

## CHARLES DICKENS: Writer for the People

You may not have read any books by Charles Dickens, but you've probably met his characters. You may remember the orphan, Oliver Twist, who gets in trouble for wanting a second bowl of gruel, then in worse trouble for joining a gang. You may remember Miss Havisham, the insane old lady who got jilted on her wedding day, and has spent the rest of her life wearing her wedding dress and sitting in a dark room with her unrefrigerated wedding cake. Even if you haven't had the pleasure of these particular acquaintances, you've certainly heard of Mr. Ebenezer Scrooge. It seems a year can't go by without some new movie version of *A Christmas Carol*, whether the star is Patrick Stewart or Kermit the Frog. Clearly the story has contemporary meaning, even though it was written in 1843.

Who was Charles Dickens? He was that rare author who is not only a genius, but known and loved for it in his own lifetime. When his latest work rolled off the presses, everyone talked about it. When he went on tour, crowds clamored for him. He was a superstar in an age that didn't have many superstars. He had phenomenal literary talent, he worked himself relentlessly, he knew exactly how to market his work—and he actually seemed to *love* his public. He wrote for them, for ordinary people. He made them laugh and cry. He tore at the public injustices of his time, some of which he helped to end. And he wrote *about* the public, the poor and the in-between as well as the rich.

He didn't start famous, of course. On February 7, 1812, he was born in England into a reasonably happy family. His father was cheerful, but a bit too optimistic, especially about his finances. In 1824, not long before Charles' 12<sup>th</sup> birthday, the family was so deeply in debt that they sent young Charles to work in a factory. He had to spend 10 hours a day pasting labels onto jars. Soon after, his father went to debtors' prison. A few months later, he was released—but Charles wasn't. Eventually, Charles was taken from the factory and sent to school, but he would never, ever forget his months in the factory.

He did his first writing as an obscure newspaper reporter, but published comic sketches on the side under the pen name of "Boz." These were collected into his first book, *Sketches by Boz*. This was enough of a success that he was asked to write stories for an upcoming series of comic pictures. This project became *The Pickwick Papers*, which became an absolute sensation throughout England.

*Pickwick* was published as a serial, which meant that one chapter would appear in each issue of a magazine or newspaper. In this age before television, people waited eagerly to see what would happen in the next episode. The serial offered many advantages over a published book: many people could afford each magazine issue who might not buy the eventual book; the suspense between issues kept interest high; and (in theory) Dickens had more time to write it. Actually, Dickens would deliberately assume a crushing work load for almost the rest of his life. He hadn't even finished the hilarious *Pickwick* before he began another novel: the grim tale of *Oliver Twist*.

Dickens had an enormous vitality, which flows through all his works. Any one of his characters, good or evil, sensible or ridiculous, often has more sheer *life* than a whole novel by some other author. People remember Mr. Micawber or Miss Havisham long after they forget the long, complex plots around them. But this vitality wasn't only for the page: Dickens loved real life, walking for miles at a time, popping into "lodging-houses, station-houses, cottages, hovels, Cheap Jacks' caravans, work-houses, prisons, school-rooms, chandlers' shops, back attics, barbers' shops, areas, back-yards, dark entries, public-houses, rag-shops, police-courts, markets in poor neighborhoods."

He loved the theater. He spent the latter part of his career performing his own works throughout both England and America. In his dramatic readings, he had a voice for each character, and his performances were intense. Not only did he make audiences laugh and weep, he took on such a brutal (and well-paying) schedule that the performances sometimes left him too exhausted to move. A few months after a "farewell tour," he had a massive stroke.

He died the next day, June 9, 1870, and was duly mourned by the public he had courted for so many decades. His last novel, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, remains unfinished. But like all his other books, it's still in print today.

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

## **CHARLES DICKENS: Writer for the People**

### **Remembering What You Read**

1. Which story does the article mention keeps being made into movies? In what year was the story written?
2. What painful experiences happened to Dickens at the age of 12?
3. What reasons are given for calling Dickens a “superstar”?
4. What does it mean to publish a novel as a serial? What advantages did the serial offer Dickens over a published book?
5. What year was Dickens born? What year did he die? What was his native land?
6. What is one reason people remember the characters of Dickens?

