



Death and Mr. Pickwick

Stephen Jarvis

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Death and Mr. Pickwick is a vast, richly imagined, Dickensian work about the rough-and-tumble world that produced an author who defined an age. Like Charles Dickens did in his immortal novels, Stephen Jarvis has spun a tale full of preposterous characters, shaggy-dog stories, improbable reversals, skulduggery, betrayal, and valor-all true, and all brilliantly brought to life in his unputdownable book.

The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club, featuring the fat and lovable Mr. Pickwick and his Cockney manservant, Sam Weller, began as a series of whimsical sketches, the brainchild of the brilliant, erratic, misanthropic illustrator named Robert Seymour, a denizen of the back alleys and grimy courtyards where early nineteenth-century London's printers and booksellers plied their cutthroat trade. When Seymour's publishers, after trying to match his magical etchings with a number of writers, settled on a young storyteller using the pen name Boz, *The Pickwick Papers* went on to become a worldwide phenomenon, outselling every other book besides the Bible and Shakespeare's plays. And Boz, as the young Charles Dickens signed his work, became, in the eyes of many, the most important writer of his time. The fate of Robert Seymour, Mr. Pickwick's creator, a very different story-one untold before now.

Few novels deserve to be called magnificent. *Death and Mr. Pickwick* is one of them.

Death and Mr. Pickwick Details

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Author : Stephen Jarvis

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From Reader Review Death and Mr. Pickwick for online ebook

Joy Stephenson says

This is a very long and meandering book without any cohesive plot. Once I had accepted that it was going to be a series of unconnected short stories / character studies, I began to enjoy it, reading them intermittently with other books. The characters were convincing and I became absorbed in each sketch and sorry not to be following them for longer. In fact I would give the first 300 or so pages 3 stars.

Then there was a more unified section dealing with Robert Seymour's creation of Mr Pickwick, Dickens' takeover and Seymour's demise and I found this part compelling and worth 4 stars.

But then the last 200 or so pages - oh, they were tedious! I felt as though I were being harangued in an attempt to convince me of Dickens' false treatment of Seymour. I skipped and scanned much of this and when I finally reached the end I felt sheer relief that it was over.

Book Riot Community says

I think any book that you read on the beach qualifies as a beach read, so why not an 800-page Dickensian novel about Dickens? (Wait is that meta?) Based on the story of The Pickwick Papers and the beginning of the career of Charles Dickens, this is a delightful novel, full of history and fun – and it's now in paperback! It will charm your pants off.

Tune in to our weekly podcast dedicated to all things new books, All The Books:

<http://bookriot.com/category/all-the-...>

Gerry says

Fact, fiction, conspiracy theory or simply pure enjoyment? 'Death and Mr Pickwick' has it all.

Yes, Dickens wrote 'The Pickwick Papers' (to give it the short title), that's a fact; undoubtedly Dickens and the original artist Richard Seymour together with publishers Chapman and Hall had many a chat over production and Stephen Jarvis reports many conversations, mostly purely fiction of course; as for conspiracy theory, well, it was always open to debate as to whether when 'Pickwick' (to give it an even shorter title) was conceived it was to be artist-led or writer-led, obviously Seymour thought the former with Dickens writing to his pictures while Charlie thought the latter with Seymour drawing to his writing but Stephen Jarvis puts a whole new complexion on the issue; but whatever else is within the pages (and there are plenty of them) there is very much pure enjoyment particularly if one is a Pickwickian or a Dickensian.

Stephen Jarvis has presented us with a vivid panorama of the early literary pre-Victorian and Victorian era followed by a most imaginative view of how 'The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club' (to give it its full title) was conceived and subsequently written together with some posthumous views of 'Pickwick' and its associates and areas of activity. And in the book being presented in this way, there is something of a dichotomy in that if one was not to know an awful lot about the period being written about in the early stages, much of the splendid writing could be lost on the reader.

There is plenty of detail about author/illustrator relationships, all of which is great for the literary historian (many now little known authors and illustrators strut across the pages) but it might just not be fully appreciated by the more general reader and I could fully understand if abandonment of the novel were to be the outcome before the Pickwick sensation is reached.

This fascinating and brilliantly inventive background continues for over 400 pages before the Dickens/Seymour/Pickwick question is raised in sufficient detail for its implications to be understood. Obviously by then Dickens and Seymour have, independently, made fleeting appearances in the tale so that their characters are known but it is when they come together that the drama really begins.

And drama it certainly is; I was always convinced I knew the background to Pickwick but now I am not so sure what to believe (although I realise that this book is fiction) because the views are so supremely presented one is almost led to believe them. Stephen Jarvis has obviously done much serious research into his work and the results are absolutely startling and it is a compelling read, providing the cavalcade of characters in the early stages is not too overfacing.

