

“What do you think of *Bleak House*?”: Dickens’s Serial Novels and
Victorian Literary Fandom

By

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Abstract

The objective of this thesis was to explore the many ways in which original readers experienced Victorian serial novels. Because the novels were published in parts over an extended period of time, often more than a year, readers experienced events in the novels in what they perceived as real time. This produced in readers an emotional connection not only between the events and characters of the novels, but between the readers and authors. The intensity of readers' involvement in these novels is illustrated by the letters they wrote to the authors asking for clues, offering suggestions and criticism, and pleading for a preferred outcome for their favorite characters. It is my contention that this relationship resulted in the beginning of literary fandom.

The era of the Victorian serial novel was the first era of the "Celebrity Author." Letters, diary entries and critical essays of the era were utilized during the course of this study. Letters and diary entries from authors as well as readers were used to illustrate how both authors, most notably Charles Dickens, courted their readers and how those readers, as fans, responded.

This thesis concludes that the symbiotic relationship between the authors and readers of Victorian serial novels created a new, responsive and malleable literary form of popular episodic fiction that remains popular and vital to this day in the forms of television, book and movie series.

Introduction

In 1853, while Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* was being published in monthly installments, the *Illustrated London News* asked its readers, "What do you think of *Bleak House*?" A question, the editors claimed, "as regular a portion of miscellaneous chat as 'how are you'?" (Hayward 31). *Bleak House* was published in 20 monthly installments between March 1852 and September 1853 and captivated the reading public. Readers had been following the progress (or lack thereof) of the lawsuit Jarndyce v Jarndyce, and the saga of Lady Dedlock's mysterious letters for nearly two years when the *News* asked, "What do you think of *Bleak House*?" The novel's characters were nearly as real to its readers as were their own families.

The *News* piece illustrates one of the most important features of serial fiction: "It cements social bonds, providing neighbors or workmates who might otherwise have no interests in common with an instant topic of conversation" (Hayward 31). Hughes and Lund, in their definitive volume *The Victorian Serial*, remind us that the readers of Victorian serial novels "existed within a community of readers whose voices in person and in print augmented the understanding of literary works" and state that the tradition of the communal reading of each installment—within the family or neighborhood "enhanced the sense that literature in nineteenth century England was a national event (the first of the month, when new issues arrived at bookstalls across the country was called "Magazine Day") and that the response was public as well as private"(10).

Hughes and Lund also emphasize the importance of “personal appeals to authors that they provide happy resolutions to plots or the return of favorite characters from disaster or even death underscore the importance of the serial’s creation of intimacy between reader and story” (11) and indicate the extent of the emotional investment readers poured into serials. Bradley Deane posits that this development of an illusion of friendship “masks the emergence of a momentous reconceptualization of authorship”; he references Foucault’s statement that readers assign attributes to authors that reflect their own ways of interpreting a text and adds, “this personalizing metaphor for novelists offers insight not only into changing relationships in Victorian print culture, but also into the gradual rise of authorship itself as a central criteria of a novel’s literary value” (28-9).

In this thesis, I demonstrate that publishing novels in serial, over the course of many months, resulted in a mutually beneficial relationship between authors and their readers, and that the relationship between readers and authors, combined with increased availability of mass-market, commercially produced reading material resulted in what is customarily seen as a modern phenomenon—the establishment of literary fandoms. Much of this study will focus on the work of Charles Dickens because of his inimitable contribution to the development of the Victorian serial novel. Dickens virtually defined the new genre as *Boz*, and in the decades that followed *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club*, he authored, or as editor and publisher, guided the serial publication of many of the most important novels of the era.

Works I have found particularly helpful in my research are the abovementioned *Victorian Serial* (1991) by Linda K. Hughes and Michael Lund, considered to be the definitive study of the subject; *Dickens, The Critical Heritage* (1971), by Philip Collins,

which contains a wealth of reviews, letters; and other first-hand accounts of the works of Dickens. Amy Cruse's *The Victorians and Their Books* (1935) likewise contains a wealth of contemporary accounts from the pens of the readers of Victorian serials. Richard Altick's *The English Common Reader* (1957) and *Victorian People and Ideas* (1973) are invaluable in helping identify the reading audience of serial novels. Susan Lonoff's *Wilkie Collins and his Victorian Readers* (1982) provides insight into another wildly popular author of serialized novels. Jennifer Hayward's *Consuming Pleasures, Active Audiences and Serial Fictions from Dickens to Soap Opera* (1997) provides valuable backup for my thesis relating the readers of 19th century serial fiction to the enthusiastic members of literary fandoms today. These along with many others noted in my works cited pages, were instrumental in assisting me in forming my thesis and conclusion, though mine is the only work to link the concept of literary fandom with early 19th century serialization.

Friends and Family

While most Victorian authors assumed a certain rapport with their readers, Dickens is credited with initiating the characteristic relationship between author and reading public that was described by Thackeray as “something continual, confidential, something like personal affection” (Lonoff 5). As Charles Eliot Norton said of Dickens in 1868, “No one thinks first of Mr. Dickens as a writer. He is at once, through his books, a friend” (P.Collins 1). Jennifer Hayward adds, “Dickens’s homey, voyeuristic writing style reinforced a sense of intimacy with the characters, a masquerade that allowed readers to gossip about ‘people’ both discussants knew intimately even though they may well have had no close ties in ‘real’ life” (31).

This familiar atmosphere was created and fostered through the methods by which the works of these serialized authors were distributed. Serial fiction provided a new forum for discussion and debate—one which transcended class, gender and age. Calvin Trilling described the sense of community that is as prevalent in Victorian literature as a sense of “companionly regard,” and explained, “for the Victorian novelist the reader was a personal presence, as the novelist was a personal presence for the reader” (6). The works the most esteemed authors of the Victorian era counted on this sense of personal intimacy and friendship with readers. Bradley Dean includes in this list Charlotte Brontë, Kingsley, Gaskell, Trollope and George Eliot (28). As their novels were literally and tangibly welcomed into homes, by extension so were their authors.

Readers came to regard the characters in serial novels as parts of their lives. As the *News* had observed, the characters and events in serial novels became topics of everyday discussions within families, at social gatherings and as topics in exchanges of letters between friends. For their part, authors did not write their novels in isolation, but were well aware of the conversations, criticism, and opinions of their readers. Writers could gauge the success of a novel in progress as they wrote and adjust situations to comply with public fancy. When sales of *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843-4) began to fall, Dickens sent his hero off to America. Thackeray reversed course on Pendennis's pending affair with Fanny Bolton based on his readers' responses, and upon overhearing a critical conversation about one of his recurring characters, Anthony Trollope resolved to do away with the objectionable character. "'As to Mrs. Proudie,' I said, 'I will go home and kill her before the week is over.' And so I did" (199).

The conversational tone that is a feature of much Victorian fiction not only suited the tastes of families who gathered to listen to the latest number read aloud, but promoted the use of another authorial tool, that of the narrator addressing the reader directly. This created a sense of solidarity with the reading audience and fostered the impression that the reader was in collusion with the author. Stepping outside the plotline to reassure or confide in the reader further drew the audience into the illusion that they were part of the novel in progress—although this is generally viewed as a feature of postmodernism, it can also be found in 18th century novels by authors such as Richardson, Fielding and Defoe.

Victorian readers viewed the author, as Mr. Norton had noted, as a friend to whom they could appeal, and characters in novels as real people who could be loved or

hated. Authors were deluged with readers' suggestions for "what happens next?" as early as the publication of *The Pickwick Papers*, when Dickens issued "a notice in part XV to warn correspondents away" (Andrews 25). Dickens, in particular, viewed the publication of his novels in installments as a way by which he was able to commune with his audience. "Communication with his public in any form, but particularly as a writer and reader, was his route to community of feeling, the sense of a shared life" (Andrews 9).

In her study of Wilkie Collins's relationship to his readers, *Wilkie Collins and His Victorian Readers*, Susan Lonoff recognizes a difficulty with this level of intimacy between author and readers. She calls extensive audience participation "double edged" and notes that although it provided the reader with "an overwhelming sense of intimacy with the characters," it lessened the aesthetic distance between authors and readers. Such an audience developed "unlimited appetites for even the longest novels, but migrated against conciseness and control. While it guaranteed an audience whose preferences could be gauged, it also nurtured hundreds of home-grown critics who carped at expectations disappointed" (11). The author of a popular serial novel had to reconcile the advantage of a relationship with readers and accommodating their wishes without compromising his art, beliefs and mores.

