



# Becoming Dickens: The Invention of a Novelist

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## **Becoming Dickens: The Invention of a Novelist** Robert Douglas-Fairhurst

"Becoming Dickens" tells the story of how an ambitious young Londoner became England's greatest novelist. In following the twists and turns of Charles Dickens's early career, Robert Douglas-Fairhurst examines a remarkable double transformation: in reinventing himself Dickens reinvented the form of the novel. It was a high-stakes gamble, and Dickens never forgot how differently things could have turned out. Like the hero of "Dombey and Son," he remained haunted by "what might have been, and what was not."

In his own lifetime, Dickens was without rivals. He styled himself simply "The Inimitable." But he was not always confident about his standing in the world. From his traumatized childhood to the suicide of his first collaborator and the sudden death of the woman who had a good claim to being the love of his life, Dickens faced powerful obstacles. Before settling on the profession of novelist, he tried his hand at the law and journalism, considered a career in acting, and even contemplated emigrating to the West Indies. Yet with "The Pickwick Papers," "Oliver Twist," and a groundbreaking series of plays, sketches, and articles, he succeeded in turning every potential breakdown into a breakthrough.

Douglas-Fairhurst's provocative new biography, focused on the 1830s, portrays a restless and uncertain Dickens who could not decide on the career path he should take and would never feel secure in his considerable achievements.

## **Becoming Dickens: The Invention of a Novelist Details**

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# From Reader Review *Becoming Dickens: The Invention of a Novelist* for online ebook

## John says

Currently biographers aplenty entitle their narratives "Becoming" All-and-Sundry or "Being" Whomever-One-Pleases. In certain cases the narrative behind the title is perfectly splendid, e.g. Ann Wroe's, "Being Shelly." Others - not nearly so splendid.

When I chose "Becoming Dickens," I thought that RD-F must have written a book that addressed Dickens' life course/career development as well as the story of his inner/imaginative life. Of course, these are only two on the many other possibilities - his life as a "public character," a celebrity, an inventor of new genres (the "bestseller") in the context of the economic/social history of the English speaking world during the nineteenth century, etc., etc. I had hoped that he would formulate brief subplots and integrate them all into a thrilling grand narrative. Of course, he didn't, and I didn't expect he would - not really, certainly not in 300 pages. But of the possibilities, I was hoping for a biography of Dickens' imaginative life. How is it possible for one individual, sitting alone at his desk, year after year, to invent so many hundreds of clear and distinct characters and voices, give them life and breath, as it were, and allow them to interact as such persons would? What qualities of imagination, what experiences refined and filtered through an imagination so endowed could actually produce a mind that could conceive such plenitude, such abundant and plausible variety over a span of so many years?

I admit at this point that Evelyn Barish's questions/statements have shaped, even determined, my expectations of literary biography since I read the following in "Emerson: The Roots of Prophecy" (p. 54): "... it is possible that his real achievement during this difficult decade was the invisible but profound one of constructing an inviolable and private space in which his mind could grow." Such a line of inquiry and analysis, when applied to the case of Charles Dickens - and effectively pursued - would generate one of the greatest of literary biographies - for reasons I won't detail here.

So what did RD-F produce? Most of his pages describe the development of CD's career: his humble origins, the good fortune of his connections through his uncle, his mother's brother, to journalists and editors, his relentless "networking" among persons of interest, i.e. publishers, whom he met and cultivated, his agile exploitation of opportunity, his compulsive attention to detail, quality of product, and on and on. RD-F also describes the master narratives that he formulated early on, populated with his particular stock of characters, who morphed into one incarnation after another, as CD generated thousands of pages of text in his unrelenting, endless pursuit of security and respectability over the course of his career as professional writer, hounded by all the furies and a relentless vitality - poor man. Not a moment's rest or ease. But then again, he may not have wanted or needed any at all.

[By the way, I didn't read Ackroyd on Dickens again before I entered these comments into my reading journal. I should, of course, because I read it when first published, years ago, with very different expectations and questions. And I would have, had I set out to write a review, rather than a journal entry. So I can't state that RD-F added much original material or acutely perceptive insight that we didn't have before he published his book.]

