



Dombey and Son

Charles Dickens, Jonathan Lethem (Introduction)

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Dombey and Son, Charles Dickens's story of a powerful man whose callous neglect of his family triggers his professional and personal downfall, showcases the author's gift for vivid characterization and unfailingly realistic description. As Jonathan Lethem contends in his Introduction, Dickens's "genius . . . is at one with the genius of the form of the novel itself: Dickens willed into existence the most capacious and elastic and versatile kind of novel that could be, one big enough for his vast sentimental yearnings and for every impulse and fear and hesitation in him that countervailed those yearnings too. Never parsimonious and frequently contradictory, he always gives us everything he can, everything he's planned to give, and then more." This Modern Library Paperback Classic was set from the 1867 "Charles Dickens" edition.

Dombey and Son Details

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From Reader Review Dombey and Son for online ebook

Julie Davis says

For a good, free audiobook try LibriVox's Mil Nicholson. She does some of the best voices I've ever heard although I don't enjoy her straight reading of the rest of the text quite as much.

I plumped for David Timson's reading which has some of the best expressive reading of the plain text I've heard, without being at all over the top about it.

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FINAL

(Writing this without spoilers probably will lead to misdirection, but I feel there are too many people who probably haven't read this book. And I DO want to say some things.)

big sigh Oh, that was good.

It is interesting to me that I began reading Dickens with his later books. Going backwards to his earlier creations, one can see the training wheels on in some places. There are some very predictable plot developments that the reader sees as soon as the seeds are introduced. However, Dickens (that genius) still managed to surprise me again and again with unexpected twists that made the story lively and interesting.

One thing that doesn't change from book to book is the creation of eccentric characters who begin by seeming odd and funny but wind up stealing your heart. I'd never have thought that I'd care passionately about Susan Nipper, Cap'n Cuttle, Miss Tox, or Mr. Toots but I really did.

I also appreciated the way that Florence, the character with the least development in many ways (one motivation and one only) was used to show us so much about other characters. Mr. Dombey, Edith, and little Paul all showed surprising depth as they came into contact with Florence whose only desire was love. I was especially impressed with what we were shown of Mr. Dombey's internal character using this technique.

There were times also when the power of Dickens' writing washed over me and left me bereft of my own words. Most notably in Mr. Dombey and Edith's argument in her bedroom, in Mr. Carker's conversation with Edith discussing Mr. Dombey's character, and in the chapter Rob the Grinder Loses His Place where I felt as tired and mentally confused as the fleeing fugitive whose thoughts we read. Here Dickens worked the seemingly impossible feat of making me sorry for someone who I'd been longing to see punished.

On a personal note, I was astounded by in the chapter After a Lapse when Harriet is advancing a proposition to the fellow who plays the violoncello. This book suddenly became a reflection of how many times we stubbornly think we know best and refuse God's love, only to find that his forgiveness and mercy are boundless ... especially when we've fallen the very lowest and don't deserve it ... and yet it is freely and lovingly given. I don't know if that is what Dickens intended, but it is certainly what struck me hard. It was a revelatory moment that left me turning off the audiobook to simply think about the implications of that interpretation when applied to the other stories woven into the novel.

It isn't the perfect Dickens novel. It sagged in the middle when there was a transition from emphasis on Paul

to introducing Edith, and there were those predictable plot points I mentioned. It probably won't ever be my favorite (right now those honors are shared by *The Pickwick Papers*, *Bleak House*, and *Little Dorrit*), but it is a great book and very rewarding on a lot of levels.

Maria Hill AKA MH Books says

This book reminds me of a daytime soap opera. People arrive on the scene, die unexpectedly and dramatically disappear only to make an even more dramatic timely re-entrance. Dramatic co-incidences abound and are essential to the plot. Maybe this is as a direct result of its original serialisation by Dickens?

Overall, it's a fun read. I found it easier to listen to on audio (due to Dickens long sentences) and the narrator (David Timson) was so good that I recognised voices of returning characters which were supposed to have a dramatic reveal later in the book. This book has a very large cast of characters so that was no insignificant achievement. I was having syncing problems with the book and ended up rereading huge chunks of this already chunky book but loved them too much to bother fast forwarding.

Overall this is recommended for those who like a good Soap Opera written by a very talented classical author.

Tristram says

[There is some temptation to make the whole of Dickens's mammoth of a novel, *Dombey and Son*, boil down to the above saw – all the more so since Dickens, according to Forster, meant to focus on Pride the same way he had done in *Martin Chuzzlewit*, its predecessor, with regard to another deadly sin, Greed. However, since a saw – as Ambrose Bierce suggested – has been given its name because “it makes its way into a wooden head”, we might flatter Dickens, and ourse

Laura says

I'm ashamed to admit that until I read this book, I hadn't read a lot of Dickens. I skimmed *Great Expectations* when I was in 9th grade, but only because I was forced, and I read *A Christmas Carol* for work once (long story, but I was working for an educational publishing company and we were doing a dumbed-down version). After finishing *Dombey and Son*, I'm afraid I don't have anything especially intelligent to add to the reams and reams that has been written about Dickens, except that I'm excited about reading a lot more of his work.

