



## Knowing Dickens

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## REVIEWS

**Rosemarie Bodenheimer.** *Knowing Dickens*. Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 2007. Pp. x + 238. \$35.00 £17.95.

Virginia Woolf's memoir "A Sketch of the Past" poses the following question: "Why did Dickens spend his entire life writing stories?" (qtd. in Bodenheimer 1). This is the starting point for Rosemarie Bodenheimer's inquiry into how well we can know the author and, more to the point, how well the author knew himself. Authorship is a subject upon which Dickens was uncharacteristically at a loss for words. His inventiveness was a matter puzzled over by early reviewers such as Walter Bagehot and R. H. Hutton, who credited some unconscious source over which the author held little understanding. According to these accounts, the works of Dickens were hardly the achievements of a rational mind. They were brilliant accidents. This was the beginning of a long tradition of biographers and critics who professed to know the author better than he knew himself. It is in response to this condescension that Bodenheimer pursues a better understanding of the question: "What did Dickens know?" (19).

"Knowing" is no simple matter here. This elastic category encompasses various senses of the word: knowledge, knowingness, "in the know." In Bodenheimer's eyes, Dickens longed to be known while at the same time he was frightened of being found out. Such contradictions are what make him a fascinating case study. Here is a man who disputes séances while defending Krook's spontaneous combustion, who dismisses ghost sightings while believing a phantom haunts his neighbor Augusta de la Rue. Such contradictory attitudes toward conscious and unconscious thought are what give complexity to allegorical tales like "The Haunted Man." It is the twilight states of consciousness recurring throughout his writing that are taken by this book to register Dickens's ongoing game of depicting us "knowing without knowing that we know" (78). Reading between fiction and correspondence, then, is one way to determine how much we know about the author.

No new archival material is uncovered here, only a careful reconsideration of the available material. The publication of the twelfth and final volume of the Pilgrim Edition of *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, ed. Madeline House, Graham Storey, and Kathleen Tillotson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002) lies behind this study, whose method is to move back and forth among correspondence, essays, journalism, stories, and novels in order to trace links between the author's experience and that of his fictional characters. The idiosyncratic collection of chapter titles

says much about the speculative nature of the study: “Language on the Loose,” “Memory,” “Another Man,” “Manager of the House,” “Streets.” Each chapter represents a different facet of the psychological pattern by which Dickens came to recognise himself through others.

Without the luxury of putting the author on Freud’s couch, the best place to analyse Dickens’s psyche may be through the fictional characters. Mr. Micawber and other characters have long been criticized for lacking credible interior lives. One explanation for this alleged defect is that Dickens’s figures reveal themselves on the page without the narrator’s explanation; as Bodenheimer imagines Dickens objecting to critics: “I write my characters inside out” (20). Of course, her emphasis on dialogue sidesteps the omniscient narrative voice for which Dickens is justly celebrated. Bodenheimer typically uses the letters to confirm how the author projects different aspects of himself onto fictional characters. In her view, the indignant voice displayed by Dickens’s letters to his first love Maria Beadnell, for instance, can be read as a verbal pattern re-emerging in subsequent writing, from correspondence with *Morning Chronicle* proprietor John Easthope to Pickwickian accusations of humbug. “The Great Protester” heard in the correspondence is traced to the portraits of self-defensive talkers Harold Skimpole, Mr. Micawber, and Mr. Dorrit (23). Bodenheimer finds it surprising that an author with such command over fictional voices would lack control over his own voice, though this is hardly surprising when one considers the long line of artists who have lacked a similar degree of mastery over their personal lives.

Bodenheimer straddles the gap between biography and literary criticism – what is referred to here as “biographical criticism” – by reading letters and fiction alongside one another (16). The life-in-letters model is close to the surface of this study (she is the author of *The Real Life of Mary Ann Evans: George Eliot, Her Letters and Fiction* [Ithaca: Cornell, 1994]), though several of the usual suspects of Dickens biographies, from the extravagant mourning for Mary Hogarth to the separation from Catherine, do not receive attention due to the lack of textual evidence. However, the same cannot be said of the biographer’s favorite subject, Warren’s Blacking, a memory Bodenheimer hears echoed throughout Dickens’s writing. As she sees it, the autobiographical fragment describing his employment in the blacking warehouse is key to understanding the many fictional portraits of traumatized children. Bodenheimer provides a clear-sighted overview of the childhood trauma controversy since John Drew’s discovery of an advertising jingle for Warren’s Blacking warehouse penned by a twenty-year-old Dickens complicates any straightforward tale of distressing servitude. The question of motivation is an unresolvable one, of course. The limits of psycho-biographical approaches are shown by a concession

that the expectation of betrayal evident throughout Dickens's fiction probably originates with an unrecoverable childhood episode prior even to the blacking warehouse. As with much of the material in this book, we are not presented with new knowledge of events so much as a finely calibrated rendition of them.

The dependence on Dickens's letters is both the book's strength and weakness. The correspondence provides an instructive context in which to understand the connection between Dickens's male friendships and the fictional roles of "Another Man" played by Dickens onstage in amateur theatricals or the love triangles formed among male rivals in *Our Mutual Friend* (90). It is less instructive to learn how Dickens's representations of London streets are dependent on his personal experience, a topic covered by every account of Dickens as the first great urban novelist. It would be surprising if characters inhabited a London *not* gleaned from Dickens's childhood years. Nor is it always clear whether our understanding of fictional episodes is substantially changed by locating their origins in biographical events. Where the letters do prove insightful is in showing how the pose of the urban stroller first outlined in "Street Sketches" for the *Morning Chronicle* turns out to be quite different from the epistolary self-portrait. Likewise, the letters usefully reveal an attitude antithetical to walking in their hostility toward solitary confinement, as readers will recall from the vivid sketch of Philadelphia's Eastern Penitentiary in *American Notes*.

Bodenheimer is not evasive about the difficulty of resolving these questions of knowledge. The operative words of this study are "may," "might," and "could," which are used to speculate on matters that can never be proven definitively due to a lack of evidence. "The reader is left to wonder ..." and "It is not impossible that ..." are not uncommon phrases here. To take one example, the Gad's Hill library is cited as evidence of conventionally defined knowledge with the proviso that we cannot be sure of what Dickens actually read since many of the books were presentation copies. Evidence of this sort is highly suggestive if also highly unreliable. (Curiously, there are no footnotes to the study, only an unnumbered set of "Bibliographical Notes.") Knowing any author with a degree of certainty is a difficult enterprise, as any biographer will be the first to tell you. To its credit, Bodenheimer's study takes this difficulty up as an opportunity rather than a drawback for those of us interested in knowing everything we can about Dickens.

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