But then near the end of his book RD-F gives us a highly interesting chapter, "Being Dickens," in which he presents ever so superficially a miraculous phenomenon, CD's imaginative life, and the related discussion of CD as a protean personality - a spectacular performance, an enactment of countless personae, which he

projected into every circumstance without pause or hesitation or perceptible transition. Of course, how could these two attributes not co-exist in a single mind? Now this is most decidedly the subject of a biography entitled "Becoming Dickens" that I want to read - but didn't.

In all fairness, I must note that RD-F wrote the book he wanted to write, I suspect. His book has been covered with awards, and so I have to believe that "Becoming Dickens" must be highly regarded among professionals in whatever domain RD-F inhabits. And so he has written/writes under no obligation to produce the book that I want to read.

But perhaps that book exists already among the hundreds and hundreds of biographies of CD that are available to me. I can't remember reading it, however. Perhaps I didn't recognize it in that small library - because I didn't know to look for it as I scanned its shelves.

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### **Asaf Bartov says**

Thoroughly enjoyed this insightful and well-written study of the young Charles Dickens. Specifically, Douglas-Fairhurst treats Dickens from his first steps as a teenager on his own through the publication of Oliver Twist and the serialization of Nicholas Nickleby, when he has "become" Dickens.

He weaves an engaging story, makes excellent and poignant use of literary and extraliterary sources, and is neither enamored nor aloof from his subject, the complex, flawed genius that was Dickens.

I guess you have to really like Dickens to care enough about his life, but if you do, this will be a rewarding read. It would help to have at least read the "Autobiographical sketch" Dickens himself composed in his later years, reproduced by his friend and biographer, John Forster.

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### **T P Kennedy says**

A fantastic biography. I haven't enjoyed a biography as much since reading Ackroyd's Dickens. This is very much an account of the young Dickens making his break though - the book ends in 1838. It is masterful in showing how the young Boz became the social reformer, novelist and phenomenon that was Dickens. He engages with the printed word as well as showing the false starts and alternative careers that he could have pursued. There's a great moment where he considers how Dickens would have been seen had he died while writing Nicholas Nickleby. This is thought through, well argued and articulate. For my money, this knocks the Tomalin biography into a cocked hat.

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### **Teresa says**

None of the facts in this partial-biography (focused on the early years) of Dickens are new, but it was a pleasure to read the way the author synthesized and interpreted the information to give us the development of Dickens as a novelist. Despite a touch of repetition (his reasoning on why Fagin was named after a young, kind co-worker is unique and astute, but was stated a couple times too often), I also enjoyed Douglas-Fairhurst's flights of fancy, especially his hypothesis of how things might've been different if Dickens had died young.

The latter technique fits a thought pattern of Dickens himself, as he was well aware of how different his life might've been – should've been -- from what it ended up being. He could not stop himself from worrying over it, like a loose tooth, thus endlessly exploring it through the lives of his characters: the routes they've might've taken along with the paths they did take, leading each to an outcome that cannot be changed once a decision is made, or not made.

"I had considered how the things that never happen, are often as much realities to us, in their effects, as those that are accomplished."

(from *David Copperfield*)

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### **Kathleen Fowler says**

I sometimes wonder what remains to be said about Charles Dickens that hasn't been said before. I picked up this book fearing that it might represent a mere grasping at straws on the part of an academic who must publish or perish. I was pleasantly surprised to see that the author had actually found a new angle to explore (or at least new to me). His book places Dickens in the context of his times, establishing how his character and the circumstances of his life combined to put him on the path to greatness. This is not a biography, as such. The focus is less on chronology and milestones, more on how people, events and Victorian culture itself influenced Dickens' perceptions of himself and his talents, and helped shape his ambition. In short, it appears he was in the right place at the right time, and had the right stuff.

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### **Bruce says**

Douglas-Fairhurst's book is less a conventional biography than an exquisitely written exploration of how Charles Dickens' life gradually shaped itself into that of a novelist. To some extent the text proceeds chronologically, starting at the time of Dickens' birth and continuing until he has firmly established himself as the preeminent novelist of his day, but the narrative is more subtle and complex than a strictly chronological presentation would be. The author skillfully mines Dickens' own life history for clues to his writing. This effort is sensitive and convincing. The text contains many allusions to Dickens' novels themselves, and, although the sources not all specifically identified in the text, they are immediately obvious to anyone with intimate knowledge of the works being quoted. Having fancied myself as a reader very familiar with Dickens' work as the consequence of having read his novels a number of times, I was often astonished at the number of short stories that he wrote and the number of dramas that he authored and produced.

