



Home

Editorial

Authors' Responses

Guidelines For Reviewers

About Us

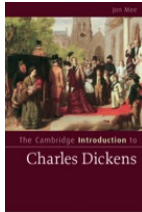
Masthead

Feedback

Search Every Field

Search

THE CAMBRIDGE INTRODUCTION TO CHARLES DICKENS



By **Jon Mee**
(Cambridge, 2010) xi + 115 pp
Reviewed by **Diana Archibald** on 2011-11-13.

[Click here for a PDF version.](#)

[Click here to buy the book on Amazon.](#)

Jon Mee has set himself the daunting task of briefly explaining a major and exasperatingly prolific author who has been analyzed by countless scholars over the last 175 years. Since many commentaries on particular novels have already appeared, he seeks to survey the "wonderful diversity" of Dickens's works rather than investigating each one of them, and to show new readers what pleasures they offer. For this reason, he has written the book so that its "parts should not be detachable" and would "have to be read whole as an introduction" (ix-x). In other words, this is not a book for students who "have an essay to write on *A Tale of Two Cities*"(x) and need a quick fix. In an essay of just over one hundred pages and five thematic chapters, Mee interweaves his discussions of various novels.

Nevertheless, he seems unsure of his audience. While aiming to educate novices-- "students and general readers" -- he also fears that "some readers and many experts" may find his approach to the novels a "distortion of *their* Dickens" (x). His own Dickens is the author of books known to just about everyone familiar with Dickens, and his critical approach is fairly mainstream. While touching on all of the major novels, Mee foregrounds *Oliver Twist*, *Dombey and Son*, *Bleak House*, *Great Expectations*, and *Our Mutual Friend*. He thus introduces a Dickens I readily recognize. Indeed, his five chosen topics, while engaging and appropriate, are not particularly unusual. He has also taken considerable pains to make his arguments comprehensible and his prose readable. But in assuming that his "new readers" are already familiar with Dickens's works, he undercuts the effectiveness of this "introduction."

The book's first chapter, "Dickens the Entertainer: 'People must be amused,'" serves both to introduce the entire book and to present Mee's first topic. After briefly summarizing Dickens's life and surveying the critical reception of his work, Mee explains how his "radical popul[ism]" and natural inclination to theatricality led to "writing attuned to popular taste" (6). Of his juxtaposition of humor and pathos, Mee writes:

... there are frequently sudden changes of tone of the sort Dickens claimed he took from melodrama, and sometimes the reader finds their own laughter catching uneasily in the throat. Sometimes it is cruelly laughing *at* people, like the representation of a former sweetheart as Flora in *Little Dorrit*, or the depiction of the dwarf Miss Mowcher in *David Copperfield*, a picture he was forced to redraw in later installments of the novel after complaints. Comedy in Dickens is often anarchic, frequently disturbingly so. The set-piece comedy of the universal stain remover in *Oliver Twist*, scarcely makes it any easier for the reader to come to terms with the death of Nancy. Rather, recognition of the comic virtuosity here creates a complex tension with the violent events witnessed only a few pages before. So, too, in the *Old Curiosity Shop*, the tics and rages of the Punch-like Quilp in pursuit of the innocent heroine are funny and monstrous at the same time, but they scarcely soften the discomfortingly lurid nature of his interest in Little Nell nor do much to distract from the disturbing question of the reader's own voyeuristic pleasure in it. In *Great Expectations*, where the opening chapters riff on the joke of Mrs. Joe Gargery bringing up Pip "by Hand," a pun originally made in *Oliver Twist* (1:2, 6) as a description of the unloving treatment visited upon the boys in the workhouse, the mixture of humor and violence is equally destabilizing.... (9)

The chapter ably shows how Dickens entertained his readers while exposing social ills and human foibles. Plentiful and well-chosen examples also exhibit "the delightful and anarchic excess of Dickens's writing" (19).

Expatriating on chapter one's account of Dickens's "continual struggle to find a language adequate to [his] needs" (19), chapter two, "Dickens and Language: 'What I meantersay,'" usefully treats the significance of names in his novels. For example, Mee writes, the names of "Uriah Heep, Pumblechook, Jaggers, and Podsnap

...are important to the reader's understanding of the characters, implying a cringing hypocrisy in the first, ridiculousness in the next, a sense of sharp threat in the third, part of his grinding nature, and possibly the pomposity of the last, but they depend upon an ingrained sense upon the association between sound and the generation of meaning. The relationship is not logical but depends on the kind of intuition that might be thought of as second nature. (21)

Mee also notes the "amazing degree of repetition of particular clusters of words bound by association across the novels, with different novels giving them more or less emphasis" (26). The words "milling" and "grinding," for instance, recur in *Dombey and Son*, *Oliver Twist*, *Bleak House*, *Hard Times*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, *Great Expectations*, and *Our Mutual Friend*. Even those already acquainted with these novels will see newfound connections emerge, demonstrating the complexity and richness of Dickens's vision.