Authors of serial novels courted this relationship with the reader, despite restrictions it may have placed on their complete editorial freedom. In 1888, Wilkie Collins wrote an essay entitled "Reminiscences" in which he reflected on the contact he had with readers over the years. He named several types of readers and the varying degrees of helpfulness that were their opinions and suggestions. He recalled the reader who disliked his characterization of Count Fosco in *The Woman in White* and offered,

should the author think of trying again, “from her own experience she would undertake to provide me with literary materials for the most tremendous scoundrel that had ever darkened the pages of fiction,” and assured the author that he could “depend on my observing the strictest truth to nature, for the man I have in my eye is my husband” (“Reminiscences”). Collins revealed that said husband “was a friend of mine.” Collins did *not* rewrite Count Fosco, but did consider himself and his fellow authors to be “indebted to [readers’] stores of knowledge, and to their quick sympathies, for information of serious importance to his work which he could not otherwise have obtained.” No matter how unappreciative or “helpful” his readers were, he acknowledged their influence “whether they praise or blame, their opinions are equally worth having. . . . Many a good work of fiction has profited by their letters when they write to the author” (“Reminiscences”). Collins recognized not only the contribution, but the drawbacks of an enthusiastic fandom. Successful serial novelists, like Collins, Dickens and Thackeray were able to strike a balance between writing to please and writing to appease.

Pickwick and Popularity

The Victorian fascination with the serial novel began in earnest in 1836 when Chapman & Hall commissioned a series of sporting stories that would accompany sketches by Robert Seymour, a popular illustrator. *Sketches by Boz* was the first mass-market serial and became the model of the serial novel that would become the primary form of publication for the next fifty years.

After a difficult start—sales of the first number were disappointing and Seymour committed suicide after the second—Chapman & Hall were faced with scrapping, or re-creating the serial. After turning down Thackeray’s offer to produce drawings to accompany the series, Dickens awarded the contract to a neighbor and friend, Hablot K. Browne whose work, Dickens believed, caught the spirit of the original sketches. Browne adopted the name “Phiz” to compliment the editor “Boz.” To address their concerns about the prospect of depending on an unproven writer and second-rate illustrator and the very real possibility of negative profits, the publishers created a fiction “purporting to respond to a suggestion from various influential quarters” (Hayward 23), Chapman & Hall undertook a “reboot” of the project. By choosing to effect the changes to the project in this manner, the publishers used to their advantage one of serial fiction’s defining quality—the flexibility and ability to respond (or, in this case, appear to respond) to the whims of its audience. The unproven writer, who continued to go by the name Boz, was Charles Dickens, and in April of 1836, *Sketches by Boz* became *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club*, “Edited by Boz.” Popularity of the serial soared and by the end of

1837, a project that had started with the publishers hoping for regular sales of about 500, “had reached a staggering 40,000” (Turner 116).

The serial parts, issued monthly from April 1836 through November 1837, contained two or three chapters in each installment, and numbered a standard 32 pages. This format was adopted by publications featuring the work of other authors and became the standard for most serialized fiction throughout the 19th century.

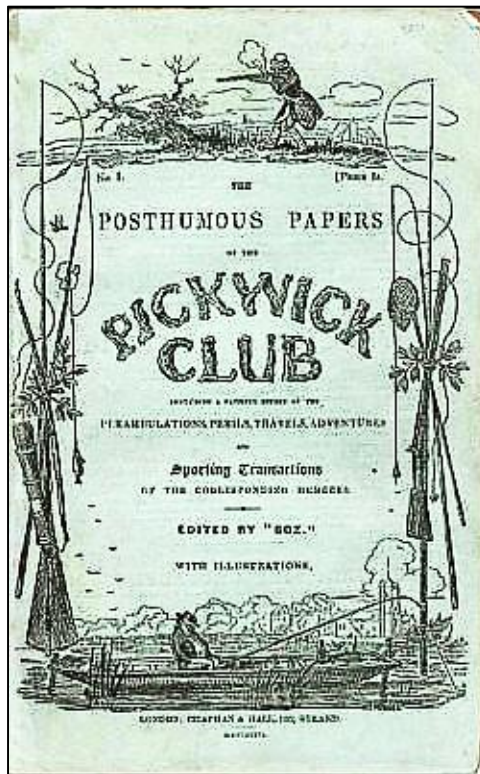


Figure 1: Cover, *Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club*, No. 1 April 1836 (This work is in the public domain in the United States, and those countries with a copyright term of life of the author plus 100 years or less.) Source: Wikimedia.com

The overall structure of *Pickwick* did not begin with any sense of narrative as a whole. The concept was that of a series of related sketches outlining the comic misadventures of Cockney sporting life. This sense of connected- disconnectedness may have been what allowed *Pickwick* to become so overwhelmingly popular. New readers

were able to pick up the latest installment without being left to wonder what had happened previously. The serial form used by Dickens “enabled the work to gain new readers, month to month, and consolidate those readers already purchasing shilling copies of the installments” (117).

In the fifth installment, Dickens introduced the working class characters Sam and Tony Weller. Readers responded positively to the humorous but sympathetic representation of the urban characters, and sales of the number soared. Readers wrote letters to Dickens to encourage him to continue to develop the character largely—to the utmost—and “Dickens, already showing the true responsiveness to his audience that contrasts so markedly with the simulated responsiveness of Chapman & Hall, answered by making Sam central to the Pickwick adventures” (Hayward 24). With the sixth installment, “Dickens began to link novel time to ‘real’ time; he builds the seasons into the narrative and included such significant temporal and social markers as Christmas and Valentine’s Day” (Turner 117). Dickens cleverly exploited the serial form so that the lives and times in the fictions in part reflected the lives of its readers. There is a cricket match that falls in the June number, a shooting scene in October, and skating in February. The technique allowed readers to imagine that they were experiencing the events in the stories in real-time, or shortly thereafter, as if the tales were more letters containing news from a friend of relative rather than a work of fiction in a monthly magazine. Butt and Tillotson call this a “curious and unique feature” of the work and credit it with endowing the serial with a journalistic nature. Some numbers are slightly retrospective: the events of Christmas at Dingle Dell are in the January number, and the report of Sam’s Valentine come in March. Butt and Tillotson observe, “Dickens appears to have imagined his

readers asking themselves, on the first of the month, ‘What have the Pickwickians been doing since we saw them last?’ and to have reported accordingly” (73).

Readers came to depend on the regular arrival of news of their new friends, the Pickwickians. Amy Cruse, in *The Victorians and Their Books*, relates a story “on the authority of the archdeacon, who told Carlyle, who told John Forster, of the shock received by an extremely serious clergyman, who, standing outside a sick room where he had just paid a pastoral visit, heard the patient exclaim, ‘Well, thank God *Pickwick* will be out in ten days, anyway” (152).

The Pickwick Papers became a huge sensation. During its publication period it appeared that everyone was reading it and advising everyone else to read it. No doubt, had the internet existed in the 1830’s, Sam Weller and Mr. Pickwick would have encouraged readers to “Like” them on Facebook, and there would have been a robust public debate in online fan communities as fans speculated on what the next adventure would bring.

In June 1837, the author Mary Russell Mitford wrote to her friend in Ireland, Miss Jephson, a letter that describes the novel’s broad appeal:

So you have never heard of the *Pickwick Papers*! Well they publish a number once a month and print 25,000. ... It is fun—London life—but without anything unpleasant: a lady may read it aloud; and it is so graphic, so individual, and so true, that you could courtesy to all the people as you met them in the streets. I do not think there had not been a place where English is spoken that “Boz” had not penetrated. All the boys and girls talk his fun—the boys in the streets: and yet those who are of the highest

taste like it most. Sir Benjamin Brodie takes it to read in his carriage, between patient and patient; and Lord Denham studies Pickwick on the bench while the jury are deliberating. Do take some means to borrow *The Pickwick Papers* . . . You must read the *Pickwick Papers*. (P. Collins 36)

Mary Russell Mitford' letter indicates that the fandom of the novel acted as a "leveler" across social strata. However, not everyone was as impressed with the popularity of the series. In November 1837, Thomas Arnold delivered a sermon in Rugby chapel during which he warned his boys against the evil of this new obsession:

The works of amusement published only a very few years since were comparatively few in number ; they were less exciting, and therefore less attractive ; they were dearer, and therefore less accessible ; and, not being published periodically, they did not occupy the mind for so long a time, nor keep alive so constant an expectation; nor, by thus dwelling upon the mind, and distilling themselves into it as it were drop by drop, did they possess it so largely, colouring even, in many instances, its very language, and affording frequent matter for conversation. . . . Great and grievous as is the evil, it is peculiarly hard to find the remedy for it. . . . But they are not wicked books for the most part; they are of that class which cannot be actually prohibited; nor can it be pretended that there is a sin in reading them. They are not the more wicked for being published so cheap, and at regular intervals; but yet these two circumstances make them so peculiarly injurious. (Arnold)

Arnold viewed his students' obsession with serials as an addiction "to a laudanum-like drug, one distilled drop by drop into the brain" (Hayward 6). He viewed the slow, steady process of textual progression as particularly insidious. While he could not find anything immoral about the stories, nor did he wish to discourage reading, he must have found the new phenomenon extremely frustrating. Arnold's students were precursors to the generations of students who would later hide comic books in their desks, more interested in the latest adventure of their favorite superhero than the lesson being presented in the classroom.

