



# Girl in a Blue Dress

*Gaynor Arnold*

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## **Girl in a Blue Dress** Gaynor Arnold

A sweeping tale of love and loss, *Girl in a Blue Dress* is both an intimate peek at the woman who was behind one of literature's most esteemed men and a fascinating rumination on marriage that will resonate across centuries.

At the end of her life, Catherine, the cast-off wife of Charles Dickens, gave the letters she had received from her husband to their daughter Kate, asking her to donate them to the British Museum, "so the world may know that he loved me once." The incredible vulnerability and heartache evident beneath the surface of this remark inspired Gaynor Arnold to write *Girl in a Blue Dress*, a dazzling debut novel inspired by the life of this tragic yet devoted woman. Arnold brings the spirit of Catherine Dickens to life in the form of Dorothea "Dodo" Gibson—a woman who is doomed to live in the shadow of her husband, Alfred, the most celebrated author in the Victorian world.

The story opens on the day of Alfred's funeral. Dorothea is not among the throngs in attendance when *The One and Only* is laid to rest. Her mourning must take place within the walls of her modest apartment, a parting gift from Alfred as he ushered her out of their shared home and his life more than a decade earlier. Even her own children, save her outspoken daughter Kitty, are not there to offer her comfort—they were poisoned against her when Alfred publicly declared her an unfit wife and mother. Though she refuses to don the proper mourning attire, Dodo cannot bring herself to demonize her late husband, something that comes all too easily to Kitty.

Instead, she reflects on their time together—their clandestine and passionate courtship, when he was a force of nature and she a willing follower; and the salad days of their marriage, before too many children sapped her vitality and his interest. She uncovers the frighteningly hypnotic power of the celebrity author she married. Now liberated from his hold on her, Dodo finds the courage to face her adult children, the sister who betrayed her, and the charming actress who claimed her husband's love and left her heart aching.

A sweeping tale of love and loss that was long-listed for both the Man Booker Prize and the Orange Prize, *Girl in a Blue Dress* is both an intimate peek at the woman who was behind one of literature's most esteemed men and a fascinating rumination on marriage that will resonate across centuries.

## **Girl in a Blue Dress Details**

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# From Reader Review *Girl in a Blue Dress* for online ebook

## Adriane Devries says

Gaynor Arnold's first published novel, a fictional memoir told from the point of view of Charles Dickens' estranged wife, proves that there are still great, new authors with much to contribute to the world of letters. Combining Dickens-inspired language and convincing social mores and scenery, she furnishes the tabloid-worthy facts of the complex author's life with characters who, like himself, are at times villains, comic relief, and occasionally unlikely heroes; and by featuring one of his favorite themes, that of redemption of the human spirit, her novel reads much like a beloved lost Dickens novel itself. The uniquely feminine perspective of the Victorian heroine reminds modern women how much we have to be grateful for, such as the right to vote and hot tap water, yet encourages us that where we see injustice, we must make change rather than accept what has always been. We no doubt still have blind spots of social justice that are uncomfortable to face, yet are possible through uncommon acts of love and courage.

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## Doreen says

I was surprised by how complex this book is. Much like Paula McLain's *The Paris Wife*, this novel takes the breakdown of a famous writer's marriage and transcends the tawdrier qualities to present a moving, realistic portrayal of personalities and emotions abruptly whipsawn by circumstances. Gaynor Arnold doesn't pretend this is a completely factual account -- unlike Ms McLain, she didn't have a wealth of source material to work from -- but it's still a very realistic account of Victorian morality and thinking, providing us with at least a little insight into the life and times of some of the Victorian era's most famous denizens.

