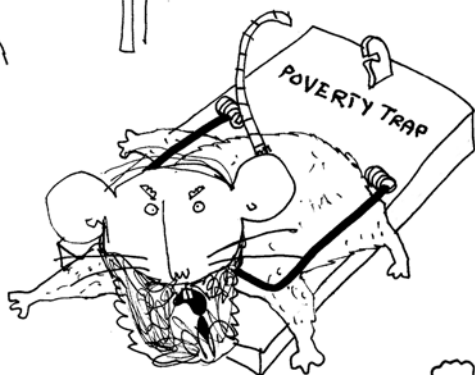


*What's so special about
Dickens?*





For my father, who read us the whole of
Great Expectations and *Little Dorrit* in a tent at night,
the books lit by nothing more than a hurricane lamp
~ with all the voices an' all!

M.R.

For Master Alfie and Miss Polly.

S.N.

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What's so special about
Dickens?



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WALKER
BOOKS

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The tour

A man with a beard, his hair thinning on top but bushy at the sides, stands on a stage. He is performing in a hall in Washington, D.C. In the audience is the president of the United States, Andrew Johnson. There are some books on a little table to one side, but the man doing the show doesn't have to look at them – he knows all the words. He is acting out stories, famous stories that he himself has written, stories that have been read by millions of people. This one-man show that he's doing is one he's put on many times before – all over England, Ireland and the USA.

One moment he acts out one character, the next he changes his voice and becomes

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someone else. So one second he's Scrooge, the mean old miser from *A Christmas Carol*. "Will you not speak to me?" he cries out to a ghost. It's the Ghost of Christmas Yet To Come.



The man's face looks anxious and the audience watches in breathless silence. Later he becomes someone called Mrs Cratchit, smiling proudly, bringing in a pudding for her family, and the audience erupts into cheers. Then he plays her husband, Bob Cratchit, crying over the death of their son, Tiny Tim, and moans,



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“My little, little child! My little child!” The audience falls into painful silence.

This was Charles Dickens the actor, recreating scenes from a book he had written. He was very good at playing with his audience's feelings, so when one of his characters says, “It's your Uncle Scro-o-o-o-oge!” he would draw the word out in a blood-curdling way. An American writer noticed the way he was comical one



moment, the next savage. He could make his face long, give his eyes a twinkle or roll them about, lifting his eyebrows. When he read the brutal death of Nancy in *Oliver Twist*, he acted out Bill Sikes beating her with a club, as well as Nancy's terrible struggles. Audiences were thrilled and shocked. Dickens wrote: "I should think we had ... a dozen to twenty ladies taken out stiff and rigid."



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As you can imagine, Dickens's performances exhausted him. In April 1868, while he was in the United States, he collapsed and had to cancel the rest of the tour. He came home to England, but the following January he was back on the London stage. Now, though, he had trouble pronouncing the names of the characters in his books. He was calling *Pickwick* "Picnic" or even "Peckwicks". It brought tears to people's eyes, and made Dickens cry too as he came out to thank his audience at the end of his very last show in March 1870. Here he was, only fifty-eight years old, physically and mentally a wreck.

"From these garish lights," he said, his voice shaking, "I vanish now for evermore, with a heartfelt, grateful, respectful, affec-

tionate farewell.” He left the stage, but the clapping and cheering wouldn’t stop. The audience didn’t want to say goodbye, and so he came back on, his face wet with tears. He kissed his hand, turned and was never seen in public again.

Dickens died three months later on 9 June. He was buried in Poets’ Corner in London’s Westminster Abbey, a final resting place for the best-known and best-loved writers.



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For two days, thousands of mourners filed past, throwing flowers on the coffin until the open grave was filled to overflowing. It's said that a market girl in Drury Lane, who heard that Dickens had died, said, "Dickens dead? Then will Father Christmas die too?"

But, in a way, Dickens hasn't died. Far from it. If possible, his stories have become even more popular. They've been turned into plays, films, cartoons, musicals and TV dramas and have been seen all over the world. His characters appear in adverts,