Dickens followed *Pickwick* with *Oliver Twist* (1837) and *Nicholas Nickleby* (1839). Sales of *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838-9) soared to an unprecedented 50,000 a monthly part (Sutherland 91), creating a sensation among readers as enthusiastic as that of *Pickwick*. A story related by Amy Cruse talks of the author and cleric Sydney Smith confessing to Sir George Philips "that he had stood out against Mr. Dickens as long as he could" (162) until one day he saw three women walking down the street towards Tottenham Court Road, one of the three a "buxom lady of middle age, the other a beautiful girl of seventeen" (162). He recounts the conversation that began when one woman tells the other, "I have taken such a fancy to your daughter, Mrs. Nickleby,"

[T]he delighted matron, fully believing in the genuineness of the compliment, began to pour out reminiscences of Kate [Nickleby] in her childhood. 'She always was clever,' said the proud mother—always, from a baby. . . ." (162)

The women continued role-playing and discussing characters and events from the novel as if retelling a personal experience. "It needed no more; Sydney Smith's heart was won.

Henceforward, he was among the most ardent of Mrs. Nickleby's admirers, and through her he entered into a closer and more appreciative intimacy with the whole Dickens company" (162).

The New Mass Media

Victorian literature has been called “a product of the first age of mass communication” (Altick, *Victorian* 64). Jennifer Hayward credits runaway success of *The Pickwick Papers*’ and Dickens’s ability to adapt continuous narrative to an industrial-capitalist economy with an essential role in the invention of the entertainment industry. Mark Turner calls the serial publication of *The Pickwick Papers* “one of the most significant publishing events of the nineteenth century,” and continues, “this serialization utterly transformed the publishing industry,” and quotes Robert Patten as suggesting “after *Pickwick*, parts publication became for thirty years a chief means of democratizing and enormously expanding the Victorian book-reading and book-buying public” (Turner 116). *Pickwick*, Turner explains, “became a popular fad; and the part-issue of new fiction won an acceptance it was to enjoy until the seventies” (116). Prominent authors including Dickens, Thackeray, Ainsworth, Lever and Trollope issued novels in numbers although Lever and Thackeray ultimately gave up the form as unworkable, citing challenging deadlines and space constraints. Critics have questioned why Dickens remained so attached to the format, eventually publishing nine of his novels in numbers. Dickens himself believed the nature of serial publication provided an arena for him to commune with his readers—a desire he expressed frequently. John Southerland explains, the serial novel as written by Dickens, “addresses the reader in a spirit of manly equality; a sentiment confirmed in the author’s habitual prefatory addresses to his reader” (89).

This understanding provided a deep sense of personal involvement, familiarity, and ownership that resulted in the phenomenon we know today as fandom.

The word “fandom” does not appear in the *Oxford English Dictionary* until 1903 and is defined as “the world of enthusiasts for some amusement or for some artist; also in extended use” (OED). This definition was originally used to describe sports fans.

Members of a fandom feel interconnected by a common interest and actively seek out others who share their enthusiasm. They involve themselves in becoming part of their interest, organizing group readings, costume and role-playing, collecting memorabilia, and writing letters to authors expressing their ideas for continuing stories—a relationship similar to the developing relationship between Victorian readers, writers and publishers.

Richard Altick defined what he called Victorian literary subcultures that could be considered precursors to actual fandoms, running “the moral gamut from religious tracts to semi-pornographic ballads” (*Victorian* 62). Increased specialization of reading material being made available to fulfill demands of specific audiences can be viewed as the beginnings of an entertainment industry, in this case publishing, catering to fandoms.

It is generally considered that the Arthur Conan Doyle’s *Sherlock Holmes* stories—which first appeared in serial form in 1887—inspired the first literary fandom, but I contend that the phenomenon started earlier and actually began with the extraordinary popularity of *The Pickwick Papers*; Dickens’s desire to be accessible to his readership, and the desire of those readers for access to Dickens. If we define a fandom as a community of enthusiasts with a specific interest in common, and recognize the communal aspect of reading Victorian serial fiction, then we can find ample evidence to

support crediting the enthusiastic followers of the adventures of the Pickwick Club as the first literary fandom.

It is because of this early literary fandom that Dickens has been called the first “Celebrity Author” in literary history. Richard Altick states that Dickens received more fan letters than any other nineteenth-century English writer including Scott, Byron and Tennyson (“Readers” 76), and Jennifer Hayward remarks on serial fiction’s effectiveness at capturing and holding the attention of an audience. She states: “Serialization was adapted for other fictional genres and eventually crossed media boundaries” (3) and cites examples including 19th century sensation novels and detective fiction (Wilkie Collins’s *The Woman in White* (1859) and *The Moonstone* (1868) were both serialized in Dickens’s *All the Year Round*), the comic strips and radio mysteries of the early 20th century, soap operas, and recent wildly popular book series and their accompanying blockbuster movie franchises. Sensation fiction was particularly suited to the practice of serialized publishing which by definition required the author to hook the reader to assure sales of the next number. The cliff-hanger became a frequent tool used by authors to convince readers to “stay tuned for the next episode.” The maxim “Make ‘em laugh, make ‘em cry, make ‘em wait” is attributed to Wilkie Collins, who became famous mainly for his extraordinarily popular sensation novels. These are the same techniques used today in television, the present day favored source for episodic drama. Writers of television series are very familiar with the “make ‘em wait” trick to prevent audiences from drifting away from a series between seasons. “To be continued” is as frustrating and thrilling to fans of series today as it was in 1859 for fans following with *The Woman in White*.

The mid-19th century was the ideal breeding ground for the phenomenon. Industrialization had flooded the marketplace with cheap, readily available goods. In *Inventing the Victorians*, Matthew Sweet describes the front page of the January 1, 1861 issue of *The Times*. Out of the 179 advertisements on its cover, eighty-one are “all related to entertainments and leisure; either for products such as toys, games, conjuring sets, skates and magic lanterns; or such events such as concerts, theatricals, acrobatic displays, panoramas, waxwork shows and phrenological demonstrations” (1). The rapidly expanding middle class and increasing ranks of the literate drove this insatiable demand for entertainment—entertainment which included a steady supply of serialized fiction. Sweet calls the Factory Act of 1847 one of the many important social and economic factors which resulted in an “increasingly elaborate, technological and systemized nature of having fun” (3). The Act, “prescribed statutory holidays, giving precise delineation to the boundary between work and leisure time” (3). Altick credits this new leisure time with the rise of a greatly enlarged population of female readers, which had a profound effect on the literature of the day, necessitating a trend towards family-friendly reading material. The interests and tastes of the reading public dictated tone and content of the literature produced. The nature of the modernized publishing industry made it possible to respond quickly and directly to the demands of readers as the value of a novel began to be determined by sales figures rather than any literary gravitas.

The commodification of popular culture was raised to the level of high art throughout the century. Readers became fans who were no longer satisfied with a distant relationship between them and their favorite characters. Those who wanted to extend the *Pickwick* experience beyond the book could buy a variety of *Pickwick*-inspired products.