Dombey & Son is a great, sweeping novel, taking place over the course of approximately 20 years, about a wealthy man who systematically shuns everyone close to him -- most notably, his daughter, whom he treats appallingly -- thus leading to his personal and monetary ruin. While some people complain, not without some justification, about Dickens's florid writing, the style is easily forgiven next to the engrossing plot, unforgettable characters, and themes that will seem relevant even now (in fact, probably especially now). And although Florence, Dombey's long-suffering daughter, was unrealistically flawless -- reading about her was rather like reading about a china figurine -- the other characters, all of whom are fully and convincingly drawn, more than make up for Florence's incredible perfection.

Dombey and Son is moving, funny, and cathartic, and I recommend it highly.

TheSkepticalReader says

3.5

Viv JM says

[only redeemed after losing his family, his business and his health (hide spoiler)]

Paul Bryant says

This is a great mid-period Dickens written just about at the point where his optimism about human beings and his zest to improve the conditions of all the hapless grovellers is at the tipping point of being transformed by a horrible realisation that the corruption of the ruling classes, the venality of the middle classes and the ground-down-and-outness of the labouring men and women meant that only a root and branch revolution would do, reform would simply fail, be watered down by the circumlocutors, revolution was the only hope.

But he was terrified of revolution and wrote two books about his fear, Barnaby Rudge (which i haven't read yet) and A Tale of Two Cities, which I have. He knew that social upheaval uncorks the violence, he knew the highway to hell paved with good intentions.

So he was in a complete political bind. Couldn't go back, couldn't go forward. All his middle to late masterpieces are written from this agonised political dilemma. Beginning with Dombey and Son he gets gloomier and gloomier.

But being Dickens his genius covers the gloom with hectic merriment and gurning gargoyley, which we love.

Sarah Clarkson says

I always love Dickens. This is my sixth by him. I am always left a little breathless by the wit with which he sketches his characters. This book certainly had its unforgettable characters, my favorites were Cap'n Cuttle, Walter Gay, Mr. Toots and Susan, and for villain, the sheer toothiness of Mr. Carker is downright awful.

I found the book a bit slow in its first half though the gradual build of Florence and little Paul's relationship, especially down at the sea was pivotal to the whole story and very beautiful. Things really picked up with Mr. Dombey's second marriage, and from there, it was a pretty engrossing read.

One of the themes seems to me to be extreme loyalty in this book: Florence's to her father, Walter's and Mr.

Toot's and Susan's to Florence, Cap'n Cuttle to Walter and Sol Gills. I love the faithfulness of the good hearts in this tale. So, while this isn't my favorite Dickens, I loved it, left feeling enriched.

I didn't find myself quite as connected to the characters as I had in other stories by him. With Our Mutual Friend and David Copperfield, I still feel as if they are friends that live in a different place. To read them again is to reconnect an old, familiar acquaintance. I never reached that depth with this book.

Sherwood Smith says

Reading Dickens always reminds me that there was no such thing as an editor as we understand the function of an editor now. Dickens did carefully plot out his books — we have the evidence not only in letters but of his actual outline of how carefully this one was worked out. We can see through his letters where he deviated and where he stuck to the plot.

This is the first of his books that features a heroine rather than a hero at the center of the story. Florence, an unwanted daughter, is beneath her father's notice. He ignores her lest he come to hate her (which he will do) in his disappointment over not having a son. When he gets the son, he is so elated that he scarcely notices the death of his wife.

Dombey's household, as well as his plans, are then organized around his little son Paul, who unfortunately is sickly. I think some of the best writing in the book is from Paul's point of view, particularly when he is six years old. Carker's run was also amazing.

Strong but at times somewhat ham-handed are the descriptions of the train-building tearing up the English city and countryside: the first is the best, comparing it to an earthquake that has devastated a poor section of town. Equally interesting is the vivid depictions of a cram school and of who does the work when a grand wedding is set up, when a household goes into bankruptcy, and what goes on in the servants' part of the house.

I had some problems, as often happens with me and Dickens, with characterizations who are too obviously either Types to Make A Point, or caricatures. That's not to say they are all either Types or Caricatures. There are some brilliant characterizations, though exasperatingly enough, not all the main ones.

