

Great expectations for Dickens birthday bash

Britain's greatest Victorian novelist was born exactly 200 years ago. He was a literary celebrity with hordes of adoring fans but, if he was alive today, would he still be writing books?



ENGLISH & MEDIA

Charles Dickens was one of the first real literary superstars – a true celebrity writer, who attracted huge crowds and an impressive fortune. With such iconic characters as Ebenezer Scrooge, Oliver Twist and Miss Havisham, he built up a loyal army of devoted fans.

Now, on what would be his 200th birthday, Charles Dickens is an international hero. At Westminster Abbey today, a star-studded wreath-laying ceremony will be held to mark the occasion. Meanwhile, London's BFI is showcasing some of the hundreds of Dickens film adaptations, while scores of other events around the world explore the unique importance of his work.

But although he has joined the ranks of literature's most respected authors – solemnly studied by professors and pupils across the globe – his work wasn't always seen as so highbrow. In Victorian times, his books' action-packed plots and evil villains appealed to readers from



The author and his cast of brilliantly imagined characters in 'Dickens' Dream' by R.W. Buss.

all social classes.

Dickens' early novels, like *A Christmas Carol*, were published in weekly chapters in newspapers, almost like Victorian soap operas. Each issue attracted jostling crowds desperate to get their hands on the latest installment.

The popularity served a purpose. From a family blighted by debt, imprisonment and poverty, Dickens never stopped writing about the plight of the poor and hungry. From the orphan Oliver Twist's journey into a sordid criminal underworld to Pip's troubled experience of wealth in *Great Expectations*, his characters are everyday people, constantly struggling with inequality and injustice.

This modern sense of social issues has led many to imagine what Dickens would be like as a 21st Century icon. Today, some say, Dickens would be tweeting installments of his tales, or writing for television about an Oliver caught up in the

summer riots. Ebenezer Scrooge might be a banker, raking in huge bonuses at RBS.

WHAT THE DICKENS?

If Dickens was alive now, say fans, he would stay faithful to his most important mission: creating dramatic stories for, and about, normal people. In the modern world, the sharp dialogue and exciting plot twists of soaps like *Eastenders* do this much better than long, plodding 'literary' novels. This leads to a startling argument: that a modern-day Dickens might not be a novelist at all.

Rubbish, say other critics. Dickens may have been interested in speaking to the masses, but he would never compromise in his commitment to perfect style and deep, sophisticated thought. Television and film would not give him the freedom and scope to express himself properly, they argue. He would never abandon the unique beauty of the written word.

Q & A

Q How have Dickens' books had an impact on society?

A During his life, Dickens' concern with social justice had a genuine effect on the real world. Parts of *Oliver Twist*, for example, are set on Jacob's Island, described in the book as the home of 'every loathsome

indication of filth, rot, and garbage'. The island was a real place: by writing about it, Dickens brought its depravity to the attention of the public, which contributed to it being redeveloped.

Q Is his work really influential anymore though?

A Perhaps. To celebrate his bicentenary, Culture Secretary Jeremy Hunt has given every

Cabinet Minister a book by the novelist. Whether the plight of Nicholas Nickleby or Nell Trent will cause a turnaround in government policy, however, remains to be seen.

SOME PEOPLE SAY...

'The novel is an obsolete art-form.'

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

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WORD WATCH

BFI – The British Film Institute is a cultural organisation devoted to supporting, promoting and preserving British film.

Highbrow – When they talk about culture, people often refer to ‘highbrow’ or ‘lowbrow’ forms of art. ‘Highbrow’ refers to things seen as more intelligent and difficult, like opera, complicated black and white films, or long novels. Lowbrow refers to more popular forms of

culture, like X-Factor, Jilly Cooper or *Nuts Magazine*.

Eastenders – A popular British soap opera, set in the East End of London. Like many soaps, *Eastenders* is known for its outlandish storylines: residents of the fictional Albert Square, where it is set, are known to suffer an above-average rate of murder, family breakdown and crime.

Cabinet Minister – When UK Members of Parliament are elected, the political party that

gains the most seats forms a government. Some MPs will be chosen by the Prime Minister to form a ‘cabinet’ of ministers, with each member responsible for a certain area of policy. Michael Gove, for example, is currently Education Secretary; Jeremy Hunt is Culture Secretary.

RBS – The Royal Bank of Scotland, also known as RBS, is notorious for having gone spectacularly bust during the 2008 financial crisis. It was bailed out by the government and is now state-owned.

YOU DECIDE

1. What would Charles Dickens do if he was alive today?
2. Are other forms of media and communication now better at exploring complicated ideas than novels?

ACTIVITIES

1. Produce a short biography of Charles Dickens, presented in an interesting way – try communicating his life through song, drama or drawing.
2. Create your own modernisation of a Charles Dickens story, placing the characters and storyline into a contemporary setting. How do you adapt their particular circumstances into the social problems of the 21st Century?