There were *Pickwick* cigars, canes, hats and coats; songbooks and china figurines, and even Weller corduroys. S. M. Ellis in *Wilkie Collins, Le Fanu and Others* noted that “*The Woman in White* was so popular that “every possible commodity was labeled *Woman in White*. There were *Woman in White* cloaks and bonnets, *Woman in White* perfumes and all manner of toilet requisites, *Woman in White* Waltzes and Quadrilles” (Ellis 30). George Du Maurier’s *Trilby* (1894) spawned what became known as “Trilby Mania” and British and Americans fans snatched up Trilby boots, shoes, scarf pins—even sausages. The Trilby hat is still recognized today. Frances Hodgson Burnett’s *Little Lord Fauntleroy* (1885-6) set a fashion for boys' clothing in America, as well as creating a demand for such things as *Fauntleroy* merchandise such as velvet collars, playing cards, and chocolates. Items such as these served to keep the novels and characters alive in the minds of readers, reinforcing the impression that the reader was not only immersed in the plot of the ongoing novel, and as familiar with the characters as friends and even family, but was actually part of what became an all-encompassing experience, far beyond simply reading a novel.

Today, the entertainment industry counts on its ability to capitalize on fans’ devotion to their favorite television shows, movies and books. Enormous multi-national entertainment companies that now own licensing and distribution rights to these properties license merchandise from tee-shirts to theme parks. The expectation of readers/audiences/fans as customer does not end with the publication of the book, or premier of the movie. The expectation is that a fan base represents return customers with an almost limitless appetite for tie-in products



Figure 2: Cover, sheet music: “The Woman in White Waltz,” by C. H. R. Marriott Lithograph cover of sheet music. London: Boosey & Sons Musical Library, [1861]. The British Library, London. © British Library Board. All Rights Reserved.

Additionally, the market was flooded with knock-off versions of popular serial novels in an attempt to capitalize on the fad. In March 1839 alone, readers looking for something to fill in the time between numbers of *Nicholas Nickleby* could choose from works such as *Valentine Vox the Ventriliquist*, *Will’s Whim, Consisting of Characteristic Curiosities*, *Charly Chalk*, *David Dreamy*, and *Paul Periwinkle or the Pressgang* (Sutherland 92)—the authors of all of which appear to have determined that the use of “spluttering consonantal alliteration” (92) in titles was the secret of Dickens’s success. Not unpredictably, the majority of these imitations never reached their sales projections and most collapsed after fewer than five installments. Sutherland observes that “altogether in 1839-40, the addict could have spent 15 shillings to a pound a month on

novels in parts” (93). For readers who wanted to immerse themselves more fully in the story, it was more common than not for a theatrical presentation of the most popular serials to be staged even before the last installment of the novel had been written.

More successful than the clumsy imitations were the out and out plagiarisms and pirated stories that co-opted Dickens’s own characters that were sold as spin-offs or companion pieces. Seeing money to be made off the unprecedented popularity of *Pickwick*, enterprising and unscrupulous publishers rushed numbers such as *The Penny Pickwick* and *The Pickwick Gazette*, “edited by Bos,” to the market. Well-known publisher of lurid “penny dreadfuls,” G. M. Reynolds wrote and published a series of serials with titles such as *Pickwick Abroad*, and *Pickwick in America*. *Pickwick Abroad* appeared in Reynolds’s *Monthly Magazine* contemporaneously with the original issue of *The Pickwick Papers* (Grego 60). Perhaps infuriated by complimentary reviews of these pirated works—the *Morning Advertiser* called *Pickwick Abroad* a “a very respectable continuation of the original,” and the *Weekly Dispatch* claimed “the author has hit off as much of the original humor of ‘Boz’ and shows what Mr. Pickwick would have been had his courage led him to encounter the perils of travelling to the continent”(61)—Dickens issued a Proclamation in pamphlet form to warn his imitators off attempting the same tactics with the upcoming *Nicholas Nickleby*.

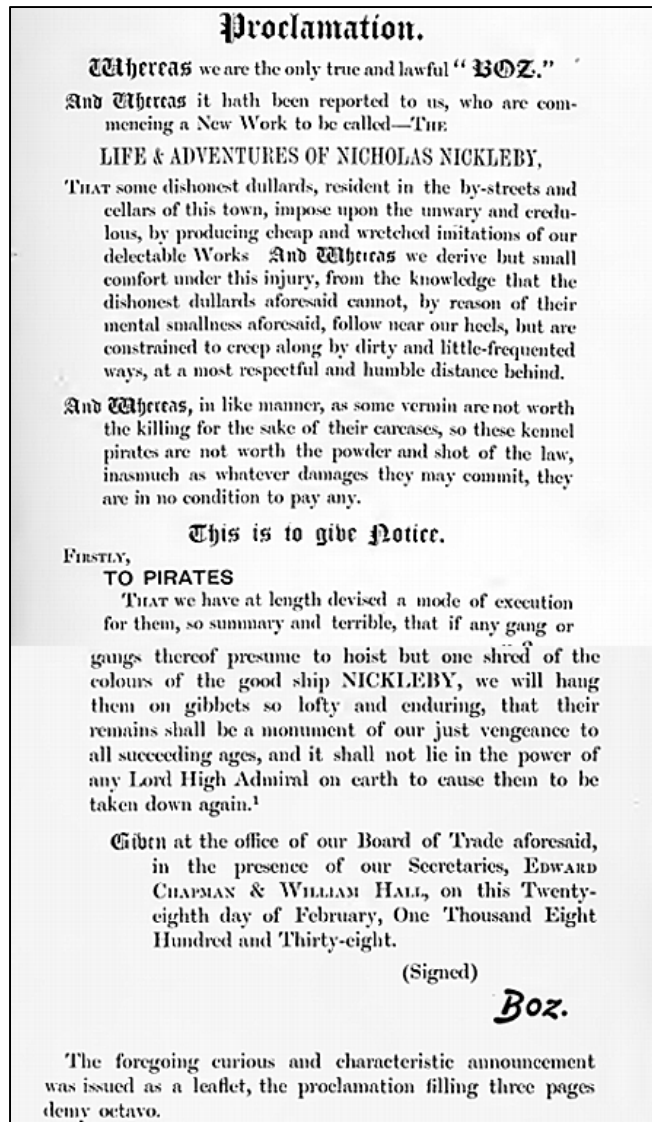


Figure 3: Dickens’s “Boz Proclamation” against imitators and piratical gangs. February 28, 1838. Source: *Pictorial Pickwickiana Charles Dickens and His Illustrators*, 1899.

Much of the allure to readers of serialized novels was indisputably an economic one. Purchasing a novel in parts spread the not inconsiderable expense of purchasing a book over an extended period of time. Readers who could not afford to pay a guinea for a complete novel were able to spend a shilling each month: “Had *Pickwick* . . . made its original appearance in book form, almost certainly it would have cost 31s. 6d.

(approximately £1.61). Its total price in numbers was 20s. (approximately £1.00), and upon completion it was published in bound form at only a shilling more” (“*English*” 279). Because most books published in numbers contained complex and expansive plots and dozens of characters, the reader was purchasing, at a discounted price, a considerably longer novel.

The increased availability of affordable fiction ushered in an era in which English readers purchased books instead of relying on lending libraries. There is no denying that *Pickwick* and Dickens’s other serialized novels held a broad appeal and huge reading audiences. It is slightly more problematic to determine, in reality, how far across the social scale his readership actually reached. In July 1837, Charles Buller wrote a review of *Sketches by Boz* and *Pickwick* numbers I-XV, in which he undertook to “investigate the foundation of a popularity extraordinary on account of its sudden growth, and the recognition which it has received from persons of the most refined taste, as well as from the great mass of the reading public” (P.Collins 52). In order to do this, however, one needs to attempt to define what was meant by “the reading public.”