Mrs. Miff, who was only on stage for a few paragraphs here and there, was more interesting (and believable) than Florence, who is just too good and pure and deferential to be believed. Another great character was Miss Tox, the aging spinster who begins as a comic character as she secretly nurses her hopes of attaching the widower, encouraged (or so she believes) by Mrs. Chick, Dombey's horrible sister, but attains dignity and greatness of heart.

Dickens is so good with comic secondary characters! Mr. Tootle, whose healthy progeny Dombey envies; Sol Gill; JB Bagshot, Miss Tox, Capt. Cuttle, Mr. Toots, and Susan Nipper. Mrs. Pipchin and the Blimbers come close.

Dickens does something interesting with the second wife, Edith, demonstrating what happens to women whose only choice is to marry. At least, I think the idea was interesting, but Dickens drags the situation on to excruciating lengths, repeating the same points in long melodramatic scenes. The villain comes on stage softly, and could have been interesting, but Dickens tips his hand by having the good and pure characters

repelled by him by instinct. If only truly evil people really did have a warning aura about them!

I applaud Dickens for attempting the women's POV, but his heroines have no agency--all the more noticeable when I consider that the magnificent Becky Sharpe, in Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, came out at exactly the same time.

That reminds me: I enjoyed little glimpses of the past. In Dickens' eyes, the Regency period was raffish and tarnished at best, as we see in a risible character whose shoulder and back are exposed, at the dinner. (Dickens is not kind to older women dressing young, even, as this one did, in the fashions of her youth, vis. the Regency gown.) Actually, Thackeray does the same, in *Vanity Fair*, which is set around the time of the Regency, with the big set piece at Waterloo. Not a pleasant depiction at all!

All in all, a good read, which could have been a great read if the repetition, preaching, and near-death Victorian conversions had been tightened way, way down.

K. says

Rereading Summer 2015. Just read chapter 19, "Walter Goes Away" during breakfast today (11 June 2015). Seriously, there is no competition. Tears shed over grapefruit.

Enjoyed this immensely, again.

I know that some might feel that Florence's goodness (and that her goodness remained with her) in her loveless life is impossible. For me, I believe that this book is about keeping our peace and faith under great trial. Florence could have chosen to become bitter and angry, so many people in real-life situations like hers do so. But what is the good in that? Instead, she chose to keep her soul pure and her personal peace by loving and serving. We don't hurt the other person when we secretly hate and despise them, we only hurt ourselves. That is one of the beautiful messages of this book.

There are many real-life instances of people like Florence, Dickens didn't invent her as a one-of-a-kind, impossibly sentimental, sappy, and too-good-to-be-true Victorian "angel in the house" woman. He made her what we ought to strive to be, forgiving, self-less and kind. Many people are this. What a beautiful thing!

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"One of the more sad Dickens books." Read first 1999. Those were my first thoughts on this book.

NOW? (2011) One of my brothers-in-law makes fun of me that all I read is Dickens. Which isn't true, but every time I revisit him I wonder why I *do* read anyone else! I completely devoured the first half of the book via audio while sewing Christmas presents. Done sewing? No reason or opportunity (I read paper easier than listen with kids around) to listen anymore (despite the fact that the narrator, David Timson, was absolutely fantastic), so I had to pick the book up and finish the rest in print.

I think that many of the beautiful things to be found in a Dickens book (*any* Dickens book) must have been lost on me during my first reading because I don't remember l-o-v-i-n-g this book to distraction as I now do. My love for and fascination with the great C. D. was only just beginning at the time I read this first. Since Mr. Pegotty (David Copperfield) I haven't fallen in love with a character like I did with Captain Cuttle, what

a dear! And Mr. Toots! And Susan Nipper. Delights abound.

Really, there's no experience to compare with reading Dickens, and I shamelessly admit my undying devotion to him. Every page was a delight and wonder. A gorgeous experience, well worth the many, many pages.

Why did I think it was so sad? Sure there were plenty of teary moments, but those abound in all his books. This one had, if possible, even more heart than some of the others. True forgiveness, self-denial, true, Christ-like love, loyalty, forbearance, repentance, the list of lovely traits could go on. Read it.

Peter says

First, full disclosure, I admire the work of Charles Dickens.

I believe that D&S is the first novel that gives the reader a look at a much more mature novelist than his earlier works. While Oliver Twist is better known than Dombey, and Pickwick a greater romp of fun, Dombey and Son is fully crafted and realized. Whatever the shortcomings of plot and character, the novel gives the reader a full, mature and comprehensive vision of human greed, blindness to family and inability to judge character on the one hand and the power of love, faithfulness and belief in the basic goodness of humanity on the other hand. Since the novel is Dickens, the good guys finally win the day, but not before we see Dickens in full flight as he presents his most unified novel to date.

