



Dickens

Peter Ackroyd

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Dickens was a landmark biography when first published in 1990. This specially edited shorter edition takes the reader into the life of one of the world's greatest writers.

Here, Ackroyd attempts to peel away the mask of a man whose life was outwardly a picture of Victorian rectitude, but whose love life was as complicated (and unconventional) as any modern writer's. Dickens had everything - fame, success and riches - but he died harbouring a deep sadness he had experienced all his life. He was a man of mercurial character, had enormous vitality and humour, but he also had a sense of loss and longing that would constantly appear in his work. Like many eminent Victorians, he led a double life: although he insisted that nothing in the newspapers he edited should upset his middle-class readers, he regularly indulged in dubious night-time escapades with fellow author Wilkie Collins, and, for the last 13 years of his life, kept a secret mistress.

Dickens Details

Date : Published May 28th 2002 by Vintage (first published 1990)

ISBN : 9780099437093

Author : Peter Ackroyd

Format : Paperback 608 pages

Genre : Biography, Nonfiction, History, Biography Memoir

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From Reader Review Dickens for online ebook

Caroline Barron_Author says

In my reading life to date neither a Dickens biography or - hush thy mouth! - a Dickens novel has been held in these hands of mine. (Well, that's not quite true, I have shuffled and re-filed 'Great Expectations' around my bookshelf many times over the years). Until now. Until Mr Ackroyd's book literally fell off the shelf at the bach (NZ speak for holiday house) we rented over Christmas. I figured the literary gods were trying to tell me something.

I'm the kind of reader (and writer) who prefers to know something of their subject before reading their work. I've been gathering my breath over the years to read Dickens, and now I understand why the hell he's so damn famous, I'm ready to begin.

The background information about the Victorian literary scene was so interesting (au revoir 1930s Paris obsession, or perhaps just goodbye for now...). Particularly that stories were serialized monthly, with Dickens' readerships often at 40,000 and occasionally 100,000, and sometimes even eclipsing sales of the London Times! Also interesting was the joy Dickens got from reading his work aloud to large audiences, and the way he went back and re-punctuated and edited his stories for this purpose.

Ackroyd is an excellent biographer, creating a readable story about a complicated life. He was not afraid to say something was 'inconclusive' (e.g. the nature of the relationship between Ellen and Dickens) and gave some excellent information on Dickens' creative process.

I was reading Donovan Bixley's incredible picture book for adults 'Faithfully Mozart' at the same time as 'Dickens', and was struck by the huge societal changes that marked the short 56 year gap between their births. In both books I was shocked and saddened by the high infant mortality rate.

Four stars as the last hundred pages dragged on and I found myself skimming to reach the end of the month-long journey.

Favourite Quote:

"This was indeed Dickens's genius: to remove his private concerns into a larger symbolic world so that they became the very image of his own time." (308)

Alexandra Peel says

Peter Ackroyd is the man to go to if you want to know anything about London or it's inhabitants.

Lisa says

It took me almost three weeks to finish this behemoth of a book, and I'm a Dickens fan. While the details and backstory of the biography were interesting, and the insights into Dickens' writing processes fascinating, I found the author's style tended to veer off into white noise if you weren't paying it a lot of attention and I

kept getting distracted. This biography had been on my mental TBR list long before Goodreads existed so I'm happy to finally check it off. And now my annual December reading of A Christmas Carol will be even more enjoyable.
Three and a half stars. Done!

Zandra says

Ackroyd's book 'takes us to the heart of the life of one of the world's greatest writers.' Or so Ackroyd likes to think, but I am not so sure. Ackroyd gets carried away with his own psychobabble: it reads well, but is not necessarily convincing. I was interested by his suggestion that Dicken's love for Ellen Ternan was not consummated. I have wondered why Ternan had no children by Dickens when she went on to have children with the man she finally married.

Tomlin's Dickens uses prostitutes and possibly contracts gonorrhoea, has an affair with Ellen Ternan, and fathers her child, who supposedly dies as a baby. In contradiction, Ackroyd quotes Dickens as saying he is 'in love with the princess of fairy-tales'. Ackroyd is better on Dicken's ability to mythologise life, while he is less good on describing Dicken's relations with real people. So it is possibly to come away from Ackroyd's book still liking Dickens, and certainly admiring his books as much as ever. But it is good also to read Tomlin.

