



Charles Dickens: Celebrity Author

The First Public Reading 1853

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This is a tale of two Charles Dickens. The novelist you will know as the man who gave us some of the most enduring fiction ever written.

But in this series we uncover the other, less well-known Dickens – the performer who loved acting and dreamed of being a theatre manager. This is the story of his public readings of his books. We will reveal how the theatre informed Dickens's fiction, the link between his writing and performing, and how bringing his characters to the stage made him rich and famous but ultimately destroyed him.

Over 12 years, from 1858 to his death in 1870, Dickens toured the halls and auditoria of Britain and America reading specially edited versions of his best-loved early works –A Christmas Carol, Pickwick Papers, Dombey and Son and Oliver Twist were favourites. He drew huge crowds wherever he went, and the proceeds made him one of the wealthiest men of his day.

The need to make money to support his family was a motivation. But at its heart was also a lifelong love of theatre and acting.

SIMON CALLOW – WIFE AND MISTRESS 1

For Dickens I've always felt the books were his wife and theatre his mistress. He was always right up to the last minute inclined to give up one for the other.

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Actor and author of Charles Dickens and the Great Theatre of the World, Simon Callow

SIMON CALLOW – WIFE AND MISTRESS 1

Dickens of course knew that his vocation was as a writer and that was his legitimate path through life, but the theatre was this constantly seductive this siren thing, that always wanted to take him away and two days before he died he said that's what I should have done, I should have been in the theatre, I should have worked in the theatre, that was his dream.

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The theatre was Dickens's first love. It was the prism through which he created his characters, casting them as if they were actors on a stage.

Dr Paul Schlicke is the author of Dickens and Popular Entertainment

PAUL SCHLICKE – CHARACTERS THEATRICAL

Dickens had a sense of character that was fundamentally theatrical, he conceived of his characters appearing on the stage, talking to one another or soliloquising as on the stage. There's a wonderful anecdote from his daughter Mamie who one day when she was a child and feeling ill was allowed to sit in her father's study while he was writing and she recounts that he would pace the room and then suddenly would race to (the) a mirror and start shouting at the mirror and waving his arms about and then would sit down and write furiously and acting each of his characters as the way that he composed, so they always talk as if they're on the stage declaiming.

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Having auditioned his characters and performed them into life, Dickens's novels – which were published in monthly or weekly instalments – were made to be read aloud.

Simon Callow.

SIMON CALLOW – READING ALOUD

There is this sense in Dickens books that the writer is performing the work for you, you hear his voice and sometimes he addresses you directly from the page as in Christmas Carol very famously he says, the first ghost, he says well 'he was as close to scrooge as you are to me'. So the direct connection is very very potent with Dickens and also not only did Dickens read his own novels but so did everybody else read them out loud because as the instalments appeared, the family would then gather round, it was like you know an episode of Eastenders. Everybody gathered round and the reader, probably the dad or whoever was good at it and would listen to the story being read out loud to them and that oral feeling is so strong in Dickens and often what looks quite difficult on the page, the moment you read it out loud suddenly falls into place.

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Dickens was fascinated by performance and loved to read to his family and friends. So it wasn't much of a leap to go from private recitations to reading in public. In December 1853, he finally got the chance to do so. He started his reading career with A Christmas Carol -- a reading he did for charity – in Birmingham Town Hall, two days after Christmas.

Professor Malcolm Andrews is the author of Charles Dickens and His Performing Selves

MALCOLM ANDREWS – DESCRIBES THE SET

If you had a good seat then you would be in full range of Dickens's voice and gestures and what you would see would be this relatively small set erected on the platform in the hall with a maroon background or back screen, a baton of overhead gas lamps and two gas flares at the side and then in the middle of that he's little reading desk that he carefully designed himself and then he would walk on stage and he would say 'ladies and gentlemen I have the pleasure of reading to you tonight a Christmas carol' and he would launch straight in.

FX: recreated readings atmosphere

READING ONE: A CHRISTMAS CAROL

Once upon a time -- of all the good days in the year, on Christmas Eve -- old Scrooge sat busy in his counting-house. It was cold, bleak, biting weather: foggy withal: and he could hear the people in the court outside go wheezing up and down, beating their hands upon their breasts, and stamping their feet upon the pavement stones to warm them. The fog came pouring in at every chink and keyhole, and was so dense without, that although the court was of the narrowest, the houses opposite were mere phantoms. The door of Scrooge's counting-house was open that he might keep his eye upon his clerk, who in a dismal little cell beyond was copying letters. Scrooge had a very small fire, but the clerk's fire was so very much smaller that it looked like one coal.

"A merry Christmas, uncle! God save you!" cried a cheerful voice. It was the voice of Scrooge's nephew, who came upon him so quickly that this was the first intimation he had of his approach.

"Bah!" said Scrooge, "Humbug!"

FX: fade

He had this capacity to move almost all of himself into the character.

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Professor Malcolm Andrews.

