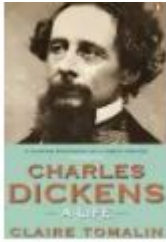


Covid-19 Book Group January



Claire Tomalin Charles Dickens: a life

Stephanie

This was a fabulous recommendation (although I was glad to have the extra month in which to read it). It was a truly scholarly and disinterested work painting a wonderfully clear picture of the life and character of Charles Dickens and also of life, both privileged and unprivileged, in England during the Victorian era. The biography portrays Charles Dickens (CD) as a brilliant and very charismatic person who was phenomenally successful as a writer in spite of his irregular education. His own father seems to have been feckless in the extreme, frequently running into debt and indeed spending time in a debtors' prison. At the age of 12 whilst his father was in prison CD was sent to work in a blacking factory which he obviously hated but responded to it with an obsessive work drive to improve both himself and the life of others suffering deprivation. The biography described CDs extraordinary character and his relationship with his family, lover and friends in detail and in doing so clarified the basis for many of CDs books which were very much based on his own life experiences.

I also much enjoyed all the details of the day-to-day life of the time. I was surprised by how much inter-national travel CD undertook travelling dozens of times a year to France and even crossing the Atlantic to do readings in the States. I loved his comments on the behaviour by members of parliament in the House (how little has changed!) and was touched by his concern for homeless women.

A very good and thought provoking read.

Anna

It has been interesting to read this book so soon after "Mrs. Robinson's Disgrace", as they are both set at a similar time, and in their different ways reveal much about the mores of Victorian Britain.

For me, Claire Tomalin's book emerges head and shoulders above the other. Both books have been diligently researched, but there is so much more to know about Dickens and his life than about Isabella, that it requires not only persistence and scholarship, but great skill and superior writing ability to draw it all together into a cohesive narrative.

She paints a picture of a complex and contradictory character: a brilliant man, convinced since childhood of his own genius and ability to succeed. He had enormous energy, and threw himself into his writing, his charitable projects, his social life with his male friends, his sex life and physical exercise, walking many miles by himself at the end of the day. All this despite having rather frail health, suffering violent, painful muscle spasms which would incapacitate him. His books made him hugely popular, and when he hit on the idea of giving readings based on the books – giving him the chance to indulge in his love of acting and the theatre – the adulation of the audiences knew no bounds.

The contradictions in his character also appear in his private life. He complained bitterly that his father and brothers could not manage their affairs, but he usually settled up their debts, and tried to find them employment. He was given to falling in love passionately, but married for domestic quiet. He thought that three children were enough, and complained when more kept on appearing – as if he had no idea why! He fussed over the children when they were small, but usually lost interest in them as they grew up. This is the man who wanted to separate from his wife when he fell in love with the young actress Ellen (Nelly) Ternan, and set about blackening his wife's character in order to maintain his public image while he kept up his clandestine affair.

Claire Tomalin gives us a short critique of his books and other works as they appear in the narrative, and does not hesitate to criticise his writing – where, for example, he strays into the melodramatic which was always a tendency with his style. However, I feel she maintains an unbiased account of his character and his actions, neither praising nor blaming. I found that Dickens had been brought to life so vividly that as the book went on he seemed more and more like a person I knew, and I ended up really disliking the man. This may seem rather back-handed as praise! But I mean it as an accolade for the biographer herself and for her thoroughly enjoyable book.

Margaret

I thoroughly enjoyed learning so many things about Charles Dickens' character that I would never have thought about by his novels. This book was well worth reading, despite its length.

Dickens used his experiences of hardship during his early life in his books and his success was due to all his hard work during adversity. Although he made money from his writing and the reading of his books to the public there were a few tricky periods when he had to borrow money and live abroad. As he aged, his earning power increased, and so too did the number of people dependent on him such as his large and feckless family.

He was generous to the under privileged but did not treat his family well, especially his wife from whom he was divorced after some years; he also had a relationship with the young actress

Nelly Ternan. However, he and his family did live in some rather splendid homes both at home and abroad. He travelled widely in his own Country as well as in Europe such as in France and Italy and he even went to America more than once. It was interesting to learn about other writers and friends who were contemporaries of his time such as Wilkie Collins, Thomas Hardy, William Thackeray and George Eliot. By the end of the book I found that despite his brilliance and generosity I did not find him a likeable person.