Douglas-Fairhurst convincingly explores and examines Dickens' psychological propensities and relates them to the course of his career and the topics and characters contained within his novels themselves. Granted that authors routinely deal in their novels with autobiographical issues and especially with material that has been fraught for them in their own lives, Douglas-Fairhurst nonetheless is perceptive about subtle factors that recur again and again in Dickens' writing, all without over-reading or inappropriately speculating. It can legitimately be argued that Dickens crafted a new kind of novel, elevating the genre to a position which it had not had before him. Douglas-Fairhurst identifies the unique artistic characteristics that made Dickens utterly unlike other novelists of his time, elevating him to a preeminence that has subsequently been almost uniformly acknowledged.

A word should be said about Douglas-Fairhurst's own literary style. Rarely have I read a work exhibiting more skillful prose. His syntax is often complex and cumulative, and he uses this style effectively to not only speak but actually to demonstrate the message he is conveying. It is an easy style, a vastly entertaining style, never failing to be perceptive and erudite, a great pleasure to read.

If the reader is looking for a straightforward biography of Charles Dickens, this book may not be the best place to start. Douglas-Fairhurst's goal has been accomplished by the time Dickens is at work on only the third major novel of the many he eventually wrote, and then this text ends. For the reader wanting a deep exploration of the factors and influences molding Dickens into the mature novelist that he turned out to be, however, it is hard to imagine a more satisfying book than this.

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### **Lauren Albert says**

I'm not really sure what to make of this. It was interesting certainly. Douglas-Fairhurst focuses on the few years leading up to Dickens "becoming" the writer we know or think we know. He tries to show how easily it could have been different. But there is also another twist on the title in that he sees Dickens' characters often "becoming Dickens" or rather Dickens inserting himself in (innumerable Charlies and Charles and Dicks).

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### **David Christie says**

this non-conventional biography offers keen insight into what made dickens the literary giant posterity tells us he was and the popular writer he was in his own day. douglas-fairhurst examines this man riddled with self-doubt, spurred on by fears of penury, and controlled by his need to be in control. an ideal reader will be very familiar with dickens's texts and not bothered by a non-chronological and sometimes seemingly skittish approach to the life and motivations and struggles and successes of cjhd.

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### **Gerry says**

Meticulously researched and very well presented with plenty of contemporary quotes that helps put the subject into context, 'Becoming Dickens' is an excellent portrayal of the novelist's early life and efforts to become the man he was to be.

From his peregrinations around London, through his Warren's Blacking Factory experience, back to school at Wellington College, time as a solicitor's clerk and on to Parliamentary reporting, Dickens' mind, it appears, was always set on becoming a writer.

Even before he went into print as a published author, he did the job so well he was highly regarded working for various newspapers and when he tried his hand, anonymously, at putting some of his experiences into a sketch, it was published and well received. He continued, eventually adopted the pen name Boz, Bozomania began and Dickens was on the way to becoming, arguably, England's greatest writer.

The author analyses his early works in great detail and one can see how Dickens developed and how he used all the knowledge that he had built up in his youthful years to good effect.

His courtship of the ladies, and I make it plural because we musn't forget Maria Beadnell (although Dickens wished he had when he was to meet her much later and labelled her 'so substantial and stupid a form') nor should we forget Mary Hogarth, his wife's youthful sister who moved into Doughty Street with the newly married couple. Dickens' relationship with Mary is broodingly dark but her dying in his arms did at least spawn the death of Little Nell scene later. And when she had gone he adopted another sister of Katherine as his lifelong companion.

His complex relationships with his various publishers is explored and it is interesting to read of his meeting with and subsequent dealings with his fellow authors, such as Harrison Ainsworth and William Makepeace Thackeray, to name but two.

All in all the book gives a complete picture of how, as Thackeray was to say, 'he calmly and modestly came and took his place at the head of English literature'. The only word that seems to stand out as possibly being incorrect in this statement is 'modestly' for it would appear that Dickens was far from modest once he had stepped on the first rung of the ladder to writers' success; indeed if one is to style oneself 'Inimitable' that would seem to rule out any modesty!

The book captures the time admirably, builds the Dickens' character up superbly as the early years of fame and fortune advance and very definitely leaves the reader wanting more about his later life and further development as a writer.