It is a real tour de force, even, in a loose sort of way, a literary equivalent of 'War and Peace', but I can appreciate that it may not be to everyone's taste.

Barb says

I can't believe I'm finished. 816 pages. Huge but ultimately a good read. Especially if you're a Dickens fan.

karen says

finally unpacked from bedbug bags!!!

i feel like i may have lost my momentum with this one, though...

Charlotte says

Having just finished one excellent faux (Jane Harris's OBSERVATIONS) and 2 real Victorian novels I found Jarvis's attempt to undermine Dickens's reputation while writing a Dickensian novel overlong, not as good as the above, and in the end a bit tedious. He wrote some wonderful episodes and included fascinating trivia about PICKWICK PAPERS, but the constant return to a thesis (sans footnotes) that Robert Seymour created the original ideas and characters seemed petty and mean spirited. In the end I didn't care and could only wish I had been reading Dickens instead.

Lee Paris says

The Pickwick Papers is my favourite novel but I came to it as a young lad only after enjoying the 1952 movie version directed by Noel Langley which appeared on CBC television at Christmas in the early 1960s.

Mr. Pickwick was played by James Hayter who Americans, at least those watching PBS, will remember as Mr. Tebbs in the popular British sitcom *Are You Being Served*. While my classmates were reading the Hardy Boys I was immersed in the adventures of the four chums on their romp by coach through the English countryside. You can imagine my delight when I read a review of the novel by Stephen Jarvis and was reassured that it was not a sequel in which the old age and decrepitude of our hero would be imagined. There is death in this novel; in fact there are many deaths but Mr. Pickwick himself remains unscathed and immortal. The collaboration between artist and writer has always interested me and I have a particular interest in the work of Gillray and Rowlandson of the Regency period so entertainingly described in *City of Laughter: Sex and Satire in Eighteenth-Century London*. Now thanks to Mr. Jarvis I have been introduced to the genius of Robert Seymour, Buss and Phiz and the world of early 19th century book illustration and publishing. Several reviewers have described this novel as Dickensian in scope and I have to agree; there are hundreds of characters vividly brought to life who cover the entire spectrum of the human condition and who represent both the good and the bad impulses of human beings. I read the Kindle edition and many times I wished that I could click on a section and display one of Seymour's inspired caricatures. Fortunately Mr. Jarvis has exploited the strengths of social media to provide illustrative material on a web page, Twitter and Facebook. His account of rescuing Robert Seymour's gravestone, which had been relegated to the crypt of a church in Islington, is fascinating. The popularity of this novel may inspire someone to publish a well illustrated biography of Mr. Seymour. Now it's time to reread *Pickwick Papers*.

Marilee says

I'm giving it 4 stars for effort and cleverness... but I can't say I found it particularly engaging. It follows it's the general form of it's inspiration... The *Pickwick Papers* by Charles Dickens, in that it's a series of vignettes and stories as if in a journal. But the jumping around left me uninvolved and often uninterested at times. I lay it aside many times... it took me two months to read.

Jason Pettus says

(Reprinted from the Chicago Center for Literature and Photography [cclapcenter.com]. I am the original author of this essay, as well as the owner of CCLaP; it is not being reprinted illegally.)

Earlier this fall, I ended up randomly stumbling across an intriguing-looking new novel at my neighborhood library, called *Death and Mr. Pickwick* by Stephen Jarvis, which purports to be the "true story" behind the publishing of Charles Dickens' *The Pickwick Papers*; but of course to appreciate such a novel to its fullest, I realized that I was going to have to read Dickens' original as well, so I picked that up on the same day and have been spending the last several months slowly making my way through the combined 1,600 pages of material. For those who don't know, *The Pickwick Papers* was Dickens' first book, after first making a splash in his early twenties with a series of short comical articles in the British penny dreadfuls. See, at the time, a hugely popular form of publishing consisted of stories mainly made up of funny illustrations, of which a writer of light verse would be hired to essentially make up lengthy captions afterwards describing what was going on, the series usually centered around a generalized concept that could be extended for as long as the pieces were popular; and this is exactly how *Pickwick* started out as well, originally the creation of the then-famous illustrator Robert Seymour, concerning the notes, travels and experiments of a "club" of pompous proto-scientists and wannabe-historians, with the 24-year-old Dickens originally hired simply to write a few

lines of humorous prose to explain what exactly was going on in the etches, the main reason people were tuning in to begin with. But Dickens had a different idea in mind, writing lengthier and lengthier stories to go with each illustration, eagerly eaten up by what at the time was a population of rapidly rising literates, a sort of perfect storm of publishing innovations and reform in public schooling that created an insatiable public appetite for the first time for written fiction; and when Seymour ended up killing himself just a few chapters into the series, essentially the process of putting them together got reversed, with Dickens now writing the stories in advance and the hired illustrators now in charge of drawing what he was describing, not the other way around, which most historians consider a hugely positive watershed moment in the history of Victorian literature.