To begin with, we have the character of Arthur Gibson, around whom the story revolves. Gibson, modeled very closely on Charles Dickens, is an egotist and tyrant. A benevolent tyrant overall, but a man who must always be right, and who is ruthless in forcing his version of the truth, whereby he is the hero and savior, on everyone around him. He demands the unquestioning love and allegiance of his circle and, being the strong-willed sort, usually gets it. Any transgressors are cut out of his life entirely. Most of the Victorian women in this book, not having been raised to be strong-willed, fall easily under his spell; few escape. Even his discarded and deeply wronged wife, Dorothea, continues to be loving and forgiving towards him throughout the narrative, a fact that I found maddening but not unbelievable. It's hard to blame her, after all: she'd been raised to be ornamental and passive, and is quite happy to spend her days quietly, hardly ever venturing out of her rooms. Ironically, her disinclination to activity is one of the reasons Gibson demands she leave, as she cannot be the helpmeet she once was (and that he vilely claims she never was. Dick.) It's difficult to be vivacious and collected when birthing 8 children in rapid succession (heaven knows, I have days where it feels as if all I can do apart from rearing my only child is nap.) Gibson has a difficult time understanding why Dorothea cannot cater to his every whim once their children start being born, and it's pretty much all downhill from there. Ms Arnold paints a portrait of a man so wrapped up in shoring up his sense of self that he refuses to believe he could possibly do wrong: that she does this even-handedly, displaying his talent and generosity as well as his flaws, is a testament to the wisdom she brings to her career as a novelist. I also appreciated the candor she brought to Dorothea, who is patient and kind but also foolish and weak. Dorothea is clearly a victim, but she never stoops, once she has been shunted aside, to act like it.

One of the things I enjoyed most about this novel -- even though it was also the bit that felt most fantastical to me -- was the deep sense of sisterhood that ran throughout once Gibson was taken out of the equation. It's

a pity that a man, even one as tireless in his good works otherwise as Gibson, could so easily wreck all those bonds as he had in the name of selfishness, but it was nice to see the women picking up the pieces afterwards and mending their personal relationships. I also quite agreed with Eddie when he huffed that he hadn't understood why Gibson couldn't just take a mistress discreetly, like other gentlemen. Again, it's the monstrous ego that needs to assure himself of his own inherent goodness that won't allow Gibson to compromise himself morally, instead forcing any possible public opprobrium, and the resulting indignities and pain, on those attached to him. I don't know if a man like Gibson could survive, ego intact, in this day and age. I sincerely hope not, but humanity always has the capacity to surprise.

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## **Nancy Oakes says**

As the story (set squarely in the Victorian era) opens, a woman is sitting at home, unable to go to her husband's funeral. Thousands of other people went, but she is at home in a small apartment. She can only hear the details from her daughter. The woman in question is Dorothea, nicknamed Dodo; the dead man is Alfred Gibson, known also as the One and Only, a famous British writer whose works were read even by the queen. Dorothea did not go to the funeral because no one wanted her there; it turns out after Dodo had borne several children, and suffered from being overtired, nervous, etc., and was basically no longer her younger self, her husband had publicly turned her out of her home, and had separated her from her children. Oh yes, I forgot...it seems that he had also taken on a mistress.

Now, if all of this sounds familiar, it's because *Girl in a Blue Dress* is based on the life of Catherine Dickens, the wife of Charles Dickens. Here, Dorothea Gibson is the narrator, and through weaving the past into her present, we manage to get a feel for a much younger Alfred Gibson, a much younger Dodo, and the growing heaviness that weighed not only upon her as the wife of Alfred, and mother of several children, but as a woman constantly made insecure by the adoration of her husband by his Public. Alfred is a rather complex individual, having to control everything and everyone, having to put on both public and private faces, and the whole book is Dorothea's look back at their life together in an effort to try to understand her situation. But although Alfred is painted sometimes rather negatively, there are indeed passages where the author shows that Dodo isn't exactly the perfect example of the Victorian wife. After all, the danger of reading a novel from the narrator's point of view is that you're not really going to get both sides, but the author does manage to overcome this problem.

The title "*Girl in a Blue Dress*," refers to an episode in Dodo's life when she was actively seeking the attention of Alfred as a suitor, but as you continue to read, there's another meaning to it altogether. And at that point, everything you need to know about Alfred and Dodo sort of clicks into place.

It is a fine book, one I am most happy to have read. The characters are convincing with the exception of Dorothea at the end of the novel. I thought this was problematic because it comes on quite suddenly, and I was scratching my head going "huh?" at that point.

If you are into the Victorian period, then you're really going to love this one. Arnold's writing is beyond good and she manages to capture the feel of a Victorian writer so at times you're so caught up in the story that you don't realize you're reading a modern author. Highly recommended.