Mr. Dombey, a merchant and father sees only his firm and the importance of its succession to his son as being worthwhile in life. His daughter Florence suffers horrid rejection, but matches her father's coldness and ignorance of her virtues with an inner strength and belief that there is good in everyone. No doubt there will be those who see Florence as too good, too innocent, and certainly too naive, but she is no Quixote tilting at windmills; rather, she is a force that believes in the goodness of humans, the power of being patient while goodness is lost in the shadows of life and she is especially the beacon which attracts all who are good, all who are lost, either literally or symbolically, to her presence.

The novel is populated with a panorama of characters, and being a Victorian novel, a wealth of sub-plots and coincidences, but a reader of Dickens will both accept this premise, and with a Pickwickian sense of fair play, forgive Dickens for his moments of excessive melodrama and other trivial transgressions.

Dombey and Son gives the reader the first evolved and continuous glimpse of the novelist who will go on to write Bleak House, Great Expectations and Our Mutual Friend. Dombey and Son is the beginning of the best of times in reading Dickens.

Captain Sir Roddy, R.N. (Ret.) says

Dombey and Son is one of Dickens' best! This novel, in my opinion, rivals *Little Dorrit*. The main protagonist, Florence Dombey is an amazing woman, full of strength and character which guides her through some incredibly miserable years. Some of the characters that Dickens develops during the course of this

novel are some of the most heinously evil or sad, or full of goodness and love, or are just plain funny. There's a powerful message about the influence of "wealth", not just money, on the individual, as well as family and friends. The explosion of the "Industrial Age" in Victorian England, and its impact on the culture plays a prominent role too. I fell in love with Florence Dombey, Little Paul, Wal'r, Cap'n Ed'ard Cuttle, Mr. Toots, and Miss Susan Nipper. I shuddered in fear and loathing with each entrance of Mr. James Carker in the plot (ohhh, the 'teeth'); and felt deep sorrow with each mis-step that 'Pere' Dombey takes. All in all, I could not put this down, and look forward to reading this again sometime in the near future. A wonderful book; and the characters truly deserved of the moniker - "Dickensian"!

Jimyanni says

Dickens as feminist? Not by 21st century definitions, perhaps, but by the standards of his own time, definitely. In this book, he very clearly perceives, and shows to the reader, the wrongness of a father discounting the value of his daughter simply because she is not a son, as well as various other indications of the wrongness of the discriminations visited upon women in his Victorian England, and the innate strength of many of his female characters in dealing with what their life forces them to endure. Even if his characters are largely one-dimensional, and either idealized near-saints, perfect villains, or caricatures, they are still generally interesting, and even if he is more than a touch long-winded at times, his writing is still enjoyable. This is one of my favorites of his writing, perhaps exceeded only by "A Christmas Carol", and matched, perhaps, by "Our Mutual Friend".

Bettie? says

[Bettie's Books (hide spoiler)]

Everyman says

This was my first reading of Dombey and Son, and I found it to be one of Dickens's less successful novels. I know some rank it highly. But I found the plot mostly uninteresting and even more dependent than is usual for Dickens on unlikely events and coincidences, and much of the writing turgid and uninspired. The first third of the book managed to engage me as the situations developed, but after that I increasingly read more out of duty than out of pleasure. I have enjoyed so much of Dickens's work that I kept reading in the expectation that things must improve, but they never did.

I never managed to get a good sense of the character of Dombey or understand why he acted in such self-destructive ways. My experience of highly successful businessmen is that they are almost universally much better judges of character than Dombey turned out to be. His marriage to Edith Granger was unjustified by any aspect of his character, especially since he didn't have the excuse of love or even affection blinding his judgment, as there was none of that on either side of the marriage. His treatment of Florence was inexplicable even for Victorian England.

Florence herself was sappy and insipid. I longed to find a single mention of any possible hint of reality in her, but never did. Reading about her was like eating an endless bowl of undiluted sugar.

The backgrounds were less interesting and less finely drawn than in most Dickens novels. London didn't come alive in nearly the way it does in Bleak House, for example, and there was no location of great interest, such as the Marshalsea in Little Dorrit or the marshes or Miss Havisham's house in Great Expectations.

As is typical of Dickens, there were plenty of well drawn minor characters. I particularly enjoyed Captain Cuttle (from whom the phrase "when found, make a note on" apparently comes), Solomon Gills, and Susan Nipper, and appreciated the humor in Mr. Toots and Cousin Feenix.

I have read many of Dickens's works multiple times, and will read many of them again in future, but Dombey and Son will not be among my choices for rereading. However, it does merit three stars, because even a weak Dickens is still a Dickens.