And Jarvis's *Death and Mr. Pickwick* covers this same ground, only in the opposite direction -- in his equally delightful and equally overstuffed novel, Seymour is the hero, picture-stories are to be commended, while Dickens is portrayed as the evil villain who came along and ruined everything. Although if you're going to pick up Jarvis's contemporary novel, the first thing to know is that it's not just about this subject; in fact it is no less than a sweeping look at what daily life was like in London at the dawn of the Victorian Age, and as such gets into such minute detail about such things as British restaurants and Victorian entertainment options that you will undoubtedly go mad from it all, unless you steel yourself in advance for the idea that this is why the novel even exists, not necessarily to push along a fast-moving (or even normal-moving) plot. As such, then, it's a lot of fun to make your way through as long as you have the right attitude and lots of time; although just like with Dickens' original, if you're not prepared for a regular amount of rambling, off-kilter digressions happening literally every other chapter or so, both of these giant books are going to end up driving you really crazy. It gets a limited recommendation from me today for that reason, a fine read for people who are in the mood for it, but a book you should stay far away from if you're not.

Out of 10: **8.0**, or **9.0** for fans of Victorian literature

Tim says

Absolutely amazing.

Amazing scale: 800-plus pages, dozens of primary characters, an encyclopedic fictional portrait of an era.

Amazing history: I assume Jarvis has done his homework in this portrayal of the people and events that turn out to be a seminal point in English literary history and the history of popular culture.

Robert Seymour, the famed caricaturist whose prints made him a sensation in 19th century London--and the creator of a sketch of Mr. Pickwick, who became a fictional celebrity when Charles Dickens, writing as Boz, wrote the serialized prose that eventually became *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club*.

Who gets the credit for *Pickwick*? That's the question Jarvis is trying to answer (spoiler alert: he answers it; non-spoiler alert: does the answer really matter?).

Sketches (a word chosen carefully) of Seymour, Boz/Dickens, publishers Chapman and Hall, artists George Cruikshank, William Heath, and Thomas Rowlandson, Lord Melbourne, entertainers, politicians--and readers and other consumers of mass culture--this is an extraordinary and immense canvas that Jarvis completes with an extraordinary degree of research and knowledge and tenderness.

It's easy to forget about *Pickwick*; he doesn't speak to readers today in the way of Dickens's later novels, but this book convinced me of *Pickwick*'s importance and the creation of a market for literature (a mass market: like Shakespeare, Dickens had an appeal that went well beyond the literati).

It's hard to push an 800-plus page book on to anyone, but this is an excellent novel. Just amazing.

Roger Brunyate says

There is a novel in here somewhere... but at 800 pages?

"First catch your hare" begins the apocryphal 18th-century recipe for jugged hare. Author Stephen Jarvis not only shows the catching of the hare, but tells you how to make the jug as well, and set the fire no doubt. There is certainly a novel here in the story of how Charles Dickens supposedly hijacked the ideas of his collaborator, illustrator Robert Seymour, in producing his first great success, *The Pickwick Papers*. But do we have to hear the travails of the artist's father, and the history of every other cartoonist working at the beginning of the 19th century? Does the mere mention of a street clown have to segue into a 25-page history of the Grimaldi family? And is it helpful to encase all this within a modern-day story in which the novel is commissioned by an eccentric patron known as (sic) Mr. Inbelicate? Yes, Dickens himself wrote at great length, but his genius made his books hang together. Much as I was enlightened by Mr. Jarvis's information and enjoyed his writing style, I soon found myself resenting the sheer amount I had to read to get into his story.

Reading on, I began to understand that much of his method was to demonstrate that the ideas for *Pickwick*—the concept of preparing a series of illustrations as the framework for text, the idea of centering them around a rambunctious gentlemen's club, the names and nature of many of the characters, even the ideas for individual episodes—were already in Seymour's head before he met Dickens. Those who have read *The Pickwick Papers* will recognize where many of these apparently random episodes are heading. Without that knowledge, the first half of Jarvis's book will seem scattered and episodic, though often interesting. Dickens' own writing at this stage was much more episodic than in his later works, so you could say that Jarvis is merely prefiguring the manner of his model. There is even a kind of fascination to this abundance; it is a bit like reading a well-written encyclopedia. But an encyclopedia is not a novel; although Jarvis will bring most of it to earth eventually, he buries his story in a blizzard of apparently arbitrary information tossed into the air and waiting to fall.