This was an excellent piece of work by Claire Tomalin.

William

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times“

Reading this tome of a book was rather heavy going at times but nevertheless a most enjoyable and didactic experience.

I believe that I have read all of Dickens’ novels but never his biography. The latter revealed so many fascinating elements to Dickens’ life which I presume became profiled in the legacy of his fictional characters. The text with its reflected eloquence confirmed his talent and work ethic, his ego, his extra-marital affairs and his obsession for accumulating vast mounts of money. The latter driven by the experience of his indigent father who was imprisoned for debt with its inevitable impact on the young family. With Dickens’ childhood conducted in dystopian poverty he was required to commence working in a blacking factory before he was able to embark on his literary career.

However, he rose to preeminence as a writer and as he aged, his earning power increased, and so too did the number of people dependent upon him. His large and disordered family and numerous friends suffering immiseration relied on him for financial support.

Dickens lived well and his burgeoning income enabled him live in style but at the same time he was extremely beneficent and altruistic. Perhaps a throw-back to the impact of his own impecunious upbringing. Human life at its best and at its worst in the context of the absence of any ‘official’ assistance from Victorian society.

I was unaware of his love for the stage and his penchant for acting plus his relentless schedule of the public readings of his work, the latter particularly enhancing his reputation and his income.

The text also focuses on the travails of his marriage to Catherine and his prolonged affair with the young actress Ellen ‘Nelly’ Ternan. Dickens unhappy marriage – a union that had produced ten children – and his infatuation with Nelly brought out the worst in him. His separation from Catherine was intentionally humiliating and conducted in the most cruellest manner.

By this time Dickens was prematurely ageing. Perhaps the strain of living this lie in strict Victorian society England provoked undue stress whilst endeavouring to maintain his

international reputation.

What I found so pleasing about this biography are the personal elements that emerge. The author doesn't hesitate to condemn Dickens with disapprobation when his behaviour demands it, yet the prose throughout is expressed with crafted eloquence. The extended family was extremely complicated and often generated demanding problems from which they continually turned to Dickens for resolution.

An amazing man. We should appreciate how internationally famous he was and remains today.

The horizon should beckon everyone.

PS I also enjoyed the numerous references to his association with fellow writer and contemporary Thomas Carlyle who happens to be a relative of mine. Numerous uncles, cousins and a nephew carry 'Carlyle' among their forenames. Mercifully I do not.

Jean

This is an incredibly good biography of the life of a genius, by Claire Tomalin.

The deeper I delved into the work the more compulsive I found it. I felt that I was living in, and breathing the air of the Victorian world.

The book was beautifully produced with many illustrations and ,photos of Dickens, his family and friends, and the many houses he lived in with his growing brood.

He was an inveterate traveller, a friend of the literary giants of his day; possessed with phenomenal energy and determination. He left me breathless!

His closest friend and biographer, John Forster, someone he relied upon throughout his life, was a native of my home city, Newcastle upon Tyne.

He attended the Royal Grammar School, a selective British independent school , founded in 1525 by Thomas Horsley, Mayor of Newcastle. It received its royal foundation from Queen Elizabeth 1st and is still one of the Country's top performing schools. Forster received a superior education to Dickens, and went on to study at Cambridge.

I was drawn to Dickens's liberal views and his empathy with the poor in society, but drew back when I read of his treatment of his wife, Catherine, who had borne him 10 children. She was obviously a long-suffering woman and I was shocked at the comments he made about their children not loving her and that she didn't love them. This was cruel and obviously untrue. In later years she enjoyed the company of both her children and grandchildren.

Dickens's iron will and determination, which stood him in good stead in the earlier years, somewhat clouded his later years, as his health began to deteriorate.

My father, born in 1901, had read all of Dickens's novels before his 13th birthday. I don't expect that today's generation could say the same, but most of us have read some of his novels which have lent themselves to the medium of film and television.

One of my sons has a house in Rochester and I sense Dickens's presence there. He would walk past the gravestone of the Dorrit family which stands beside the cathedral and which led to his creation of 'Little Dorrit.'