Bionic Jean says

Dombey and Son is a novel about pride and ambition. Paul Dombey, proud, wealthy, arrogant and frigid, is a man to whom the idea of "*Dombey and Son*" is paramount. There has always been a "*Dombey and Son*"; there will always be a "*Dombey and Son*". It is his whole world, his reason for being. Everything in his life is focused and directed towards this.

The full title of the book is **Dealings with the Firm of Dombey and Son: Wholesale, Retail and for Exportation**. Therefore the "son" of the title, although a real living person, is first and foremost an abstract concept, much as we are led to believe Paul Dombey senior himself had been to his own father, and so on, as far back as living memory allowed.

"The earth was made for Dombey and Son to trade in, and the sun and moon were made to give them light ... Common abbreviations took new meanings in his eyes, and had sole reference to them. A. D. had no concern with Anno Domini, but stood for anno Dombei - and Son."

The book starts with a defence of this character by Dickens himself, as part of the Preface from 1867, where he berates his earlier readers for "*the confounding of shyness with arrogance*", insisting that,

"Mr Dombey undergoes no violent change, either in this book, or in real life. A sense of his injustice is within him, all along. The more he represses it, the more unjust he necessarily is."

And although we despise Dombey Senior for his rigidity, his cold aloofness, his arrogance and pride, we see that he is the product of his class and time, and that any adapting of that initial "*repression*" as Dickens terms it, must represent a huge development in his character. This novel is partly about his eventual realisation and breaking out from such an inflexible mould. Dickens carefully inches Dombey along to more and more appallingly selfish acts, so that the reader comes to abominate the man's actions. Throughout he stays completely authentic and believable, even though at root Dombey is an honourable man. He is never a villain in the same mould as, for instance, his man of business the marvellously devious, scheming and manipulative wolf, Carker.

Once again we have a myriad of wonderful characters. James Carker is a moral thug who steals every scene in which he appears. He would shoot to the top of the tree of pantomime villains; a delight to read about with his,

"two unbroken rows of glistening teeth, whose regularity and whiteness were quite distressing. It was impossible to escape the observation of them, for he showed them whenever he spoke; and bore so wide a smile upon his countenance (a smile, however, very rarely, indeed, extending beyond his mouth), that there was something in it like the snarl of a cat."

Carker's beauteous teeth are mentioned no less than 69 times in the novel!

Dombey's little son Paul is, to use an expression of the the time, a strange old-fashioned boy. Dickens modelled him on his sister Fanny's crippled son Henry Burnett Junior. Paul's startling observations seem to indicate a wisdom, and perhaps a prescience, beyond his years. Coupled with his frailty, this increases our feelings of impending doom. Dombey also has a daughter, Florence, whom he ignores and despises. Her depiction is easily the most convincing "good" heroine he has created so far. She is virtuous, intelligent, hardworking, determined, modest and kind. In fact she has all the attributes Dickens admired in women. Yet unlike earlier female characters, she has what we would consider a "flaw". She feels guilt where there could not possibly be any. From a modern perspective then, she is very appealing. We do not like perfection.

Another character who appears later in the book is Edith Granger, a proud, bridling, passionate but penniless widow, and again, she is a very rounded and complex character, with nuances of ambition, confusion, bitterness, loathing and a kind of desperate love. Almost as many pages of this novel are devoted to female characters as to male characters, including the title character, Dombey himself. Florence and Edith together comprise much of this attention. Edith's mother Mrs. Skewton is a wonderfully monstrous creation, a sort of prototype for the much later Miss Havisham in *"Great Expectations"*. But unlike her, she pimps out her daughter while she primpes up herself.

As well as the great family of Dombey, there are other families whose kindness and warmth of their internal relationships provide a sharp contrast. There is young, good-hearted Walter Gay, his old salt-of-the-earth uncle Solomon Gills, a ship's instrument-maker, plus their friend the genial old Captain Cuttle. Captain Cuttle himself has an old seafaring friend called Captain Jack Bunsby, who is always called on in times of crisis for much-valued advice, although those around usually find such advice perplexing. Bunsby is hilariously described by Dickens as having,

"one stationary eye in the mahogany face, and one revolving one, on the principle of some lighthouses."

One cannot think of this family without thinking of Mrs. MacStinger, that fearsome harridan of a landlady, who terrifies the life out of Bunsby. The playing-out and denouement of their continuing saga, is both hilarious and satisfying, as it eventually weaves into another main theme. The strands in this novel are so subtly intertwined; the novel is superbly constructed.

This family represent to some extent the old world which is being left behind. The Toodle family, rosy-cheeked Polly - who has to become *"Mrs Richards"* in order to emphasise her position as nurse rather than her individuality, her *"plump and apple-faced"* husband, who later begins to work on the railway, plus all the little Toodles including their eldest rogue of a son Rob (the Grinder) represent the new world. There is Dombey's sister Louisa Chick, the only person to have any influence whatsoever over him, slight though it is, and whose byword seems to be *"effort"*. Anything could be overcome by more effort. According to her, the fact that Dombey's first wife died during childbirth (at the beginning of the novel) - was due to her *"not making an effort"* - thus proving without a doubt that she was not a real Dombey, with the admirable Dombey marks of character.