Defining the Community

As Richard Altick points out in *Victorian People and Ideas*, defining “the reading public” is problematic. He states, “in Victorian times that audience, like today’s, was not really a cohesive, homogenous unit, but a whole cluster of publics, as various as the society to which they belong” (*Victorian* 59). For our purposes we want to concentrate on “that overwhelmingly more numerous portion of the English people who became day-by-day readers for the first time in this period as literacy spread and printed matter became cheaper” (*English* 7). As literacy spread and printed matter became accessible to more and more people, the reading public expanded to include the ever-expanding middle class and even to some extent into the working class. Between 1841 and 1900, the national literacy rate based on the ability to inscribe one’s name into the marriage register rose from 67% (male) and 51% (female) to 97% for both sexes (*Victorian* 60). However, as Altick warns, these figures are misleading as they “exaggerate the instance of reading ability among the masses. Many thousands who could trace their names could not read a word of print” (60). Poor and cramped living conditions and poor eyesight “caused in part by nutritional deficiencies and eyestrain at work” (61) were among the many factors that discouraged reading among the working class. Even when working conditions improved and laws such as the Factory Act provided more leisure time, most workers who could read preferred “books and papers written expressly for an audience of semi-literates whose requirements were simple but demanding” (61). A proliferation of cheap “penny dreadfuls” and “shilling shockers” featured serializations of thrilling fiction for

men and boys, sentimental tales for women and girls, and “drastic condensations of ‘standard literature,’ among them some literary classics such as Scott’s romances” (62). Sensational fiction was accompanied by Sensational news reports of grisly murders, fires and disasters. One popular theme, particularly among boys, were the adventures of infamous highwaymen, among them Jack Sheppard, Dick Turpin and Claude Duval. Thomas Frost, the editor of the *Family Paper*, “told of a letter he received . . . which came from a little company of boys who bought and shared the paper between them. ‘Mr. Editor, If you don’t give us a good highwayman story, we shan’t take your pub any longer. So take notice! [sic] (emphasis added).’” (Cruse 126) The boys signed the letter with the names of those notable highwaymen Sheppard, Turpin and Duval.

In an article for *Household Words* in 1858, Wilkie Collins reflected on the influence of what he called “The Unknown Public,” a growing population of emerging literates:

It is perhaps hardly too much to say that the future of English fiction may rest with this Unknown Public, which is now waiting to be taught the difference between a good book and a bad. To the penny journals of the present time belongs the credit of having discovered a new public. When that public shall discover its need of a great writer, the great writer will have such an audience as has never yet been known. (“Unknown” 222)

In this nebulous Unknown Public, Collins foresees the potential for an enormous literary audience that had yet to discover the value of a ‘quality’ work of fiction.

As popular as the penny press was among the working classes, the main audience of the serial novel was overwhelmingly middle-class. However, the definition of the

Victorian “middle-class” is as plastic and amorphous as that of the middle class of today. Altick states that the term “middle class,” like “the reading public,” is difficult. He points out that the term “is virtually useless as an indicator of the level of education, attitudes, and tastes. It embraced the whole social spectrum from university graduates to self-taught small tradesmen, with their widely disparate stores of knowledge and degree of literary sophistication: political conservatives and liberals; Churchmen and Nonconformists; city dwellers and country people” (“Readers” 73). It was this large and varied population for whom printed matter in all its forms became a much more familiar accompaniment to everyday life, and “the activity of reading occupied a notably larger portion of many persons’ free time”(Victorian 62). This readership had available to it a sufficient enough supply of ready cash that attracted the advertisers who financed the popular monthly and weekly serial magazines, and the audience that attended the theatrical adaptations of their favorite stories snapped up the related merchandise. This was the audience that had the education, leisure time and discretionary funds to become a fandom.

Unfortunately, determining how the majority of these readers responded to popular fiction at the time is difficult. Primary sources such as letters and diaries of workaday, middle-class readers are rare. Dickens destroyed his letters and Trollope made a point of telling a correspondent “I never keep a letter” (Hall 688). Altick explains, “much of what can be inferred about readers’ response is found in contemporary reviews. But while these are, necessarily, the principal source of our knowledge, it must be borne in mind that *vox critici* is by no means *vox populi* (“Readers” 75). Hayward distances the opinions of critics and common readers even

further and draws a clear line between “professional readers” and the general public. “Of course, reviewers are hardly ‘typical’ readers but rather are professionals paid to provide a mass readership advice,” but goes on to qualify that statement by acknowledging that in many ways, they faced the same uncertainties as the general public. “Still, reviewers of serial parts were subject to the same conditions of reading as the general audience, and therefore they engaged in typical activities such as prediction, response to the author, and attempt to influence the direction of the narrative (33-4).

Much of the available information as to how the common reader experienced serial novels is anecdotal. Amy Cruse’s 1935 *The Victorians and Their Books* is a valuable collection of letters, diary entries and anecdotes gathered, as Altick describes, “in their fragmentary abundance” (“Readers” 76). Some authors’ letters do survive, including those written to their friends, family, and publishers; for instance the exchange between Dickens and his friends Forster and Bulwer-Lytton that resulted in his changing (some say ruining) the ending of *Great Expectations*, which will be addressed in a later chapter.

The 19th century was an era of rapid and radical transformation in social, political and economic standards. Social conventions based on close-knit rural villages, extended families and stable communities were being rapidly replaced by an urban, industrial landscape in which workers were “reconstructed as faceless units of production with no direct relationship to the end product, to those in control of the production process, or to each other” (Hayward 31). There was a need to re-define “what it means to live in common” (31). The new, urbanized Victorian lifestyle was made up of people living in close quarters with neither familial nor occupational ties, resulting in an overwhelming

sense of alienation. Dickens himself has been quoted as stating, “99% of Londoners are strangers to everybody” (32).

As was indicated in the *Illustrated London News*'s “What do you think of *Bleak House*?” commentary referenced above, one of the most important features of serial fiction is that it strengthened social bonds and provided people “with an instant topic of conversation” (Hayward 31). The ability to gossip about what was happening to the “people” they met in the pages of the current serial and exchange “opinions about a serial community of fictional characters took the place of shared gossip about a common circle of acquaintances” (31).

The novel, and in particular the serial novel, provided a common ground and a source of bonding between people who had nothing else in common. Much later, critics would discuss theories of reader-response in “imagined communities; however,” these communities are hypothetical. Unlike Iser's “implied reader,” Fish's “informed reader,” Culler's “qualified reader” or Riffaterre's “super-reader,” the reading community that shared the experience of the 19th century serial novel was a real and identifiable reading community that reached across social classes.

By including lower class characters in significant roles in his novels, Dickens was instrumental in encouraging readers to recognize and take seriously characters such as factory workers Old Stephen Blackpool and Rachael in *Hard Times* (1854), and Jo, the crossing sweepers in *Bleak House*. These characters elicited attention from upper and middle class readers and brought their attention to the plight of the lower classes (although even in Dickens, this tended towards depiction of the working classes as “poor

but happy”), while providing his working and lower class audiences with characters they could recognize and to whom they could easily relate.

This having been stated, recent scholarship has questioned the actual extent of the reach of these novels. There is debate as to just how accurate the “long-standing legend of Dickens as ‘author of the people’ has been rightly challenged in recent years by historians and literary scholars” (Hayward 34). Altick asserts that despite decades of reviewers speaking “glibly of Dickens’s unique appeal to ‘the million’, there were therefore other millions who were disqualified from reading him on the twin accounts of illiteracy and poverty” (Altick “Readers” 73). When viewed through a critical lens, Dickens’s mass audience is significantly smaller than it appears to be on first glance. Even cheap, mass-produced reading material was beyond the reach of a large portion of the population. While it is true that a wider segment of the population gained access to cheap, readily available newspapers and magazines, purchasing weekly or even monthly numbers of the latest serial remained difficult for a large segment of Victorian society.

The cost, even at the rate of one shilling per part, would have been prohibitive for the average employed working class family with an income of ten to fifteen shillings per week. In his classic *Dickens and his Readers* (1955), George Ford explains, “perhaps the largest group among those loyal Dickensians was one about which it is most difficult to obtain information. . . . Below certain economic levels . . . the evidence becomes scarce. Diaries, letters, autobiographies and essays—even if written—rarely survive” (77).

Although firsthand evidence from working class serial readers is scarce, there is some anecdotal evidence that the working classes found ways around both poverty and

illiteracy. One of these was the practice of communal reading. Family readings are mentioned in several working-class autobiographies; Hayward shares the example of Charles H. Welch, who wrote, “It was quite a feature of home life to assemble in the parlor while Dad read a chapter of two from one of Dickens’s novels” (qtd. in Hayward 35), while Altick (through Cruse) relates the anecdote of Dickens’s mother-in-law’s illiterate charwoman who “attended on the first Monday of every month a tea held by subscription at a snuff-shop above which she lodged where the landlord read the month’s number aloud” (“Readers” 72).

Dickens’s novels were also decidedly London-centric and depended on readers’ familiarity with the sights and sounds of London life. Therefore, his works include “innumerable references to specific London places and the manifold artistic uses to which he put them” (74). Even as late as the publication dates of *Dombey and Son* (1846-8), few readers in the country outside London would have been familiar with any of the London depicted by Dickens. Despite stories such as these, and as my thesis contends, the more accurate description of Dickens’s appeal was expressed by an 1848 reviewer in *Sharpe’s London Magazine*, who corrected himself mid-statement when writing that Dickens’s works had “a particular appeal in language and subject to the middle classes --- *we had almost written*, the masses of society” (qtd in “Readers” 73).