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**CHARLES DICKENS: Writer for the People**

**Considering What You Read**

1. How can you tell the works of Dickens are still popular today?
2. Was Dickens satisfied to spend all his time writing?
3. How can you tell that Dickens' enormous popularity wasn't due *entirely* to his great writing?
4. Why might you think that his work in the factory was highly unpleasant?
5. How can you tell that his "readings" on the stage were more like plays?

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**CHARLES DICKENS: Writer for the People**  
**Beyond What You Read**

1. Charles Dickens put much of himself into his work. Find out how his own experiences directly inspired portions of the following novels or stories:

*a. Little Dorrit*

*b. The Signal-Man*

*c. David Copperfield*

2. How was Christmas celebrated by most families in England when Dickens wrote this story? To what extent does *A Christmas Carol* seem to have influenced the celebration of Christmas?
3. This article focused on the great side of Dickens, but he had his flaws. Find out more about his life, and describe one of his failings.

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**CHARLES DICKENS: Writer for the People**

**Do you already know Dickens?**

*After each quote, write the title of the Dickens novel in which this quote is found.*

1. "Bah!" said Scrooge, "Humbug!"

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2. Child as he was, he was desperate with hunger, and reckless with misery. He rose from the table; and advancing to the master, basin and spoon in hand, said, somewhat alarmed at his own temerity:

'Please, sir, I want some more.'

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3. Mr. Micawber was waiting for me within the gate, and we went up to his room (top story but one), and cried very much. He solemnly conjured me, I remember, to take warning by his fate; and to observe that if a man had twenty pounds a-year for his income, and spent nineteen pounds nineteen shillings and sixpence, he would be happy, but that if he spent twenty pounds one he would be miserable. After which he borrowed a shilling of me for porter, gave me a written order on Mrs. Micawber for the amount, and put away his pocket-handkerchief, and cheered up.

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4. It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.

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5. "Look at me," said Miss Havisham. "You are not afraid of a woman who has never seen the sun since you were born?"

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**Titles to choose from:**

<i>Oliver Twist</i>	<i>A Christmas Carol</i>	<i>A Tale of Two Cities</i>	<i>Great Expectations</i>	<i>David Copperfield</i>
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## **CHARLES DICKENS: Writer for the People**

### **Your Own Christmas Carol**

*A Christmas Carol may well be Dickens' most popular work today, at least among writers! According to one count, there have been **over fifty** adaptations and parodies of the story for film, the stage, and television, and probably there have been more. Often, well-known performers will present their own slightly altered version of the tale.*

*Now it's your turn. How would you like to tell the story? You can make a serious version, and star a hero or heroine your own age who lives in a place not unlike yours. Or you can set the story in ancient India, or on Wall Street, or on a settlement on Mars, or wherever you like. Another route is parody: you can change whole the plot around, and even have a different ending. Or you can simply tell the old story with oddball characters and a few funny twists. Think about it. The great thing about an adaptation is that the main work of making the characters and plot has already been done for you. You can use it and imagine anything you like.*

1. Describe your Scrooge. What does this person do all day? For what nasty habit are the ghosts heading his or her way?
2. How about your Bob Cratchit? Does he work for Scrooge, or have some other relationship—a brother, a student, a chauffeur, a research assistant? Somehow, Scrooge is making Cratchit's life miserable. How?
3. What are your ghosts like? What do they do to Scrooge?
4. How does the story end?
5. Look at that, you've got a whole story planned out! Go write it!

## *Answer Key*

### **Remembering What You Read**

1. *A Christmas Carol*; in 1843.
2. He had to work at a factory, and his father was sent to debtors' prison.
3. The popularity of his writing and the tremendous turnouts when he went on tour.
4. One chapter would appear in each issue of a magazine or newspaper. Advantages: many could afford each magazine issue who might not buy the eventual book; the suspense between issues kept interest high; and (in theory) Dickens had more time to write it.
5. Born 1812, died 1870. England.
6. Their sheer life or vitality.

### **Considering What You Read**

1. Movies are still made from his works and/or his books are still in print.
2. No, he loved real life, exploring all sorts of different places and meeting people. He also relished the theater.
3. He knew exactly how to market his work. Also, he undertook huge reading tours that were so extensive that they greatly contributed to the breakdown of his health.
4. It lasted only for some months, but he never forgot it.
5. He did an individual voice for each character.

### **Beyond What You Read**

Answers vary.

### **Special Activity**

1. *A Christmas Carol*
2. *Oliver Twist*
3. *David Copperfield*
4. *A Tale of Two Cities*
5. *Great Expectations*