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## **Felice says**

"The Girl in the Blue Dress" is a fictionalized account of the life of Charles Dickens from the viewpoint of his wife Catherine. For years Catherine was viewed as sort of a 'Shakespeare's Wife'. A shadow of no real interest except for the number of children she gave birth to. A dull footnote in a brilliant man's career. In "Girl" Dickens is Alfred Gibson and Catherine is his wife Dorothea. In this Alfred is the It Boy of Victorian letters, magnetic, representing the values of home and hearth, popularly viewed as a social reformer and successful beyond belief. Dorothea is the quiet wife once loved and pursued now humiliated and left behind.

When "Girl" opens, Alfred is dead. The world is mourning his passing. He is being remembered as 'The Great One' and 'The One and Only'. He and Catherine have been separated for 10 years. Alfred had grown tired of his dutiful, ever pregnant wife. He cast her out, publicly painted her as mad, installed her in a barely decent apartment and kept all but one of their eight children from seeing her--just as Dickens did to Catherine. Dorothea humbled by the estrangement, did as she was told and moved on to a nun-like life. Spending her days reading and re-reading Alfred's novels and brooding over what had been and what it had become. An invitation from another widow, Queen Victoria pulls Dorothea back into the world and compels her to try and reclaim her life.

The events of Alfred and Dorothea's lives so faithfully follow those of Charles and Catherine that you might wonder why write a novel? Why not write a biography of the Dickens' marriage? A novel gives Catherine/Dorothea a voice that history can not. The subject matter is at the level of you-can't-make-up-this-stuff but the author's insights and handling of it all is made credible and consistent with the time period and her descriptions of Victorian life would have made Dickens jealous. The research is impeccable.

There never seems to be any middle ground with first novels. They fall into one of two categories: better luck next time or wham, a homer. First timer Gaynor Arnold has put this one out of the park and I'm thrilled. A new author to look forward to! Because after all it really is all about me

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## **Cheryl Gatling says**

This book begins in sadness and progresses into misery. The story opens as the great Victorian writer Alfred Gibson is being buried. His cast-off wife Dorothea (Dodo) is not invited to the funeral. It is a common enough sad old story that a man throws off the wife of his youth for a younger, prettier girl. But as Dodo relives the story of her marriage through flashbacks, her experience shows itself to be even darker. Alfred Gibson was like a force of nature. He was outgoing, brilliant, and funny. He entertained company by doing different voices and creating games. He charmed the ladies. He charmed everyone. He seemed to have boundless energy. Dodo fell for him hard. She lowered the neck of her best blue dress in an attempt to get him to notice her. And it worked. Their marriage began happily. But Dodo never had as much of Alfred's attention as she wanted. He gave himself to his writing, to friends, to charity causes, and increasingly, to his adoring reading public. He also developed an intense attachment to Dodo's sister. When Dodo expressed her concerns, she was ridiculed. That became the pattern. The great man could do no wrong. Dodo was a hysterical, whining harpy. It became worse when Dodo, exhausted from bearing eight children, invited her other sister in to be housekeeper. Under the pretense of providing Dodo with rest and quiet, Alfred and Sissy remove her from household responsibilities, alienate her from her children, drug her with laudanum if she complains, and then blame her for failing to be involved with the family. It was at this point at the middle of the book that I could hardly bear to continue reading. The height of humiliation was that, when Alfred

removed her to a tiny apartment, he published a statement in the papers declaring Dodo an unfit wife and mother. She barely left the house for ten years.

This book is "inspired by the life and marriage of Charles Dickens." The names, and some of the situations are changed, but it stays so close to the real events of Dickens's life that I wondered why the author didn't just make it a historical novel about Dickens. The answer is that at the end, she is free to deviate from history and make things happen that probably didn't really happen. For example, Dodo grows a little backbone. She begins to speak up for herself, and to confront her "oppressors." The ending is as satisfying as it can be, given all that has happened. There are times in the story when Dodo seems a little bit too much of a dishrag to be likable. But in the end, while able to say, "I was wronged," she is also able to remain kind at heart and not embittered, which was something I liked very much.

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### **Karen says**

Despite its somewhat feminist sensibilities, this is a thoroughly old-fashioned book -- which is appropriate since it's inspired by Dickens. Throughout, the dialogue sounds utterly written, not spoken. Once I got over this artifice and accepted the book on its own terms (within in first 20 pages or so) I was hooked. I liked this one a lot and I'm sorry it's over.

