriculum, it slots readily into conversations about belonging, global history and its silences. Who is left in and who is left out; what violence might be hidden by Magwitch's taciturn account of obtaining wealth in Australia; and what might be forfeited and gained by returning to the same old dominant stories.

Years after we graduate from university, my friend publishes a novel, and *Great Expectations* is one of the titles she includes in a list of inspirational books, written for our hometown bookshop's blog. It takes me back to being seventeen and reading Dickens in her bedroom. To wondering if I should go out later after all, or if just an extra night might be what it takes to swing it. We read Dickens, like Shakespeare and Mary Shelley, because he held the keys to culture: unlocking the voice, the words we had to mouth. But there was something else in *Great Expectations* that somehow carried over. It matched the currents of our dreaming and the tenor of our fears. Our unlikely hopes we'd be the ones who got away; that it could ever be possible to leave.

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Why did I call my daughter Estella? I didn't really mean to. I meant to call her Matilda. But that name didn't stick, and this one remained.

Estella means something to me that I can't easily talk about because it is a feeling that cannot be anything but voiceless. Estella is a pretty face, a painted object, a bright star walking in the corridors of someone else's "I". Like Marx, Dickens understood what it meant when working men became things, and, through Estella, he came close, perhaps unwittingly, to extending that analysis to the different but analogous ways in which this applies to women. When Estella compares the relation between her person and the unwanted suitors that surround her to that between a helpless candle and its moths – asking "Can the candle help it?" – Pip counters with "but cannot the Estella help it?" (283; vol. 2, ch.19). "The Estella" Pip portrays is fearful and frightening. The lack of interiority she is afforded makes her distant and cruel. She is as remote and menacing and otherworldly as the "wicked Noah's ark" on the marshes, even before we know the truth of her origins (37; vol.1, ch.6). Only at the edges of narrative perspective do we sense a different being: a living, breathing figure who crackles with anger and fierce observation, who feels, thinks, and answers too (Schor 549-50).

But as the end of David Lean's 1946 adaptation of *Great Expectations* makes clear, Estella means walking past all that as well: pulling down the curtains and letting in the light as the wedding cake collapses and beetles crawl. She means the need to overcome bad inheritances. Yes, the details of learning through suffering are troubling and dated – part of the gendered problem. But the sentiment rings true.

Estella is not a rounded character – perhaps that's the point. She is an icon, a symbol – "unreal and impossible" (Lewes 146), but nevertheless caught up in my own bad inheritances and partial transformations, and probably other people's too.

I don't know, in all honesty, whether I had this Estella in mind when I named my daughter. I like to think not. Is it wise to pass on the things we can't voice, or only the things we can name? But Estella – Stella as we shortened it – was the name that stuck.

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In most of my university Dickens classes, I have been periodically obliged to critique or deny him, as we do sometimes have to critique or deny our crushes when they are exposed. Dickens on "The Noble Savage" in *Household Words* certainly makes for deeply unpalatable reading and his apologies in *Our Mutual Friend* for his early antisemitism don't quite wash. Yes, he can seem apolitical by some standards: never quite calling for systemic change and always trying to use improbable dollops of fellow feeling and charity to plug the gaps between classes. He remained fascinated by eighteen-year-old girls, had terrible taste in poetry, and didn't really invent Christmas. He is cruel about aging women and invested in spiritual visions of motherhood that leave us cold. He left his wife and gaslit her in public. He took most of her children and made off with an actress. He did all these things, and probably worse.

We have to acknowledge these aspects of Dickens and his writing, to let them sit uncomfortably in the classroom with us under the strip lights. Yet I find I can forgive him. I don't know him, after all. He's not my father or husband, and even if he was, don't we all behave badly when we think history isn't looking? Or when history squeezes us close.

This year's MA class on *Sketches* goes much better than I'd expected. Many of my students forgive him too. One tells me that he finds the doorknob skit in "Our Next-Door Neighbour" funny – I'd forgotten that it is. Another is taken with how the *Sketches'* mobile narrators, unlike Baudelaire's classic flaneurs, always come to a point of stoppage: embracing the flow of urban things and crowds only up to a point before the plight of real people hooks them in. We agree, on the whole, that we rather like the loopy, maddeningly long sentences:

the way Dickens's prose wraps around and gives form to London, constructing its juxtapositions and points of connection and myriad viewpoints and hidden rhythms rather than merely revealing them.

4 'o clock. Another day is moving to its close in our own real Northern city. Orange leaves fly past the window and the light is just sinking. The students can sense that it will soon be time to go. They are rustling their notes and looking sideways at the weather, thinking ahead to buses to catch, and dinners to make; to shifts in bars, or distant drinks. They are poised to join the city streets: their dim dirty gutters, glittering lamplight, and strange fellow strollers – all now just slightly different to the scenes they left at 1. For they are walking with Dickens, and his pathways are persuasive.

Yes, I think. I'll keep him after all.

Because, all told, there is no other writer I can easily think of who combined such a keen eye for society and its injustices with such aesthetic care for the shape and turn of a sentence; such idiosyncratic preoccupations – wooden legs, dead letters, sea captains, thick fogs – with such fabulously mass appeal; such a specifically linguistic flair with such cross-media portability. Not many writers have succeeded in holistically combining humor, feeling, and thought like Dickens at his best. So much good writing lacks belly or heart, but Dickens had it all.

Dickens believed in Thomas Carlyle's theories of heroism and must have felt he fitted the mold: the "hero as man of letters" driving history ("Hero" 154), just as other driven men became "captains of industry" (*Past and Present* 270; bk.4). In fact, it is precisely this combination of ego and history that I most admire about him: that capacity to be porous to topical currents – whether capitalist inequality or the latest melodrama at the theater – while retaining his own unique style. There may be something excessively "Dickensy" about Dickens's writing at times, as Gaskell implied, but though she is just as fine a writer and a finer social critic, a "Gaskelly" book doesn't hold quite so well.

Style matters. It sticks when matter fades. And no writer has stuck to me through the years quite so tenaciously as Dickens – though I see now that it is really me who's done the sticking. It can get embarrassing, but I'm still doing things with Dickens. Dickens and I are not done.

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Biographical Note

Jude Piesse is a Senior Lecturer in English Literature at Liverpool John Moores University. Her monograph *British Settler Emigration in Print, 1832-1877* (Oxford UP, 2016) featured chapters on Dickens's Christmas stories and on *Great Expectations* in serial. Her most recent book, *The Ghost in the Garden: in search of Darwin's lost garden* (Scribe, 2021) blends biography, nature writing and memoir to tell the story of Darwin's childhood garden. In 2023, she was Writer in Residence at Gladstone's Library, Wales.