There is Susan Nipper, initially an unpleasant and objectionable, waspish, sharp-tongued character, but as

Florence's maid she proves to be a loyal and stout-hearted friend, who has the reader cheering from the sidelines when she tells some home truths to Paul Dombey. There is the gouty retired Major Joe Bagstock, put in for comic relief, as the objects of his amorous inclinations seem to change so very easily. Lucretia Tox too, switches her matrimonial attentions with equal alacrity - to our great entertainment once again. Another entertaining cameo role is played by Mrs Pipchin, the cantankerous operator of a boarding house in Brighton where Paul and Florence are sent for Paul's health. Never a comment goes by without her referring to her late husband, who had been killed 40 years earlier, in the Peruvian Mines. Dickens apparently modelled Mrs Pipchin on Mrs Roylance, who had been his landlady in London when his father was imprisoned for debt.

There is the grotesque witch "Good" Mrs Brown, in a frightening and shocking fairytale passage in the book which is extraordinarily redolent of *"Hansel and Gretel"* or *"Baba Yaga"*. Incredibly unpleasant and bizarre, she is one of the few actual caricatures in the book. Yet she returns later on, more fully fleshed out, and is revealed to have a profound connection to the main storyline. There is the portly scholar Doctor Blimbers, his wife who, *"was not learned herself, but she pretended to be, and that did quite as well"* and the Doctor's sister, the ghoulish Cornelia, *"dry and sandy with working in the graves of deceased languages"*. Kind but misguided, their strenuous disciplined instructive routine in their cramming Academy causes their little pupils such long-term distress.

Minor characters add to the book's enjoyment. There is Toots, little Paul's scatterbrained classmate, who becomes the humble admirer of Florence, permanently worried about his absent-mindedness and addled brain. There are many more quirky characters dotted around the novel, and several subplots, such as the hidden mysterious secret between the Carker brothers. Why is Carker's older brother John called *"the Junior"* by James, having a low position at the firm of Dombey and Son, and why is he looked upon generally with scorn? There is the sister of both brothers, Harriet, who for some unknown reason has elected to live with this less successful brother, John. Then there is the feisty, aggressively enigmatic Alice Brown - what is her secret? There is the good-natured aristocrat cousin Feenix, who makes everything all right in the end, Doctor Parker Peps, Sir Barnet, Lady and Master Skettles and the wonderfully named Reverend Melchisedech Howler.

There are many more characters who come to mind, but I cannot leave the topic without mentioning Florence's only true friend and sole companion at one point, a scruffy mutt, Diogenes the dog,

"Come, then, Di! Dear Di! Make friends with your new mistress. Let us love each other, Di!" said Florence, fondling his shaggy head. And Di, the rough and gruff, as if his hairy hide were pervious to the tear that dropped upon it, and his dog's heart melted as it fell, put his nose up to her face, and swore fidelity ... Diogenes already loved her for her own, and didn't care how much he showed it. So he made himself vastly ridiculous by performing a variety of uncouth bounces in the ante-chamber, and concluded, when poor Florence was at last asleep, and dreaming of the rosy children opposite, by scratching open her bedroom door: rolling up his bed into a pillow: lying down on the boards, at the full length of his tether, with his head towards her: and looking lazily at her, upside down, out of the tops of his eyes, until from winking and winking he fell asleep himself, and dreamed, with gruff barks, of his enemy."

We have this absurdity, this humour. We have our entertainment, our mystery - and sometime our horror. And we also have, perhaps for the first time, literary gravitas.

For instance, the motif of Time constantly rears its head, with timepieces, clocks and watches, all present at decisive moments of the story. Another noticeable device is the sea, waves, and running water. A sense of "waves", or a kind of unsteadiness often seeps into the story just as a character is delerious or beginning to be seriously ill, when an enormous eventful change is in the air, or some thing or idea is to be swept away.

There is so much symbolism with ringing and bells tolling the death knell. There are both overt and subtle references to earlier literary works. Is it not deliberate that Dickens has created three witches in the novel? First comes the kidnapper and thief, the ogress "Good" Mrs Brown. The second is the abominable Mrs Skewton, whom Dickens facetiously refers to throughout as "*Cleopatra*" because of her artificiality. This description is of her as her maid attends to Mrs. Skewton's dress as she retires at night,

"... her touch was as the touch of Death. The painted object shrivelled underneath her hand; the form collapsed, the hair dropped off, the arched dark eyebrows changed to scanty tufts of grey; the pale lips shrunk, the skin became cadaverous and loose, an old, worn yellow, nodding woman, with red eyes, alone remained in Cleopatra's place, huddled up, like a slovenly bundle, in a greasy flannel gown."