Bettie? says

Malcolm Pellettier says

Dr. Ackroyd is most impressive.
I wonder what his reading speed is?

Ekaterina says

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Cocaine says

The level of research by Peter Ackroyd into this biography is in itself impressive but it is the manner of delivery that takes the biscuit. Without a doubt the author is amongst the best at this form of writing: concise, detailed, authoritative, at all times precise. It is his understanding, empathetic in its depth, that allows him the courage to take one or two creative liberties. Without an ounce of conceit he introduces fictional details of Dickens death. He does this as by way of starting this intimate analysis by fast forwarding to the terminal point in Dickens life 13 his demise. Obviously Ackroyd wasn't there and whatever thoughts were transcribed by those present the final expression as described by the biographer was not recorded. His descriptive flourishes include the suggestion that Dickens face bore an infantile look. Ackroyd also seems to think that the great author 19s mental state was one of mellow fruition. This may strike some as not staying true to the art of the biographer but in Ackroyd 19s hands, no slouch himself at creative writing, it is not merely excusable, it is acceptable.

It is the passion that Ackroyd has for the subject matter that delivers the maximum impact. Each sentence, each paragraph is filled with admiration, adoration even which is constantly underlined and supported by the authors attention to detail. The secret behind this books success has to be that gathered here for posterity are two of England 19s greatest novelists who stand together in some form of literary waltz.

The people who formed the backdrop to his life, his mother, father, his first love, his wife, his children, his friends are all presented as the living breathing individuals from whom Dickens drew inspiration to create his famed characters. No stone is left unturned, no shying away from unpalatable truths. Dickens was, like us all, a flawed man, a genius perhaps, one who suffered extreme mood swings, a man who could, when the need arose, force his powerful nature onto others the better to get the result he desired.

The creative flourishes do not intrude on the process of honest presentation, they add garnish not gratuity. Reading is for pleasure and all too often biographers forget this principle as they deliver the meat without the gravy. With Ackroyd we get both. Ackroyd spares Dickens no blushes. His passion for the man does not deter his journalistic bent. Unpleasant things are forensically researched before being displayed. Dickens was a man who suffered from unimaginable bouts of nervous energy. To combat this and to prevent himself going insane he would go for walks. Not around the block but for up to as much as thirty miles a day walking for seven hours at a time. He could also be controlling and was almost certainly an adverse character in the development of his sons. And then there was his infatuations with females other than his wife. In this biography we meet a man who was unafraid of challenging the dreadful social class system of the day, highlighting the wrongs of deprivation, unconcerned by the taunts of those who saw his fiction as crude and commercial and not literary but also a man driven by his memory of poverty to succeed in life, to make his mark. He certainly did that. Dickens knew what he wanted and gods help those who got in his way. This isn't a good biography, this is a great one.

Richard Anderson says

Fascinating, but gets too personal.

Olga Khomitsevich says

This enormous, all-encompassing biography not only tells the life of Dickens, but paints a sweeping picture of the society in which he lived, the England of his time, and indeed the entire era. It truly reads like a novel, because of the depth and complexity of the characters that populate it. While the author does take some liberties, drawing a few conclusions that are conjectures rather than solid facts, he never fails to point that out and doesn't pretend to know more than he does. And he knows a lot: you remain in awe of Ackroyd's encyclopedic knowledge and effortless erudition. He succeeds in being extremely compassionate towards his hero, while not glossing over some of his least commendable actions. An exceptional biography of an exceptional man.

Sara says

Dickens: Gifted with a flawless memory, boundless energy, extraordinary talents of organization and management. Endlessly nursing (without relief) the wounds of childhood poverty and abandonment. Channeling that endless grief into a broad sympathy for the poor, both in his writing and in his activism. Also, an almost monomaniacal control freak in his personal life, domineering, unforgiving, and startlingly unfeeling towards those closest to him.

Ackroyd: Trying to stitch back together the textual evidence we have of Dickens's personal psychology with the fiction he created. Weaving together the incidents of his daily life, personal and social, with the books Dickens wrote, to try to find the mundane sources of some of Dickens' wildest flights of imagination. Throwing in ample cultural background so that a reader might use this biography as a decent starting point for knowing something about Victorian England. But the primary focus is psycho-biography, without a doubt.