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### **Bettie says**

Good book, but if you like Charles Dickens, do not read it because you will not like him as a person when you finish this book!

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### **Sterlingcindysu says**

3.5 rounded down. A great debut novel!

So, okay, this is a story based on Dicken's marriage but all the characters are fiction. (So if you're wondering if there's countless references to Dicken's work, the answer is no. Arnold makes up new titles and mentions some references to basic items, such as "bah humbug!" or "the orphan boy".) I did catch one "Charley" instead of "Alfred" being used in referring to the Dickens character.

As they say, fact is stranger than fiction and when I googled Dicken's relationship to his sisters-in-law, it was very odd. I'd read *The Last Dickens* not too long ago that covers Dicken's last trip to America and death, so this was a nice companion piece.

So you have "The One and Only" (who used it to refer to himself) married to a woman who bears 8 children, has post partum depression, is exhausted and also probably has chronic fatigue syndrome. Eyes will wander and that isn't anything new...what is new is Dicken's treatment of his wife.

I must admit at parts this book did drag a bit--for example, after Dicken's funeral, Dodo visits the Queen. Arnold not only writes of that, but also when Dodo tells two other people of the visit and repeats everything over. And, let's face it, reading over and over again about how someone is exhausted doesn't make for rapt

reading.

Who Dickens wanted to be buried beside, not at the Poet's Corner in Westminster Abbey.

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### **pinkgal says**

Liked reading it, but not sure whether I could recommend it. Yes, there seemed to be a conclusion and yes, Catherine's voice is strong in here. But really. WHAT WAS THE POINT? We never got a satisfying conclusion; the confrontation with her sister and with the 'mistress' gave me no sense of closure. I was so disappointed in the end because nothing seems to change. But I guess that could be the point; nothing is supposed to change. This is a portrayal of Dicken's life and Catherine's previously unheard voice is the point; in that way, this was a very successful story because you hear someone who you've never heard speak before.

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### **P.D.R. Lindsay says**

Long listed for the Man Booker Prize in 2008 , and rightly so, this literary historical novel is a gem. Based on the idea that being married to a great man and public figure is not what people imagine, or what the 'Great Man' says it is, Ms Arnold looks to Charles Dickens and his wife, Catherine Hogarth, for inspiration. She gives us the One and Only, the Great Original, Alfred Gibson, and his wife, Dorothea (Dodo). The story begins with the Great Man's funeral and is told by his wife. No, this is not a feminist rant, but it is interesting that many so called 'Great Men' have wives who are ignored or regarded as inferior or actually damaging to the talent of the Great Man. It would be nice to hear their side of the story.

Here we have a wife who has been separated, by her husband, from her beloved children and lives in a mean flat with one servant, whilst the Great Man enjoys his mistress and his fame and the ten children she bore and loves. The novel could have been a rant or a bitter tale. Instead Dorothea not only deeply loves Alfred still, but, more importantly, she understands him. For every insult and hurt - he leaves his mistress a house and small fortune, she receives a servant's annuity - she recounts the memories and good times. That she meekly accepts the injustices would seem improbable today, but because this is Victorian Britain, with the historical background skilfully woven into the plot, we understand that she was restricted by the mores and laws of that time.

In the end we readers are left feeling that if the meek have not exactly inherited the earth, at least there is hope. We see Dorothea finally reconnecting with her children after facing down her husband's mistress and learning how much damage her husband had caused that innocent 17 year old actress he seduced. It's a novel about choices and the other point of view. It's not an easy read, but it is a delightful and thought provoking one.

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### **Deborah says**

This was an intriguing book, largely because the narrative is based on the marriage of Charles Dickens and



his wife Catherine, except with all the characters renamed and taking on a new identity. Here we have the discarded Mrs Gibson, living in virtual isolation in an apartment in London while her husband was lauded as the One and Only, one of the most popular and influential men living in London at the time. The book is well written, and certainly keeps you engaged, and explores the way in which Mrs Gibson's love for her husband still guides and directs her action years after he publicly humiliated her. My one criticism is the appearance of the ghostly Mr Gibson, her Alfred, towards the end of the book. I really struggled with this as a plot device, and would have liked to see our heroine actually choose a path that she had determined for herself, instead of one, which yet again, was bowing to the dictates of her husband. An interesting concept, but I think I almost would have preferred a more direct fictional biography, rather than one that changed names and the gender of the children. The marriage of the Charles and Catherine Dickens was intriguing, and for a man who borrowed so much from his observations of life all around him, I think it would have been far more fitting to write his story.