What an eye! The third hag, is a fortune-teller, or tramp,

"a withered and very ugly old woman ... munching with her jaws, as if the Death's Head beneath her yellow skin were impatient to get out". Scowling, screaming, wrathful, and "going backwards like a crab, or like a heap of crabs: for her alternately expanding and contracting hands might have represented two of that species, and her creeping face some half-a-dozen more: crouched on the veinous root of an old tree, pulled out a short black pipe from within the crown of her bonnet, lighted it with a match, and smoked in silence, looking fixedly at her questioner."

This narrative complexity marks a subtle change and expertise in Dickens's novel-writing. **Dombey and Son** is a book which can be read on many levels.

During 1844 to 1847, the railways were starting to be developed, and the impact this has on London life is also a major aspect of the book. Several of the characters can be seen as representing one age or another. Dombey epitomises the older age of traditional values, stymied by the new exciting upcoming age which was to clear away the stuffiness with more opportunities for all. Yet this new age was also to impose mechanisation and a lack of individuality. Dickens sees it all, and sees the faults inherent in both. His powerful descriptive passages describing the coming of the railroad to Camden Town, conjure up a hellish place,

"The first shock of a great earthquake had, just at that period, rent the whole neighbourhood to its centre. Traces of its course were visible on every side. Houses were knocked down; streets broken through and stopped; deep pits and trenches dug in the ground; enormous heaps of earth and clay thrown up; buildings that were undermined and shaking, propped by great beams of wood ... Hot springs and fiery eruptions, the usual attendants upon earthquakes, lent their contributions of confusion to the scene. Boiling water hissed and heaved within dilapidated walls; whence, also, the glare and roar of flames came issuing forth; and mounds of ashes blocked up rights of way"

Dombey and Son was Charles Dickens's seventh novel, published, as his earlier ones had been, in monthly parts initially, between Oct 1846 and Apr 1848. He was between 34 and 36 years old when he wrote it. The first parts were written in Lausanne, Switzerland, before Dickens returned to England, via Paris, to complete it. He also published one of his Christmas books, "*The Battle Of Life*", was directing and acting in various theatrical productions, and set up "*Urania Cottage*" (for "fallen women") with his friend the philanthropist Angela Burdett-Coutts, all within the space of time when he was writing **Dombey and Son**. As always, he was a literary dynamo, pushing himself to the absolute maximum.

Dickens asked his great friend, Hablot K. Browne, or "*Phiz*" to illustrate **Dombey and Son**. He was not sure how it would sell, as he had new publishers, Bradbury and Evans. As it turned out, he had been worrying

quite needlessly. Before long the installments were selling at up to 40,000 copies a month. This was eight times as many as his main competitor, William Makepeace Thackeray, whose monthly installments of *Vanity Fair* were being issued by the same publisher, but only selling only 5000 copies a month at the most. Interestingly *Vanity Fair* is probably the more popular novel of the two nowadays. This is yet another example of how immensely popular Dickens was. He really could do no wrong in the public's eye.

Whenever considering a novel by Dickens it is always as well to bear in mind that what we now read in one book, was never read this way by the initial audience. It is serial fiction, and the structure has to take this into account. Those earlier readers may have forgotten a character or episode; equally, they may need a very dramatic or comic interlude to sustain their interest for the month ahead. This sort of imposed spasmodic reading is mostly alien to us now. Having said that, the writing is masterly. Dickens now has a much surer touch when describing his characters. Unlike Thackeray's or Trollope's, they range throughout the upper and lower classes, so that the reader gains a very clear picture of society in his time. There are fewer outright caricatures, but many outrageously funny ones. The female characters have far more depth than ever before, and the novel is devoted proportionally far more towards female characters.

Critics consider **Dombey and Son** to be Dickens's first artistically mature work. After this novel was published, his reputation had grown so much that he was by then considered a world class author. This is the first one for which he planned properly with notes to outline how the novel would progress. He called these notes "*mems*". All Dickens's novels up to this point had been created free-form, from a germ of a suggestion. Frequently they developed into something different from what the author originally had in mind, yet all are inspired pieces of writing.

It would be hard to say when Dickens first started to conform to what we now think of as a novelist, rather than an observant recorder of life, taking his inspiration from the notes he made on what happens in the street, brilliantly embellishing them and throwing in a few sarcastic diatribes on the way. Mental giant though he undoubtably was, his writing often strikes the readers as a series of momentary farces. With **Dombey and Son** Dickens had made it clear in his letters to his friend and mentor John Forster, that he had resolved to be a serious novelist. This novel is more consistent, and has a sounder structure, with less discursiveness in the middle seeming to go nowhere. It has themes and subplots to which he returns again and again. It has pathos which has more emotional appeal than before; nothing seems quite so frivolous.