Charles Dickens is not mentioned by name until page 639. But he appears under his pseudonym of Boz beginning on page 450, and crops up once or twice before that as a youth known simply as Chatham Charlie. As compared to the extensive build-up of the character of Robert Seymour, Dickens sneaks late into the story and simply grabs it. The interactions between the illustrator and author of *Pickwick* occupy no more than 50 pages of the 800-page book. And the key exchange takes place in a ten-page scene in which Boz (Dickens) treats his collaborator with a high-handed arrogance amounting virtually to professional assassination. Nothing that Jarvis has shown us of Boz so far makes the excesses of this scene credible, nor does his long and detailed portrait of Seymour give much hint of how totally it would destroy him. The ascent of one and demise of the other happen so quickly as to feel like a slap in the face—or stab in the gut—within the leisurely pace of the rest. With this stroke, Jarvis abandons the normal development of the novelist to give us a piece of violent polemic to make his particular point.

There are still 250 pages to go, but they feel like a hugely distended epilogue. We hear of the runaway success of *Pickwick*, which became the media sensation of its time. We hear of instances where models for one of other of the characters recognize themselves with either fury or pride. We hear of the steps taken by Dickens' publishers and associates to distance him from claims that the inspiration was not his own. And we read of the sad decline of the Seymour family, living under the shadow of theft and imputation of failure. And so the story drags on into the twentieth century, as Dickens writes other books, is honored, and dies, and *Pickwick* mania eventually runs its course. We even discover the real name of the annoyingly knowing Mr. Inbelicate. Not that it matters.

Had Stephen Jarvis simply entitled his book "*Pickwick: a History*," it might have been a non-fiction best-seller.* It would have lost the color he brings to his imagined scenes and dialogues, but his vast erudition would all fall properly into place. But as a novel, the book is an unwieldy hybrid that, for me, just doesn't work.

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*Actually no. Thinking this over, I realize that the case that Jarvis is making can only be advanced in fiction. When other reviewers say they were convinced, what were they convinced by? A series of fictional encounters devised by the author to place Robert Seymour into situations that might seem to prefigure *Pickwick*—but we have only the author's word that they happened. I see now that the purpose of the modern archivist character, Mr. Inbelicate, is to miraculously come up with "documents" without any compunction to attest to their source; there is not a single footnote in the book itself, nor any endnote that might attempt to separate fact from fancy. There is something fundamentally dishonest about using the trappings of history to argue a real-life case of such importance, but in fact using the meretricious tools of fiction.

Rebecca says

The Pickwick Papers was a Victorian publishing phenomenon. Originally envisioned as a series of sporting tales to accompany Robert Seymour's engravings in a monthly magazine, the story soon took on a life of its own. Debut novelist Jarvis believes that a conspiracy between Dickens and his publishers covered up two key facts: *Pickwick* was primarily Seymour's creation, and Dickens's brash attempt to take it over was the impetus for Seymour's suicide in 1836. At 800+ pages, this novel is chock-full of digressions – some amusing, others seemingly irrelevant. Jarvis started the project with the ambition of reading everything ever written about *Pickwick*. The results are exhaustive...but also a little exhausting.

(Non-subscribers can read an excerpt of my full review at [BookBrowse](#).)

Readalikes:

- *The Luminaries* by Eleanor Catton
 - *The Strangler Vine* by M.J. Carter
-

Laurie says

This was SUCH a slog at times. It took me way longer to read than the actual *Pickwick Papers*. I can see why you need some of the background and lead-up, etc. and it does hearken pretty well to the meandering

tangents in Pickwick Papers, but Jarvis is no Dickens and for most of the first third of the book my eyes were just glazing over.

Paul Bryant says

I shall now tell you all about *Death and...*

Mmmmhmmmm

Mr Pick

Now, pick what... er ah yes

....wick.

So, here is my review. I always do one of those. Absolutely, I'm just going to.....

It is a gigantic novel which for the first 1000 pages seems.....

Uh? Oh sorry... yes, what? It's all about some ... young guys becoming ill....

Ah where was I? illustrators. In the early 19th whatever. I have to be honest here, it just

It's something to do with Dickens. I think I remember that...

But don't quote me because

I have to say that it

Didn't.

Seem. Mmmhmm.

It didn't seem to have

To have much

Of a

Story to it.

Story to it. Hmmm, mumble mumble.

So I found it quite..... Hmmm, mumble mumble

I gave up. No, not quite. No. That's not it.

It gave me up. It said you know, really, I don't think that you are the right reader for me. I feel I should be with somebody else. Somebody with more patience. You, you just can't sit still for more than five minutes. You seem to want explosions and sex and jokes. You don't have any inner peace. So the sun has set on our relationship. I already met someone else. At the library. She's good and kind. She knits her own breakfast cereal.

Well, I was kind of relieved. There was no bitterness, we just smiled kinda sadly and that was it.

William says

a miraculous novel that was enthralling as well as educational..lots of real history here. If you liked books like DROOD or CRIMSON PETAL AND THE WHITE, or if you love the books of Charles Divkens, you'll estvthus up.
