



The great novelist died 150 years ago, on 9th June 1870, aged 58. Four writers tell *Simon Hemelryk* their favourite Dickens moment

The best of times...

Simon Callow

Actor, author of *Charles Dickens and the Great Theatre of the World* and creator of the one-man show *The Mystery of Charles Dickens*

It made my young, would-be actor heart beat much faster when I first read the section in *Nicholas Nickleby* where Nicholas and his friend Smike join Vincent Crumple's touring company. The pair meet him in a Portsmouth inn, having come to the town to look for work as sailors. But Crumple, this improbable figure with

a huge rumbling voice, convinces them they should take to the stage instead.


'There's genteel comedy in your walk and manner, juvenile tragedy in your eye,' he tells Nicholas. 'You'll do as well as if you had thought of nothing else but the lamps, from your birth downwards.'

Dickens's subsequent description of life in Crumple's touring company is an enchanting introduction to the theatre.

There are fabulous characters: the child phenomenon, who's actually about 20, and Folair, who's unmistakably a

bitchy queen – not unknown in acting. There's a real sense of the magic, absurdity and tawdry glamour of the profession. And the thrill of putting on a show, exciting people and then moving on to the next place.

When I was a child with chickenpox, scratching all over, my grandmother gave me my first Dickens, *Pickwick Papers*. I never scratched again.

Dickens's youthful, carnivalesque world of grotesques was wonderful to discover as a young person. 

The theatrical emotion of Vincent Crummies, an 1838 engraving by H K Browne (known as Phiz) for Nicholas Nickleby



I've tried over my career to create or portray characters like his who belong to the realm of the imagination, rather than being slavishly photographic. Gareth in *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, for instance. Or Oliver Haddo/Aleister Crowley in *Chemical Wedding* (2008).

The human race, which has so disgraced itself, has thrown up a few admirable figures to give us all courage. Dickens was one of the most admirable of them all.

Barry Cryer Comedian and writer

The Dickens moment I treasure most is in *A Christmas Carol* when we realise Scrooge has been utterly transformed by the visits from the ghosts. He finally realises where he's been going wrong and that he has the chance of a much better life.

He starts to smile and laugh. 'I'm as light as a feather,' he says. 'I'm as happy as an angel. I'm as merry as a schoolboy. I'm as giddy as a drunken man.'

Alistair Sim's portrayal of this moment in *Scrooge* (1951) is particularly wonderful. His face just lights up in a way you haven't seen remotely in the movie, until then. Then he leans out of the window and asks a boy to buy the prize turkey. 'I'll send it Bob Cratchit's,' he chuckles to himself. 'He shan't know who sends it.'

Dickens wasn't a conscious influence on my work, but sometimes the great writers have more of an impact on you than you realise. When writing sitcoms, I've realised it's not necessarily the witty, sharp lines that make characters funny.

It's making sure they speak and react in a way that's completely true to their nature. Dickens was a master of that.

Graham Chapman and I created a part for Ronnie Corbett, in the comedy series *No – That's Me Over Here!*, who was an amalgamation of several Dickens-type characters. Something would go badly wrong at work and he'd go home and tell his wife a totally different version of events.

Dickens's work hasn't dated, which is quite amazing when you think about it. But that's because he writes about human nature so well.

Lynne Truss Author of *Eats, Shoots and Leaves*

The start of *David Copperfield* has a long description by the hero of how he was born with a caul, which eventually became the property of an old lady. The superstition ran that owning one would prevent you from drowning. It is a completely unnecessary piece of prose – we never hear about the woman again. But it's a brilliant pen portrait and, for me, exemplifies the joy of writing. You can tell Dickens is loving it, thinking 'Yeah, I can really do this.'

There's lots of great detail about how the caul was initially advertised in a newspaper 'at the low price of fifteen guineas'. And how, eventually, the old lady wins it in a raffle and dies 'triumphantly in bed, at 92'. David adds, 'I have understood that it was, to the last, her proudest boast, that she never had been on the water in her life, except upon a bridge.'

The story introduces the idea that David's world is full of different types of people, all with different motives and often with not quite enough money. It also shows he's got a very good grasp of detail – important for becoming a writer.

I got into Dickens properly when I was doing English at UCL. I hadn't read any of his books apart from *Oliver Twist*. But I ended up doing my dissertation on him.

He had a big effect at such a seminal age. Familiarity with his characters was so enriching. And the amount of writing, walking and other things he did... He was unstoppable.

At the moment, I'm writing a crime novel and you have to throw out lots of ideas and details to bring it to life, hoping you can weave them all to a satisfying conclusion later. Dickens's work – something like the caul story – gives me the nerve to try it.

Jeffrey Archer Novelist

If you're going to have an anti-hero in a novel, he has to do something very, very special for the reader suddenly to say, 'Wait a moment. There's more to this guy than we thought.' That's exactly what Dickens manages in *A Tale of Two Cities* with the death of Sydney Carton.

On the face of it, he's a drunken, brawling, second-rate lawyer. Then his love for Lucie leads him to take the place of her husband and his doppelganger, Charles Darnay, in a French prison. Darnay has been sentenced to death for the misdeeds of his aristocratic relatives. But it is Carton who is taken from prison to the guillotine on the back of a cart, the crowd jeering as he goes.

'It is a far, far better thing I do than I have ever done,' he thinks as he is about to meet his end. There can't be a more dramatic event in many novels.

But then, in terms of drama Dickens was the giant of his era. He really makes you turn the page. That's a God-given gift. I'm a storyteller, too, and, of course, I'm influenced by the greats.

His genius is also that you remember his characters. Pickwick and Pip are figures we all know and love. We don't love Scrooge so much, but we certainly know him. These are people who have lived in readers' minds for 150 years.

I read *A Tale of Two Cities* when I was a child – it was one of my mother's favourite books. Dickens has lots of youthful heroes, such as Pip and Oliver Twist. People who succeed. But I loved his anti-heroes, like Carton, too. We all see ourselves as anti-heroes, don't we? We all think we'll come good and do something brave in the end. 🍀