"*Nicholas Nickleby*" had represented Dickens's first attempt at a true novel. In that there is the unforgettable portrayal of a school, "*Dotheboys Hall*" with its ogre of a headmaster Mr. Squeers. Yet that part of the book is merely an episode, albeit an inspired, hilarious, scandalous, hugely entertaining episode. Nothing which happens there affects the main character very much. On the contrary, the character Nicholas Nickleby seems to exist merely in order to tell us about Dotheboys Hall.

But when little Paul Dombey goes to Dr. Blimber's, we get a real sense of the characters there, the kindly but old-fashioned cramming teachers. Little Paul's pathos is highlighted not by extreme contrast with some exaggerated cartoon character, but by contrast with old dusty pedantry. There is a real sense of predestination and tragedy throughout. Paul's childish innocence and extraordinary wisdom is eventually perceived and appreciated by all, and his departure from that school is one of the most affecting parts of the book.

Dombey and Son has all the satirical indignation readers relish so in his early novels, but it has new shades of darkness and a new narrative complexity. There are so many nuances and grim metaphors. To take a tiny example, think of the loss of the Walter's ship "*The Son and Heir*", and think of an alternative applied meaning. After **Dombey and Son** were to come Dickens's greatest novels. These are darker still, and even his absurdity was to be more grave.

I did not weep for Little Nell, in "*The Old Curiosity Shop*", but I wept for little Paul, that wise child, with a philosophical air lifting him preternaturally out of his small body. I was in good company. When that episode was first published, the entire nation of England was apparently prostrated by grief. William Thackeray, in the middle of serialising his own novel, "*Vanity Fair*", was consumed with envy, expostulating,

"There's no writing against such power as this - one has no chance!"

And that in itself, is a measure to me, of just how far Dickens's writing has by now gained in mastery and stature.

MJ Nicholls says

[Once Dombey's son dies (not a plot spoiler, it happens early on), the novel seems to collapse, start again. Britain was in mourning for Paul Dombey's demise, and this grief is reflected in the sluggish pace that follows. Wonderful, wrenchingly excruciating scenes between Dombey, whose hauteur builds to pitches of teeth-grinding stubbo

Amanda says

This is by far my favorite Dickens after *The Christmas Carol* (whose reigning place has more to do with nostalgia than anything else). I found all of the characters interesting and compelling. None of them slowed down the narrative for me, unlike in *Little Dorrit*. This is a wonderfully dense book about families and gender roles and the different forms of love. I highly enjoyed so many of the plot lines. My favorite characters were Walter, Susan Nipper, Edith and Captain Cuttle. I'm not sure if I'm spelling those correctly, as I listened to the audiobook narrated by David Timson, who did an excellent job. I look forward to listening to more Dickens narrated by him! Here I come, *Our Mutual Friend*!

Amanda says

I pretty much spent all day reading this. I really wanted to finish it in 2016 and I really got into last quarter of the book. This is my third Dickens as an adult (not counting the Christmas stories) and it is my least favorite of the 3 but it's still well worth the time to read it. There were a few too many coincidences needed to move the plot along and just some (I thought) unnecessary things but reading Dickens is like going on a long trip with a bunch of fun friends. It doesn't really matter where you are going it's the fun you have along the way. I'm very happy I have so many left to explore. I'm still looking for one to come close to the magic of *Bleak House*.

Julianne says

How the mighty fall. This book is literary genius, of course, and written by the master, Dickens. Beware your friends that serve too well with too bright and many teeth. Don't put all your eggs in one basket you might

drop that basket. This book really brings to light all the mistakes that man can make in a broad spectrum but put them all into one man, Mr. Dombey. The lessons within the book are too numerous to mention; the plight of the poor who actually have so much contrasted against the plight of the rich who really have so little, so the story goes. Dickens captivates everyone with his style of writing; he is a visionary writer and takes me wherever the story is, whether a dirt road in cheapside or a Great Country House with large stables and plenty of servants. I do have to say about Dombey and Son, this book stood out to me in more ways than any other book that he had written. The characters in this book were so well defined, as they are in all his books, but to me in this book each play a memorable part individually in this story and they each stand out so singularly to me that they will be remembered once the book is shelved and the dust has settled . I will continue to browse through the Dickens collection hoping to find a story that can compare to this literary buffet, until then I will continue to feast to my hearts content on what he has left behind and encourage you to do the same, Good Reads to you.

Julianne