An annual Dickens festival is held in Rochester and his wish had been to be buried there rather

than in 'Poets' Corner.'

The beautiful and moving description of Dickens's dying moment will stay with me for some time.

'A long day went by. Soon after six in the evening, Dickens gave a sigh, a tear appeared in his right eye and ran down his cheek, and he stopped breathing.'

Ann

Claire Tomalin is an excellent researcher and I feel she certainly must have had difficulties collating the energetic and packed life of Dickens. The pace of his life left me breathless! All those walks, changing houses, dashing around the world (not easy in the 19th century, when travelling must have been a lot more difficult and uncomfortable than nowadays). This is all on top of fathering a number of children and writing a whole lot of successful novels. It was an interesting read, but I found it rather laborious. I got the impression that Dickens didn't really understand women and am personally not a fan of his melodramatic style of writing. His great and lifelong friend Forster brought Dickens alive when writing his Biography describing 'the passionate fullness of his nature', his charm and brilliance and also his anger and obsessiveness. He presented a genius but not a saint.

Alix

I have not finished the Dickens book but have read a lot. Am up to his separation from his wife and his relationship with Nelly. I don't want to rush the end so will go back at my leisure and finish it sometime. Found most of the book interesting. Especially his childhood and having to work from age 12 and his parents going into the Debtors Prison. All very hard and interesting how we have read about Mr Micawber and family.

I found it a bit long and so much detail but found out that he was such a hard worker when he was so young and a Court reporter etc. Also he looked after his family as his parents did not. He did charitable works and looked after the young prostitutes getting them off the streets and into a home and made sure they had clothing etc. He travelled with his family widely, France and Italy mainly and then went to America with his wife. He did not like America much. He packed an awful lot into a short life by today's standards.

Chris

I found this book a fascinating insight into the life of this extraordinary Victorian writer who relished life and made every moment matter. That is not to say he was without fault, indeed he had many - he was selfish and hurtful to an astonishing degree to those he took against, yet amazingly kind and generous towards those he felt needed help. Many people took advantage of this, his own family not least, but also treated some members of his family with appalling cruelty. A man of two personalities then, at the same time a man of vitality, charm, curiosity and generosity but very selfish in getting his own way, seeing all those around him whether family, colleagues, friends, royalty or countries as friends or foe. If you were foe you were cast off completely, without a word or a penny. But if you were a friend, and many were, then a charmed circle was yours with seriously lavish hospitality and entertainment, at his own expense,

mutually admired and loved. He enjoyed a whirlwind bachelor lifestyle despite his wife and large family, and spent a lot of time in male only company, enjoying dinners, breakfasts, theatre, music, readings etc and indeed kept a secret mistress for 12 years - and saw only disloyalty in anyone who cast any doubts on his character. His skill as a writer served a prolific output and he can only be admired for his need to bring stories of the poor and needy to public view, achieving this with little or no education but enormous drive. His dramatic writing style reflected his theatrical personality and indeed he loved performing even more than writing. Overall then a biography I really enjoyed, bringing the life and times to life, full of highs and lows, secrets and revelations.

Angela

As we had a choice between two biographies this month, I downloaded samples of them both. Initially I had thought that the one about Michael Caine would be more engaging, but I quickly changed my mind. In *Charles Dickens: A Life*, Claire Tomalin's writing is really accessible and straightforward. The book was so beautifully written, it drew you into the atmosphere of the times and her reconstruction of Dickens's life. Her work seemed to be very comprehensively researched, but this never became cumbersome as she had divided the book into sections and gave us an introduction to all the main characters at the beginning and then additional notes at the end for those readers who were interested. This meant that the central biography was able to flow and engage. I had never felt a particular interest in Dickens, but found Tomalin's portrait fascinating. Through modern eyes, Dickens came over as quite self obsessed, but I think one has to remember that he was very much a product of the times. He seemed to have very little empathy with the women in his life, in a society which was very male orientated. This was reflected in an apparent inability to write realistic female characters into his work, which I found illuminating. A very good read and I would definitely like to try her biography *Samuel Pepys: The Unequalled Self* at some time in the future.