Reading in Serial

As Linda K. Hughes and Michael Lund point out in *The Victorian Serial*, the experience of reading a novel in installments was a very different experience from that of reading a completed novel. They explain that the reading experience of the readers of the same novel in serial parts was very different than the experience of reading classic 19th century novels today. Because of the parts structure of serialized fiction, “Victorian literature was engaged much more within the busy context of everyday life. It was not possible to enter into an imaginary world and remain there until the story’s end; instead readers repeatedly were forced to set aside a continuing story and resume everyday life.” (8-9)

Serial fiction, by design, imposed curbs on reading momentum. Malcolm Andrews suggests a serial reading pattern that begins with the purchase of the latest monthly installment of generally about four chapters. A much-anticipated installment would be purchased on or close to its date of publication and read with a circle of friends and family that evening. Over the next several days, it would be browsed over again this time with more consideration of accompanying illustrations and advertisements. Later, as the publication date of the next installment approached, “it might be brought down again and scanned to refresh the memory and restore the sense of narrative continuity” (“Note” 244). During these repeated readings in the interval between numbers, readers would have noticed details they had missed during the first, excited reading. Each repeated reading “impressed the characters, settings, motifs, and small particulars more deeply in

their memories” (“Readers” 79). The issues were richly illustrated with detailed sketches that would have provided readers recognizable characters so detailed they might recognize them on the street. Dickens’s technique of assigning his characters speech tags and physical idiosyncrasies rendered them instantly recognizable to the reader. The level of detail Dickens provided his readers with a “lively and variegated world, a steadily growing store of permanently available memories” (79), thus enriching their everyday lives and strengthening the readers’ power of retention, which allowed them to keep track of large numbers of characters and convoluted plots over the course of the many months it took to complete the novel.

An enforced delay between installments of an ongoing story not only required the reader to remain involved between publications but also required the author to give each monthly number as far as possible its own integrity while establishing its place in the whole design. Malcolm Andrews quotes Dickens’s own comments in the preface to *The Pickwick Papers* on the challenge faced by the serial author:

It was necessary—or it appeared so to the author—that every number should be, to a certain extent, complete in itself, and yet that the whole twenty numbers, when collected, should form one tolerably harmonious whole. (244)

If Dickens found this to be a challenge between the minimally connected sketches that made up *The Pickwick Papers*, he found it to be a greater one when he began writing structured, cohesive novels designed to be published over the course of many months. In October 1841, he penned an address to the readers of the weekly *Master Humphrey’s Clock* describing the difficulty faced by the author of a novel appearing in weekly

installments. He expresses frustration at the inability to develop characters under such tight deadlines and the within the constraints of limited space:

I sometimes found it difficult when I issued thirty-two closely-printed pages once a month, to sustain in your mind this needful connexion; in the present [weekly] form of publication it is often . . . quite impossible to preserve it sufficiently through the current numbers. (qtd. in Butt and Tillotson 88-9)

At the conclusion of this apology, Dickens announced, “On the first of November, eighteen hundred and forty-two, I purpose, if it please God, to commence my new book in monthly parts, under the old green cover, in the old size and form, and at the old price” (89).

The new book was *Martin Chuzzlewit*, which began publication later than planned—in January 1843, but as Dickens had promised, was published in monthly parts. The novel, perhaps because of the delay in publication that distanced him from his readers for three and a half years, suffered from slow sales. For the first time in his career as a novelist, Dickens was “jolted and perturbed” (P. Collins 182). In an attempt to boost sales, Dickens sent the hero, Martin, on an American adventure (Dickens had lately returned from his own visit to the States) but even then, sales remained well below those of *Pickwick* and *Nickleby*. Despite its poor reception, Dickens himself maintained that *Martin Chuzzlewit* was his best work. He wrote to Forster, “You know as well as I that I think *Chuzzlewit* in a hundred points immeasurably the best of my stories” (182). Fortunately, the poor public reception of *Martin Chuzzlewit* did not deter Dickens from continuing his career.

Readers' Responses

The chapters above address the mechanics of writing and reading a serial novel but not the emotional effect on the reader. The extended timeline over which a serialized novel was consumed resulted in an emotional reaction from the reader. Complex and convoluted plots evolved slowly over time, and characters were drawn so true to life that the reader began to consider them acquaintances rather than characters. The format “heightened their sense of familiar (one might also say familial) with the author. It was as if they received a monthly budget of news about various characters who . . . had become parts of their daily imaginative lives” (Altick, “Readers” 79). As the *Spectator* pointed out in 1838, “each number contained something striking and readable for all ranks” (9). In 1837, during the publication of *Pickwick*, *The National Magazine* remarked, “The characters and scenes of this writer [Dickens] have become, to an extent undreamed of in all previous cases, part of our actual life” (qtd. in Andrews 15). Cruse calls Dickens’s writing “no mere writing of books, but an act of creation” and says of his characters:

“[They] had a frank, revealing method of presenting themselves that brought them into quick and close intimacy; so that very soon it was not a matter of having read *Pickwick Papers* or *Oliver Twist* or *Nicholas Nickleby*, but of having made the acquaintance of Mr. Pickwick and Sam Weller, Bill Sykes and Nancy, delightful, exasperating Mrs. Nickleby, and poor unfortunate Smyke, and the hose of others who came, brimming over

with life and individuality, to join the company that was being added to the population of England. (Cruse 159)

The intensity of the readers' involvement in these novels is illustrated by the letters they wrote to the authors asking for clues on what would happen next, offering suggestions and criticism, and pleading for a preferred outcome for their favorite characters. Some authors responded directly to their readers, either by return letter or within the evolving story itself. It is interesting to note, that of the surviving letters to authors, readers refer to characters as if they were real people. The example of the state of anxiety Dickens created in readers of *The Old Curiosity Shop* and the outpouring of letters from readers on both sides of the Atlantic pleading with Dickens to spare the life of the doomed Little Nell is well documented. Biographer Claire Tomalin recounts Dickens's own struggles with the decision. After taking Forster's suggestion that he should kill off the popular character, Dickens wrote during his work on the novel, "You can't imagine how exhausted I am today with yesterday's labours... All night I have been pursued by the child; and this morning I am unrefreshed and miserable. I don't know what to do with myself..." (114). In a letter to W.C. Macready on 6th January 1841 Dickens himself wrote, "I am slowly murdering that poor child, and grow wretched over it. It wrings my heart. Yet it must be"(114). Macready tragically lost his three-year old daughter, Joan, during the time in which Dickens was writing Nell's final chapters. Upon her death, Macready wrote, "I have lost my child. There is no comfort for that sorrow; there is endurance—that is all" (115). In his diary entries, he recalls his attempt to convince Dickens to change the course of the novel and his reaction to reading the number that told of the death of Nell:

21 January, 1841: Called on DickensAsked Dickens to spare the life of Nell in his story, and observed he was cruel. He blushed. . . .

22 January 1841: Found at home . . . [a note] from Dickens with an onward number of Master *Humphrey's Clock*. . . . I dread to read it but I must get it over. I have read the two numbers; I never read printed words that gave me so much pain. I could not weep for some time. Sensation, suffering have returned to me, that are terrible to awaken; it is real to me. . . . (P. Collins 99)

The second entry illustrates the depth of feeling for characters that developed during the months-long serialization. Dickens himself wrote in a letter to Forster, “I shall not recover it for a long time. Nobody will miss her like I shall. It is a very painful thing to me, that I really cannot express my sorrow” (165). Just as his fans had in their letters to him, Dickens here refers to his own fictional creation as if she was a real girl, and with a depth of feeling that makes it seem as if he is speaking of the death of a family member or close friend. As Tomalin points out, the death of a child was an all too common event in Victorian life. “If he [Dickens] was torn to bits by his feelings, Victorian families, with their all too frequent experience of the deaths of children, responded in their thousands” (115). Despite his despair, Dickens could not bear to let his readers suffer uncomfoted and “set out to palliate and soothe” (115) by offering words of comfort to his distraught audience. He wrote of Nell, “Sorrow was dead indeed in her, but peace and perfect happiness were born; imagined in her tranquil beauty and profound repose” (115). To go along with this sentimental farewell, he requested an illustration “giving some notion of the etherealized spirit of the child” (115). The

tailpiece illustration by Cattermole depicted Nell being “lifted up to heaven by four angels, her eyes shut and a slight smile on her face” (115). Dickens’s intent in all this was to “try and do something which might be read by people about whom Death had been,—with a softened feeling, and with consolation” (115).