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### **Ilze Folkmane says**

An overall brilliant book on Charles Dickens' early years. It is (will be) a tremendous help with my Bachelor paper, as I guess it would be with any research that deals with Dickens and includes his biography. Perhaps it is a bit too long and, in my opinion, the author strayed from the topic once or twice (or perhaps he didn't, and I simply failed to understand his reasons for writing certain paragraphs), but it still gives a good sense of Dickens' time and author himself.

Definitely better to read after completing all of Dickens' works, but that's a tall order, I guess.

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### **Meredith Allard says**

After I read Peter Ackroyd's biography of Charles Dickens I thought there was nothing left to say. Every known fact about the great author has been examined, pulled apart, glued back together, pulled apart again, examined under stronger microscopes, mused over, challenged, rearranged, pulled apart again... What makes *Becoming Dickens* a different sort of biography is the way Douglas-Fairhurst concentrates on Dickens' early years as a writer. How did Dickens become, well, Dickens? Douglas-Fairhurst does his best to answer that question.

I admit it took two running leaps for me to get into this biography. Douglas-Fairhurst begins with a prologue about a Victorian Age that didn't exist (with technology that wasn't available then) and then explains how there's this book called *The Difference Engine* that reimagines the 19th century. Then he explains how "the absence of Dickens is surprising" (3). I understand Douglas-Fairhurst's point--that Dickens is too important

to the Victorian Age to leave out--but I was put off by this roundabout beginning and I set the book down...for months. Finally, I was rereading Sketches by Boz and I was curious how Boz ever came to be considering the circumstances of Dickens' early life. I picked the book up a second time, held my nose while I waded through the prologue, and then this book became what it should be from word one, a critical account of Dickens' early years as a writer.

I don't think Douglas-Fairhurst adds any new information to the literary canon of Dickens biography. I don't think there are any more facts to uncover about Dickens. But the reason I ultimately enjoyed this biography is because it focuses in depth on the years most biographers skim--the years when Dickens didn't know what he wanted to do with his life. He tried out the law as a clerk, he thought about becoming an actor, he considered immigrating to the West Indies, he learned shorthand to become a court reporter, and then he became a journalist. One of my favorite early Dickens stories is how he had written a letter to the manager of a local theater asking for an audition. He was granted the audition but became ill when the day arrived and had to cancel. He had the intention of rescheduling, but never did. And thank goodness. Imagine what an emptier world this would be without his stories.

As a writer who has been heavily influenced by Dickens, I appreciate how Douglas-Fairhurst shows Dickens' creative influences. Dickens did not write in a vacuum, and he was influenced by comic actors as well as other authors. I wish Douglas-Fairhurst had added even more in this respect.

Anyone who is a Dickens fan and has more than a passing interest in his life, especially in his formative years, will enjoy this book. And perhaps you'll like the prologue more than me.

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## **Robert says**

Becoming Dickens: The invention of a novelist is a really good book. I don't normally come out and say something like that right from the start, but this book is elaborately researched, perceptive, intriguing, and very well written. The Charles Dickens who appears here is something of a haunted, insecure but at the same time dogged and brilliant figure. Yes, he was damaged as a child by his father's multiple insolvencies, but yes, he also was a resourceful law clerk, journalist, essayist, playwright, and of course, novelist. In fact, he became the major English-language novelist of his day.

Without psychologizing, Douglas-Fairhurst portrays someone who was a great mimic, a comedic personality and an exceptionally evasive figure. Douglas-Fairhurst has the good sense to understand why Dickens (and others) ultimately chose to write fiction: because you can live better in fiction than you can in life, because the characters you meet are funnier, sadder, more provocative...and because "the world" is replete with articulated moods and details, things that slip past notice unless you are preying upon them with your curiosity and vocabulary and sense of literary "possibility."

I had no idea how hard Dickens worked as a fledgling journalist and satirist before *The Pickwick Papers* made him a national figure in England. He covered parliament, elections, the courts, the prisons, and the social life of his times. Douglas-Fairhurst knows those times well, and he has an extraordinary ability to cite just the right passage from Dickens's writings to illustrate a point...but not only that...he also excels in drawing on the writings of others--Thackeray, for instance, or diarist/memoirists that only a specialist in 19th century British social history would know.

At the same time, I wasn't familiar with how many plays Dickens wrote, or how often he took on roles



himself, or how unhappy he clearly was in his marriage...something Douglas-Fairhurst attributes to Dickens having chosen the wrong sister to marry...and then watched the younger one die a sudden, early death.