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### **Allison says**

I may not appreciate Charles Dicken's writing, but his life certainly makes for a good novel. This was a very quick read, not only because it falls comfortably into the easily digestible language of the YA genre, but because it was well-paced, with the backstory woven into the "current" plot in a very logical, forward-moving sort of way. I generally do not appreciate "old England" sorts of books, either, but this one got the language just right. What's more, the characters were fully believable and multidimensional; the narrator was just the right amount of indignant, compassionate, wistful, and independent for her time, age, and station in life, and she told her story in an equally appropriate manner. Seeing Alfred (i.e. Dickens) through her eyes as well as the eyes of her friends and children in the way of 3rd party characters provided a fascinating spectrum of perspectives on the character, and fleshed out the novel.

My one and only complaint is that the author made herself "known," in the section where Dorothea (the narrator) begins to rant about women's liberation. While thematically presenting this idea was not far-fetched, Dorothea's making a scene over this subject was not consistent with her character's temperament, nor did it fit the situation. This was the only disruptive segment of the novel, and without it, *Girl in a Blue Dress* would have provided a seamless, compelling read from beginning to end. It's the sort of book that keeps the reader wrapped up in the world it has created, and as we all know, these are the best sorts of books. Escapism will forever be invaluable.

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### **Kristin says**

This was our book club pick for January. I was really excited to read this book. It is based on the marriage of Charles Dickens and his wife Catherine. Before beginning this book I had zero back ground knowledge of their marriage...or lives for that matter. Believe me the cover alone had me intrigued.

Here is my advice: Do Not Read this book if/when you are feeling slightly depressed, fat, or if you are having marital difficulties. It could put you over the edge. It nearly put me over the edge...and I was not having marital difficulties; I have been feeling rather glum due to the cold never-ending-gray winter; and I was feeling fat due to the fact that I hadn't gone to the gym for a week. Not a good combination for reading this book.

It is another gentle read. It is a quiet novel, not too much action. Most of the time it is Dorothea reflecting on her marriage, the past, and how she has come to be in the position she is in, which is, cast-off from her home and family.

Here are the positives: It is elegantly written. It is interesting. Charles Dickens as Alfred Gibson is an interesting albeit complicated man. It is a compelling although not terribly exciting read.

The negatives: Alfred Gibson/Charles Dickens is an S.O.B. and I wanted to kick the said S.O.B. in the teeth the entire novel. Also, Dorothea is an irritating enabler who spent her whole life making excuses for him DESPITE the fact that he treated her like crap, kicked her out, took up with a mistress, and kept her from her children. Yes, Yes, I realize it was in Victorian times and women didn't have many options except to do as they were told by their husbands (it pains me to even write that) but I think I would've been putting up more of a fight especially where the children were concerned and not thinking so highly of old Alfred which she continues to do the entire novel and defends him adamantly. Another negative, the ending.

\*\*\*\*Spoiler\*\*\*\*

When old Alfred appears from the dead...did he have to answer to Dorothea for his abominable behavior? NO!! He again tells her what to do...and not very nicely...and she does it. Give me a break!!

You do not leave this book thinking very highly of Charles Dickens, "the Great Original", "the One and Only" and that is disappointing. Having said that it was interesting historical fiction.

My Rating: Good...leaning toward OK.

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## **Anne says**

I really enjoyed every page of this first novel by Gaynor Arnold, this was long-listed for the Man Booker Prize and it should have won!

Dorothea, widow of Alfred Gibson narrates the story. Alfred was the most famous novelist of Victorian times and much loved by the British public. The story opens on the day of his funeral - to which Dorothea was not invited. They have lived apart for many years and Dorothea has been banished to a small London house. Whilst the rest of the country mourns Alfred's passing, she reflects on her life with him.