Chapter three considers what Dickens does with one of his most commonly discussed topics: the city. Mining his experience as both a journalist and a frequent perambulator of London streets, Dickens appealed to middle-class readers,

says Mee, by enabling them "to penetrate the hidden parts of the city" (56). Fittingly enough, this chapter inspects some less visited parts of Dickens's own work. While showing that he represents "the city as a huge prison" in *Little Dorrit*, *Great Expectations*, and *Bleak House*, it aptly quotes from "The Uncommercial Traveller," especially from "Night Walks" and "On an Amateur Beat." It thereby demonstrates that "The Uncommercial Traveller" offers some of Dickens's "most brilliant writing about the city" (57).

Chapter four turns from the city to women. Mee notes that Dickens's novels tend to categorize them as "grand women, defined by their surface veneer" (Lady Tippins and Lady Dedlock) or as "a series of 'little' women, defined by their 'heart' and their care for the interiors of the home" (Florence Dombey, Agnes Copperfield, Esther Summerson, and Amy Dorrit, etc.) (68). Probing lesser-known novels in this chapter, Mee also considers the women of *Barnaby Rudge* and *A Tale of Two Cities*. The cross-dressing women in the mob scene of the former and the "unnatural vengeance of Madame Defarge" (72) in the latter complicate Mee's argument.

While Mee contends that none of his chapters can be read alone, chapter five ("Adapting Dickens: 'He do the police in different voices'") comes closest to being self-sufficient. Indeed, I found this in some ways the chapter most likely to engage undergraduates--especially since it links Dickens's fiction to the media of our time. Very soon after he achieved fame with *Pickwick Papers*, Dickens became one of the most heavily adapted writers in any language, and his novels are still reconfigured often for stage, television, and film. In light of this adaptability, Mee fascinatingly identifies the

tension between the creative opportunity afforded by the prolixity of Dickens's own imagination and the position of the novels now viewed as classics of the English language. The heritage industry reproduces Dickens as an icon of greatness available for worship in the present, often with the implication of a fall from former glories and cultural values built into it. (84)

Circling back to his first chapter, Mee contends that Dickens "aspired to an ideal of collaboration with his readers," which made him think "of his novels as only realized in the performance of reading" (85). As an entertainer, Dickens wished to have his works performed, whether read aloud to a family or acted on the stage. Since his characters and stories readily lend themselves to adaptation, it is no wonder that his wish was granted. As Mee suggests, "Dickens was too restless to think of his novels in terms of finished and consecrated works of art" (88). For his own reading performances he tailored his material to fit the tastes of his listeners. Cinematic versions of Dickens's fiction such as Frank Lloyd's *A Tale of Two Cities* (1917) and David Lean's *Great Expectations* (1946) aim, says Mee, to "translate the verbal code of the novel[s] into an equivalent visual register" (94). But Mee thinks Dickens offers more for the filmmakers of our own time. Urging them to avoid simply "pointing a camera at a National Trust property" and to resist the impulse towards "ultra-realism" (98), Mee suggests that Dickens's complexity should be fuel enough for innovative adaptations.

Well-written and accessible, this book deftly handles a huge body of work and includes excellent quotations to illustrate its points. Nevertheless, I remain unconvinced that yet another introduction to Dickens is needed. Many fine introductions are already available. Old standbys include two titles in Twayne's English Author Series (Harland Nelson's 1981 *Charles Dickens* and Robert Newsome's *Charles Dickens Revisited* [2000]); newer models include David Paroissien's edited collection *A Companion to Charles Dickens* (Oxford, 2008). While none of these three is as short as Mee's book, its concision may not adequately serve "new readers." Those lucky souls who are just now encountering Dickens for the first time may be baffled by the interwoven references to his novels. How many of Mee's plentiful allusions--no matter how deftly handled--can a true beginner catch? Sadly, we can no longer share Mee's assumption that students come to a book such as this with a "common baseline of knowledge" about Dickens (99). From true neophytes, scholars who introduce Dickens must expect little more than a passing recollection of Scrooge's "bah, humbug!" and Oliver's asking for more.

This book, then, will best serve those who have read but not studied Dickens's novels. For those who know neither the characters and plots of the novels nor the prevailing scholarly arguments about them, I surmise that Mee's book would leave little more than vague impressions of Dickens's work. This very rich and thoughtful "Introduction" is quite simply too rich for beginners, and in deliberately making this book so organic that it cannot be readily raided by a student looking for something to quote in a freshman English paper, Mee also makes it hard for true novices to digest. While instructors and graduate students might comprise the ideal audience for the book, most undergraduates, at least in the United States, have rarely encountered in high school anything more of Dickens than *A Tale of Two Cities* or *Great Expectations*--at best. Rather than being "introduced" to Dickens in an essay that richly alludes to novels they don't know, such students would be better served by a biography or an essay on a single novel that deals with several of the themes Mee identifies. That said, those who bring to this book a more than passing acquaintance with the work of Charles Dickens will find that it ably surveys some important themes.

Diana C. Archibald, Associate Professor in the Department of English at the University of Massachusetts Lowell, is the author of *Domesticity, Imperialism, and Emigration in the Victorian Novel* (Missouri, 2002).

Leave a comment on Diana Archibald's review.

Name:

Email:

Comments:

I'm not a robot

reCAPTCHA
Privacy - Terms

Submit