The doomed Little Nell was not the alone in eliciting a heartfelt response in readers. During the publication of *Dombey and Son* (October 1846- April 1848), Dickens received a series of letters from Lord Jeffery, Judge of the Court of Sessions (then in his 70s), many of which expressed his reaction to characters being introduced into the story. On December 14, 1846 he wrote to thank Dickens for the Dombey's:

...the Dombey's, my dear D! How can I thank you enough for them! . . . it is Florence on whom my hopes chiefly repose; and in her I see the promise of another Nelly! . . . I expect great things too, from Walter, who begins charmingly, and will be still better I fancy than young Nickleby. . . . I have good hopes too of Susan Nipper, who I think has great capabilities, and whom I trust you do not mean to drop. (P. Collins 216).

Philip Collins notes that another letter from Jeffery, (apparently non extant) had a notable effect on the novel (216), as a Dickens states in a letter written to John Forster December 21, 1847, “Note from Jeffery this morning, who won’t believe (positively refuses) that Edith is Carker’s mistress. What do you think of a kind of inverted Maid’s Tragedy, and a tremendous sense of her undeceiving Carker, and giving him to know that she never meant that?” Collins reports that “Jeffery’s hint was taken: a rare example of Dickens’s yielding to advice” (216).

Letters Dickens wrote to close friends contain some evidence of his responsiveness to suggestions from readers, and correspondence with friends John Forster and Edward Bulwer Lytton clearly indicate his openness to editorial suggestions. In addition to the above mentioned “murder” of Little Nell, Forster suggested an alternate ending for the novel *Dombey and Son*; and Bulwer Lytton-Lytton’s suggestion that Dickens write a happier ending for *Great Expectations* lead him to “substitute one in which the eventual reunion of Pip with Estella is, at the very least, a possibility” (Flint 25). Bulwer-Lytton convinced Dickens that the original ending did not provide the happy, romantic resolutions assumed to be preferred by the reading public. In July of 1861, Dickens wrote to Forster notifying him of the change and telling him, “I have put in as pretty a little piece of writing as I could, and I have no doubt the story will be more acceptable through the alteration” (536). Claire Tomalin reveals that this letter arrived too late for Forster to object to the change, “but he was not pleased and thought it marred the book” (315). Forster kept a copy of the original ending, eventually publishing it in the third volume of his *Life of Dickens*. Tomalin remarks that “Few critics have disagreed with Forster, although the happy ending appears in every standard issue of *Great Expectations*” (315).

In other letters, Dickens communicates to Forster his regret that the entire novel could not be read as one piece, saying it was “regrettable ‘because the general turn and tone of the working out or winding up will be away from all such things as they conventionally go’”(536). These letters imply that Dickens took a certain pride and pleasure in the ‘unconventionality’ of the original ending but recognized that the serial format made it difficult for readers, after following Pip from childhood through his hard

life-lessons, to accept an abrupt ending which left Pip alone and adrift. It was with an editor's, not author's eye, he ultimately chose to publish the final installment of *Great Expectations* with the new ending which would be most likely to please the audience and result in the most sales.

The authors of other popular serial novels also received letters from concerned readers. During the publication of *The Woman in White*, readers of the serial cast bets among themselves as to what the 'great secret' of the mystery would turn out to be (Sutherland 31). Collins received letters from readers concerned about the fate of favorite characters. One anxious reader, the sister of his friend, Nina Chambers Lehmann, wrote of her concern for the novel's heroines. He responded:

I beg to assure Miss Chambers, solemnly, that nobody about whom she interested and over whom the undersigned can exercise benevolent control, shall come to any harm" (Lonoff 73).

After revealing some significant "spoilers" to reassure Miss Chambers, he continues:

If this categorical explanation be only half as acceptable to Miss Chambers, as the perusal of Miss Chamber's note was to the lucky individual who has excited her interest in his story, that individual will consider these few lines as the most agreeable literary composition in which he has been engaged for many a long day past. (73)

When reading Collins's earnest reassurance, it is easy to imagine Miss Chambers wrapped in a *Woman in White* shawl, surrounded by "all manner of *Woman in White* toilet requisites" while writing her heartfelt plea for her favorite characters and reading the author's assurance of their safety. Some months later, he wrote in response to a

stranger from Philadelphia, “*The Woman in White* has made me many friends both in England and America—and I am glad to know that I number you among them” (73).

Personal responses such as these served to strengthen the appearance of a collaborative relationship between authors and their readers, and the impression that the next number of a serial novel was more a missive from a friend than a fictional novel from which the reader was expected to disengage during the weeks between numbers.

Reading a novel in weekly or monthly parts that paralleled the seasons of the year as they passed in real time enforced the illusion that fictional events were happening as the readers’ own experience. This led to criticism, still common today, that readers, fans and viewers who immerse themselves in an ongoing fictional series, whether a 19th century serial novel or a present day soap opera are “ignorant dupes of the media”(66). Ian Watt, in his study of the 18th century British novel, called the convention of readers speaking of fictional characters as friends and family “formal realism.” Formal realism recognizes the careful placement of the novel at a specific time and place in an attempt to “capture the texture of life at that point” (Hayward 67). Thackeray recognized, and went out of his way to emphasize, that readers had “long proved themselves capable of holding a double vision of their texts as at once realistic and fantastic, quotidian and otherworldly” (67). Thackeray himself famously encouraged a blending of fiction and real life by claiming to be a conduit through which the narrative is delivered—as if it were being dictated by his characters. His postscript to *The Newcomes* opens with the narrator directly addressing the reader and admitting of his characters “I hardly know if they are not true; whether they do not live near us somewhere. They were alive, I heard their voices” (qtd. in Hayward 66). The author and audience together begin the process

of “disengagement from characters who have been intimate friends for twenty-three months” (66).

In March of 1858, Dickens prepared to embark on a tour of personal appearances and public readings. Now in addition to being an author, editor and publisher, he was about to become a professional reader. He knew that this new role would have a profound effect on the relationship he had carefully developed with his readers since the first issue of *The Pickwick Papers* 20 years earlier. He wrote to his publisher, F.M. Evans:

Now, the question I want your opinion on, is this:—Assuming these hopes [of becoming a professional Reader] to be well grounded, would such a use of the personal (I may almost say affectionate) relations which subsist between me and the public, and make my standing with them very peculiar, at all affect my position with them as a writer? Would it be likely to have any influence on my next book? If it had any influence at all, would it be likely to be of a weakening or a strengthening kind? (Andrews 9)

This sense of doubt seems ironic coming from a man who so successfully cultivated a relationship with his readers that he called it “personally affectionate, and like to no other man’s” (10). The public readings evolved from this particularly intimate relationship between author and audience; they seemed a natural progression from communication through the written word to communing face to face. Andrews recognizes these engagements as Dickens’s “chance personally to meet [his] vast readership, to see and hear how they responded to what he had written” (10). “I have long held the opinion,” he

wrote in prefacing his first reading, “and long acted on the opinion, that in these times whatever brings a public man and his public face to face, on terms of mutual confidence and respect, is a good thing” (10).

Dickens’s readings attracted large, enthusiastic crowds who rewarded him with, as he told Macready in an 1968 letter, “a roaring sea of response” (Tomalin 290), and the crowd that turned out to see him at St. Martin’s Hall in April greeted him with “a roar of cheering which might have been heard at Charing Cross” (295). When he opened his speech by telling the audience that “he saw readings as a way of strengthening his friendship with his readers . . . he was cheered again” (295). At times, however, it appeared these raucous and enthusiastic crowds were not as endearing as others. Claire Tomalin recounts an episode in November 1858 at Southampton, at which an acquaintance, eager to speak with Dickens following a reading, went in search of him only to be told he had already left—through a window (302).