Alfred is based on Charles Dickens and as far as I know, the author has stuck quite closely to his actual life and family story. He was a lively, high spirited young man who spent his life writing for his adoring public. Not only did he produce many books, but he and Dorothea had a very large family.

Gaynor Arnold writes in her acknowledgments that she has fictionalised many scenes, added some characters and removed some of them. Dorothea thinks back to when Alfred was a young man in love, a doting father and a friend to many.

After Alfred's death Dorothea encounters many problems with her family, with money and her layabout no-good son-in-law, she also goes off to meet with another new widow - Queen Victoria. Eventually Dorothea plucks up the courage to meet with her estranged sister, the woman who stayed with Alfred until his death, and also the young actress who was Alfred's mistress - or was she?

This is an exceptionally well written novel, I knew nothing about Charles Dickens private life and it probably works best that way. It is full of detail about Victorian life, yet never stuffy or old-fashioned. A really easy read - I loved it.

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### **Dru says**

I found this book at a thrift shop so I picked it up. I like Victorian and Victorian-esque literature so I thought I'd give it a try. It was a delightful surprise that in the end, had me thinking a lot about love in our modern life. It made me ponder male/female relationships. The theme is love, but where do love and duty cross lines? It is a loosely based fictionalized account of the marriage of Charles and Catherine Dickens. The character's names are changed and some facts have been altered, but the central story of how the famous author forced a separation on his wife after she bore him 10 children is intact. He then took a mistress. It is a story of dysfunctional family live and narcissism. It is also a romantic story of love and genius. I found it to be incredibly well written. The first chapter and a half were slow and I almost gave up, but I'm so glad I didn't because in the end I found it flowed well and had a satisfying conclusion. If you like Victorian history or Dickens you may enjoy this one.

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### **Nikki Roberts says**

I really thought this book was intriguing. A historical fiction piece revolving around Charles Dickens and his wife—told from her perspective about their courtship, marriage and its dissolution. Particularly noteworthy to me was the role of women, and how few choices they really had in life, compared to men.

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### **Karen Hogan says**

I enjoyed this fictionalized account of the marriage of Charles and Catherine Dickens. The author does an excellent job imagining the difference between the moralistic public writer, and the not so nice family man and husband. He was egotistical, self-centered, and willing to destroy his wife in order to satisfy his desire for a younger woman. Worth reading.

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### **Pam Schemrich says**

3.5 ??

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### **Marcy says**

The Girl in a Blue Dress has a cast of characters with different names, but in fact, this is a fictionalized story about Catherine Dickens, the wife of Charles Dickens, and the great writer. Catherine's father had been Dicken's benefactor. When he was invited for dinner, Catherine and Charles fell madly in love. Catherine's father was dead against this marriage. Charles Dickens was poor and unknown. Despite the parents' wishes,

Charles and Catherine were married. Catherine was not educated and paled in front of the company invited to their home. Charles made fun of Catherine in front of company, but he continued to impregnate Catherine - eight children to be exact. With each pregnancy, Catherine lost energy and slept away the hours. When her sister came to stay and help, there was a strong "suggestion" that incest occurred and was insinuated by Catherine. Catherine was jealous and did not hide it, forcing Charles to distance himself from her. The sister died. Charles was bereft. When encouraged strongly to go away for months of "rest," Charles settled comfortably in his home with Catherine's second sister who ran the household without the mother present. When Catherine came home, her children were not there to greet her and Charles was clearly done with his wife. Catherine was asked to leave their house, which she did willingly. Although Charles Dickens was now well known, rich, and treated like a god by his readers in England and America, Catherine lived sparingly in several small rooms for ten years before Charles' death. After his death, much of the story is told by Catherine's recollections, and conversations with the children she had not seen in years. Charles Dickens clearly wanted to be the king of literature. He needed to be front and center, often belittling his family members while being entertaining. His story was the single story, blaming his marriage on Catherine to the public while he was seeing an actress the age of one of his daughters. The story was compelling, but often repetitious. Still I would highly recommend the Girl in the Blue Dress.

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### **Tea Jovanovi? says**

Iako obožavam ?arlsa Dikensa ova knjiga me je ostavila potpuno ravnodušnom... I ne vidim razlog što je uopšte ušla u širi izbor za Bukera...

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