The Verdict: Not primarily for academics (who will be driven nuts by its lack of systematic citation), this biography creates Dickens as a character appallingly flawed, but fascinating for all that. Only, clocking in at just under 1200 pages in the hardback edition, the book also suffers from baggy repetitiveness. Which I guess befits an author who made baggy repetitiveness into high art. Still, the dilatory, speculative nature of a lot of Ackroyd's prose feels prolonged and hesitant ("Is it not possible that his real yearning is toward his own mother, a yearning he so frequently and often denied? Was he in this dream expressing all the real pining of his nature for the young mother who had once nursed and nourished him and whose later apparent abandonment of him led to so much bitterness and even coarseness in his relationship to her? Was he returning to his origins in such dreams? It cannot be known.") Of course it can't be known, Peter. We know that going into this biography. It goes without saying. Carry on.

This biography does a nice job of fleshing out Dickens' complicated but not consistently unloving marriage to Catherine Dickens, the wife whom he abandoned and publicly shamed. But I remained unconvinced by

Ackroyd's assertion that Dickens could not have been conducting a sexual affair with Ellen Ternan, the young actress with whom he became obsessed at the time he left his wife. All of the evidence he cited as proof of the impossibility of such a relationship could be just as easily recruited to prove that yes, of course they had an affair.

Redfox5 says

I picked this up out of a box of books that had belonged to my uncle. I chose it as it was one of the newer looking books and I really like 'The Christmas Carol'.

I hate a love/hate relationship with Dickens's books, love 'The Christmas Carol' and 'Oliver Twist' but hate the other Christmas books & 'Great Expectations', so wasn't really sure how much I would like this biography of him.

Peter Ackroyd does a great job of bringing Dickens to life, and what a life! He was constantly working, right up until the day he died. He was always walking and moving from place to place. He traveled to America and Europe. I had no idea he did public readings for his books or oversaw them being made into performances. He just seemed to fit so much in!

The one thing I would have liked more information about was his relationship with Ellen Ternan. They obviously saw a lot of each other but in what context is unclear. The author suggests at one point that the relationship wasn't sexual but I'm not so sure. Or maybe the author was sticking to the known facts and didn't want to speculate? I was only surprised because I have whole book about their relationship on my tbr list.

This is a great book about Dickens. Even if you are not a fan of Dickens's works, you will appreciate the life of this famous author. Ackroyd does an amazing job and he does it in such a way that it reads like fiction and keeps you engaged from beginning to end. Would recommend.

Rebecca Allen says

I enjoyed the book because of the subject, but Ackroyd's prose, though not as flowery as I expected from reading other reviews, was sometimes dull and often repetitive. I noticed this mainly at the beginning and end. Short phrases are repeated within a page of each other, as well as a quote from Forster at the end. This just made it seem hurried and sloppy sometimes, and made me wonder if that's how Ackroyd has managed to write so many books!

I also think that some major events are often brushed over, with massive detail given over others (the readings for example). Eg. I don't even recall (and if it is in there it clearly isn't made memorable) Ackroyd mentioning how Dickens met Collins. I know there is a lot on this elsewhere, but it is important for someone who hasn't read a Dickens bio before.

Also didn't like the Postscript at all.

And REALLY didn't like how there were no references for any quotes/letters, what if you wanted to look up something further??

Worth reading if you're interested in Dickens and his various biographies, but if you're only looking for one to read I would choose Tomalin's over Ackroyd's.

Robert Muir says

Very complete and well researched.

♥ Ibrahim ♥ says

The only work I have to do in this book is holding it. It is heavy. My copy has no less than 1195 pages. Intimidating? Isn't it? The funny thing is, the book reads like a breeze and you feel like you are walking through a massively huge yet charming palace learning all you want about Dickens and everybody directly related to him. I love that! I also love how the author is so knowledgeable about Dickens works, so much so that he can show me how much David Copperfield mirrors a lot of who Dickens himself and we can find the real Dickens, trace him, shake hands with him and enjoy meeting him in his own literary works. Yes, the author is both a scholar and down-to-earth person. I wish Napoleon's biography was written by Peter Ackroyd, and I wish Andrew Roberts wrote Napoleon's story with that kind of ease that makes the story available to us all. Yes, the book is dense in size, and I love that, what else have we got to do?! But the book is by no means dense in its presentation of the charming story of Dickens.