Public readings were the next step in his evolution from journalist, to author, editor and publisher, self-described magazine “conductor” and actor. In October 1868, a review in the *Syracuse Daily Standard* commented on Dickens’s reading of an excerpt of *Pickwick*, “The trial of Bardell vs Pickwick, we venture to say, was perfectly familiar to the entire audience, and yet it seemed like a new thing interpreted by its creator” (226). In a letter to Robert Lytton at the conclusion of his career as professional reader, Dickens wrote, “I was sustained by the hope that I could drop into some hearts, some new expression of the meaning of my books, that would touch them in some new way” (226). If the *Standard’s* review is typical of others he received during his tour, he met that goal handily.

This reciprocal relationship between readers of serial fiction continued after Dickens through the end of the Victorian era, culminating in a fan response to the death of Sherlock Holmes that raised such an outcry that Arthur Conan Doyle was persuaded to write a new story in which he “revealed” that Holmes’s did not fall to his death at Reichenbach Falls. As of this writing, there is intense speculation among Sherlockians as to the fate of a modern incarnation of Sherlock Holmes, who apparently jumped to his death in the 2012 season-ending cliffhanger episode of BBC Television’s current adaptation of Doyle’s tales.

Conclusion

The culture that developed around and among the authors and readers of serial fiction in the 19th century closely resembles the culture of active fandoms today. The communal aspect that emerged from the practice of publishing novels in serial created a template for the growing cultural phenomenon of fandom—literary fandoms in particular. The fandom culture surrounding *Sherlock Holmes* has long been recognized, but why is it widely considered the original literary fandom when so much evidence of earlier publications exists that engendered at least as much enthusiasm from readers of the day?

One possibility is that the Holmes stories were not ongoing sagas doled out bit by bit in tantalizing pieces, but self-contained, complete units published consecutively. When Dickens published the final installment of a novel, the story was complete, loose ends tied up, characters variously dispatched. The format adopted by Doyle for publication of his *Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* had the potential for an endless series of episodes and adventures. The first Holmes story was published in *The Strand* in 1891, and Sherlock was still solving cases into the 1920's. What is clear is that the Doyle's readership was primed by earlier serials like *The Pickwick Papers* and *Nicholas Nickleby*. Dickens demonstrated how to draw an audience into a story and keep them interested between numbers. Serialized Sensation and Detective novels by the likes of Wilkie Collins created an appetite for continuing episodic thrillers.

Reading serial novels provided a sense of interconnectedness that is an essential factor in a developing fandom. These novels provided a common interest to a wide variety of people from all walks of life. Readers who followed the exploits of the Pickwick Club and the events surrounding the Nicklebys or fretfully watched the decline of Little Nell, actively sought out ways to share and extend their reading experience. I have cited research that documents instances of communal reading within families and organized by subscription that speak to the desire for the readers of episodic fiction to share the experience with family, friends and neighbors. Readers sought out ways to immerse themselves in their favorite serials, and the new industrialized commercial economy was equipped and ready to provide an assortment of merchandise to accommodate them. This sense of community created readers as consumers and authors as producers who were able to gauge the success of their ongoing novels by the reaction of their audience and acted accordingly—either encouraging reader participation by altering the course of a novel in progress, providing more “face time” for favorite characters, or alternately removing for a period of a monthly number or two, a character that readers had determined to be boring or unsavory.

Fans today flock to blockbuster movie versions of their favorite serials, whether adaptations of classic comic books or the current best-selling novels. Franchises such as the movies that were spun off of Ian Fleming’s *James Bond* novels have flourished over decades and have drawn international audiences in ever increasing numbers. Particularly enthusiastic fans gather at conventions, called “Cons,” to socialize with others who share their interests. The largest of these events, such as “ComicCon” and “DragonCon” which cater to sci-fi and fantasy fans attract fans from all over the world. Thousands of fans

converge on these events in the hope of meeting stars of their favorite shows and movies, or authors of their favorite books. Surely there was no comparable event for the fans of Victorian serial novels.

What then do we make of the “Boz Ball” held at the Park Theater in New York during Dickens’s 1842 visit to the United States? 5,000 people applied for 3,000 available tickets. The theater’s stage was turned into a ballroom lit with hundreds of gaslights and decorated with medallions depicting characters from Dickens’s novels. Upon his entrance, Dickens was paraded around the ballroom twice as a band played “Hail the Conquering Hero Comes” and the crowd applauded enthusiastically. Actors presented a series of tableaux from the novels (Tomalin 131) and a fabulous feast was served. The next morning, Dickens “was amused to read in a newspaper that he had never been in such society in England as he now enjoyed in New York” (132). Today, the “Boz Ball” might have been publicized as DickensCon.

As mass media expanded and flourished and audiences grew, the author/reader interaction became an accepted and expected part of the reading, and in later years listening to episodic radio dramas and viewing TV and movie series, experience. It is not a difficult reach to look at the lines of people attending midnight book release parties for recent popular book series such as the *Harry Potter*, *Twilight* and the *Hunger Games* series and see them as direct descendants of the readers who reportedly rowed out into New York harbor to greet the ship delivering the latest episode of *The Old Curiosity Shop*, desperate to be the first to hear news of Little Nell’s fate.

The readers who flocked to Charles Dickens’s readings were looking for the same personal experience as those who line up to see modern celebrity authors at book signings

and public readings: to hear them read words that they have read so often as to know them by heart; and for the opportunity to personally express their reactions, ideas and suggestions for future developments. Those that gather in vibrant online chat communities to discuss, debate and argue the merits (and shortcomings) of the latest episode of popular television dramas or the new volume of the current best-selling book series are as eager to share their experience with like-minded fans as were the readers of the *Illustrated London News* when they asked, or were asked by their friends, family, and neighbors, “What do you think of *Bleak House*?”

Areas for further study

Because primary sources that can be reliably attributed to readers of the original serial publications of novels by the likes of Dickens, Collins and Thackeray are scarce, it remains difficult to get a complete picture of just how influential these early fandoms were on authors and exactly how much sway they held with publishers. The anecdotal evidence that does survive suggests that it was significant. In his article “Rereading the English Common Reader,” Jonathan Rose suggests that a new field of study is required to ascertain the makeup of what Altick called the English Common Reader. He calls this area a “history of audiences” and explains that a study of the history of audiences would “put some sorely needed discipline into the study of popular culture (57). He credits David Vincent, John Burnett and David Mayall, with beginning to undertake this field of study through books including *Bread, Knowledge and Freedom: A Study of 19th Century Working Class Autobiography* (1982) and *The Autobiography of the Working Class: An Annotated, Critical Bibliography* (1984). Vincent, Burnett and Mayall amassed a collection of autobiographical information by a segment of Victorian society that has for the most part been ignored, not for want of interest, but for lack of surviving information. These are the words of a reading audience—one that ranged from “tramps and petty criminals” (51) to self-employed skilled workers—that fell outside of Altick’s definition of middle class, as plastic as that is. The autobiographies in these collections are, according to Rose, “often wonderfully forthcoming about their reading experiences—not

only what they read, but how they comprehended and reacted to their reading” (“Rereading” 51). Further study of the writings of this segment of society can only add depth to our understanding of what influence mass-produced episodic fiction had on the lives of readers of all classes, as well as if their influence had the a similar impact on shaping the literature of the day. Rose explains that evidence is growing that the works of Dickens “played an important role in making the British working classes literate. . . by providing a “fund of allusions, characters, tropes and situations that could be drawn upon by people who were not trained to express themselves” (“Rereading” 60) . He points to the example of a Christmas story competition sponsored by the *Dundee, Perth, and Forfar’s People’s Journal* in 1869 that attracted more than a thousand entries, many of which were clearly influenced by Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol* (60). Rose has discovered further examples of Dickens’s influence on the writings of working class autobiographies. A shoemaker’s daughter borrows David Copperfield’s opening “I am born” to introduce her own reminiscences; and a Devonshire farm boy “who could point to the tales of ‘The Convict’s Return’ from *The Pickwick Papers* to affirm the importance of writing a biography of a ‘homely and ordinary life’” (61).

The influence of the serial publication of novels had a demonstrable effect on Victorian society. From promoting a desire for literacy to a wider audience, serial fiction opened a new world of knowledge to populations that previously had little or no access to literature in any form. By inviting readers of all ages, genders and classes into the worlds depicted in the serial fiction of the era, these publications provided these disparate groups something in common. In promoting an open relationship between audience and writer, publishers of serial fiction created a form in which a reading community could

interact with not only each other, but with the author as well. Fostering readers' perception of a personal relationship with the authors of their favorite serial novels created a sense of investment and ownership among readers that they were eager to share. In turn, this sense of connection created a fandom.

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