MALCOLM ANDREWS – HIS PERFORMANCE

So though he was never in costume, he was always in formal evening clothes he could change the shape of his body, the tilt of his head, his eyebrows, his expression, everything about him would enter into the character of whoever it might be, and then once he got into his stride you would very likely just be carried away by this extraordinary sense that you weren't watching one man, you were watching a whole host of people up there on stage and listening to them.

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SIMON CALLOW CAROL

One of the most important things about Dickens is always this genius of storytelling. Simon Callow again. The characters literally flash before you in this particular kind of brilliance and an accumulation of detail and repetition of catch phrases very often. He's bedazzling you with characters but he's working on something rather deeper inside you and that's normally the narrator that does that in his books.

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Lucinda Hawksley is Dickens great-great-great granddaughter and the author of the book Charles Dickens.

LUCINDA CAROL - CAROL

By this point 1853 everybody knew the story; Christmas Carol has been published ten years earlier, and was an immediate phenomenon. It was published in 1843 19th December 6,000 copies had all sold out by Christmas Eve, so this wasn't a new story that people were hearing, but just to hear Dickens read it was incredibly magical and it was one of those stories that even today it still manages to get reactions from people and what Dickens really wanted to do was make people aware that there is a bit of a Scrooge in everybody and what they have to do is beat that Scrooge and get into the spirit of Christmas preferably in so doing, give money to his favourite charities.

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Drawing attention to the plight of the nation's poor was a driving factor behind Dickens's writing and public readings.

LUCINDA CAROL – CAROL POVERTY

Charles Dickens wrote Carol directly as result of experiencing poverty in Manchester. He came back to London and said I'm going to strike a hammer blow in favour of the poor man's child and he wrote the whole of the Novella in just six weeks. A lot of people don't realise, he actually wrote five Christmas stories and many many short stories. But I think a Christmas Carol, the reason that it's the best known and the one that most people know about even if they haven't heard the others, is because it was written with such passion so when he did readings from a Christmas carol, that passion, that further with which he'd written the book to try and raise his awareness of terrible conditions so many of Britain's children were living in was a really important thing for him and I think that's what came across.

FX: theatre atmosphere

READING TWO: A CHRISTMAS CAROL: IGNORANCE AND WANT

"Oh, Man, look here! Look, look, down here!" exclaimed the Ghost.

They were a boy and a girl. Yellow, meagre, ragged, scowling, wolfish; but prostrate, too, in their humility. Where graceful youth should have filled their features out, and touched them with its freshest tints, a stale and shrivelled hand, like that of age, had pinched, and twisted them, and pulled them into shreds.

Scrooge started back, appalled.

"Spirit, are they yours?" , "They are Man's," said the Spirit, looking down upon them. This boy is Ignorance. This girl is Want. Beware them both, and all of their degree, but most of all beware this boy, for on his brow I see that written which is Doom, unless the writing be erased."

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Dickens knew what it was like to be hard up, and he wanted others to know too.

Dennis Walder is emeritus professor of English Literature at the Open University

DENNIS WALDER – CHILDHOOD

When the family were put into a debtors prison in the Marshalsea because his father couldn't pay the family debts, the young Dickens was put out to work when he was about 12 in a blacking factory and Dickens's job was to paste labels on to these little jars of blacking, boot blacking polish for boots. He felt completely humiliated and taken out of a safe world, a secure world within his family circle and although it was only for some months, as far as we know for less than a year, that experience seems to have marked him so severely that for example he never spoke about it, never wrote about it except indirectly in *David Copperfield*.

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Dickens rose himself out of poverty but never forgot it. And he never lost the common touch. So when friends were concerned that doing public readings was undignified for a gentleman, he did them anyway.

Dennis Walder again

DENNIS WALDER – INFRA DIG

If you read John Forster, his great friend, if you read John Forster's biography of Dickens, you will find that Forster himself was rather opposed to it all along and didn't think that it was an appropriate thing for a great novelist to do, it wasn't something a gentleman would do. However, it was Dickens himself, it was part of his urge to help in the great project of educating the masses if you like to reach very large numbers of people, particularly people who might not read his novels and might not have come across them and might not be able to afford them.

FX: theatre atmosphere

READING THREE: A CHRISTMAS CAROL – SCROOGE'S GIFT TO BOB

"Hallo," growled Scrooge, in his accustomed voice, as near as he could feign it. "What do you mean by coming here at this time of day?"

"I'm very sorry, sir," said Bob. "I am behind my time."

"You are?" repeated Scrooge. "Yes. I think you are. Step this way, if you please."

"It's only once a year, sir," pleaded Bob, appearing from the Tank. "It shall not be repeated. I was making rather merry yesterday, sir."

"Now, I'll tell you what, my friend," said Scrooge, "I am not going to stand this sort of thing any longer. And therefore," he continued, leaping from his stool, and giving Bob such a dig in the waistcoat that he staggered back into the Tank again; "and therefore I am about to raise your salary."

Bob trembled, and got a little nearer to the ruler. He had a momentary idea of knocking Scrooge down with it, holding him, and calling to the people in the court for help and a strait-waistcoat.

"A merry Christmas, Bob," said Scrooge, with an earnestness that could not be mistaken, as he clapped him on the back. "A merrier Christmas, Bob my good friend."