The Pickwick Papers was the first Dickens novel I read. I was eleven. I suppose I understood 60% of what was going on. Then came Great Expectations, David Copperfield, and Bleak House—a novel I read in college and still regard as one of the most astonishing books written since Shakespeare. Dickens had a plastic personality—meaning that he adapted to circumstances if he had to (he didn't like it, but he did it)—and that marvelous plastic style, capable of rendering low-lives, aristocrats, children, barristers, cabbies, thieves and entire cities and landscapes in quick, powerful fashion.

Ultimately, Douglas-Fairhurst doesn't really pin Dickens down. One can tell he was “a case” and there probably was some kind of psychological disorder at the heart of his drive and imagination, but the point made here is that Dickens kept on inventing himself as he invented his stories.

Again, a good book.

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### **Erin says**

I admit, I did not actually finish this book. According to my Kindle I read 60% of this book which was too much for me. I started this biography in hopes to learn more about Dickens and how he became one of the greatest authors in British history. While the author is quite jumpy in terms of going back and forth between Dickens and his contemporary authors, my main complaint is that the author spent too much time on Dickens' life regarding The Pickwick Papers. I understand Pickwick is what got Dickens' foot in the door for the literary world, but after reading more than half the book, Douglass had yet to really focus on Dickens' other great literary works, which left me quite disappointed and I began to become bored with the book. I do plan to finish the book one day, and maybe then my view will change, but for now I was quite let down in this “great, new biography” on Charles Dickens.

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### **Jason Furman says**

In 1855, Charles Dickens formally withdrew from the formal list of law students, permanently giving up the idea of a stable career in the law. At the time he was already the most famous novelist in England, the author of The Pickwick Papers, Oliver Twist, David Copperfield and Bleak House.

This fact captures what appears to be intended as the thesis of Robert Douglas-Fairhurst's *Becoming Dickens*. The book is intended as a counterweight to what might be called the Whig history of Dickens, the inevitable march from *Sketches by Boz* to the *Pickwick Papers* all the way through to completing the first half of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* before his death. Instead, Douglas-Fairhurst focuses on the first 26 years of Dickens' life, ending in 1838 when he first signed a novel with the name “Charles Dickens.”

The thesis is that before Dickens settled into his role as novelist, he pursued a number of other potential careers. Douglas-Fairhurst zooms in on several of these, starting with the blacking factory, as a clerk, in a law office, as a parliamentary reporter, and even after his current trajectory started, branching off into writing plays, editing memoirs, etc.

Every single page of the book is interesting and insightful, very light on the biography and heavy on the literary criticism – either how events were later reflected in the multiplicity of Dickens' or deeper dives into some of the early individual pieces, like the first story Dickens wrote, "A Dinner at Poplar Walk." Every chapter works as a unified essay.

But the chapter's don't add up to a book that supports the thesis or provides a completely original insight into Dickens life. In part this is because Dickens became a hugely popular writer at age 24 so there really were not a lot of roads not taken. In part, this is because Dickens continued to restlessly follow multiple paths his entire life, as an editor, public speaker and amateur dramatist, among other vocations. And in part all of this has been well told before, by Michael Slater and others.

Becoming Dickens is still an excellent book. Just not quite as original or proven as the premise it sets up.

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## **Maggie says**

A well-written account of the start of Dickens' career in the 1830s, covering his first foray into the public consciousness as "Boz" to the proud publication of *Oliver Twist* with "Charles Dickens" printed on the title page. Douglas-Fairhurst's work is richly researched, dipping deeply into the endless supply of short pieces and articles the young and seemingly manic "Boz" churned out on a regular basis. Though the biography naturally refers to novels by which Dickens' life is usually mapped out, it is the growth of Dickens as a professional writer and his acceptance of himself as a novelist that drives the biography forward.

Though scholarly in scope, the tone remains engaging throughout (though D-F often can't seem to help himself from tossing in a clever turn of phrase or amusing aside that would make the young "Boz" proud). The work begins with D-H musing on how intrinsic Dickens is to the Victorian era, both of his time and an active creator of his time. The final chapter, entitled "Postscript", is another nod at Dickens the author who worked hard to forge and then maintain a direct relationships with his audience. We are invited to muse along with D-H, to think about how Dickens is still developing, still "becoming" in our own time.

Overall a penetrating analysis and fluid read.

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