



# The Invisible Woman

*Claire Tomalin*

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## **The Invisible Woman** Claire Tomalin

Now a major motion picture directed by Ralph Fiennes, co-starring Fiennes and Felicity Jones with Michelle Fairley, Kristin Scott Thomas, and Tom Hollander: the unforgettable story of Charles Dickens's mistress Nelly Ternan, and of the secret relationship that linked them.

When Charles Dickens and Nelly Ternan met in 1857, she was 18: a professional actress performing in his production of *The Frozen Deep*. He was 45: a literary legend, a national treasure, married with ten children. This meeting sparked a love affair that lasted over a decade, destroying Dickens's marriage and ending with Nelly's near-disappearance from the public record. In this remarkable work of biography, Claire Tomalin rescues Nelly from obscurity, not only returning the neglected actress to her rightful place in history, but also giving us a compelling and truthful account of the great Victorian novelist. Through Dickens's diaries, correspondence, address books, and photographs, Tomalin is able to reconstruct the relationship between Charles and Nelly, bringing it to vivid life. The result is a riveting literary detective story—and a portrait of a singular woman.

## **The Invisible Woman Details**

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## From Reader Review *The Invisible Woman* for online ebook

### **MJ Nicholls says**

There is no real story here—Dickens might have had sex with Nelly Ternan or he might not have. Evidence points to its likelihood but he could not have laid Nells as much as he laid his wife Catherine. You can stop reading the review at this point if the dirt is your desire. The focus here is on the life of Nelly Ternan, which for a Victorian life, is frequently interesting—if not always thrilling (the Dickens bits are the least fascinating since all the evidence as to Dickens's shenanigans were burned)—beginning with her matriarchal upbringing with her two sisters and her education on the stage. Her years as a performer in poverty are the most intriguing and full of the drudgery of this particular dark age of no education for women and having to thrive on one's merits as a stage doll to please male punters. Refreshing is Nelly's post-Dickens life: Tomalin suggests Boz was something of a choke chain (despite the financial freedom) and his death freed her into a respectable life, where she married a churchman and pretended to be twelve years younger than she was (a rather gullible churchman) and settled down to a productive life of writing and book matters, spoiling it all by becoming a Tory and an anti-suffragette. Three stars for content, four for Tomalin's telling.

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### **Chris says**

Well read audio version. There is a movie coming out, but somehow I think Dickens will look less of a bastard in it.

Well balanced in terms of looking at Dickens and Nelly. Tomlin doesn't gloss over the problems and goes into detail about the society. Well done.

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### **Gerry says**

It is no surprise to discover that Claire Tomalin's 'The Invisible Woman' won a number of awards, for it is superbly researched and superbly written.

It tells the story of actress Nelly Ternan, beginning with her life with parents and sisters and her blossoming career on the stage and ending with her life with her new husband, George Wharton Robinson, and family. But the most poignant part of her life is that inbetween these two dates when she was allegedly the mistress of Charles Dickens, who does feature frequently in her later life when details of their relationship slowly seeped out.

The relationship was kept well hidden and their meetings were nearly always clandestine although the Staplehurst train disaster very nearly blew their cover. Dickens tried to organise his later life so that he could spend as much time with Nelly as possible and went to great lengths to see that he did so, even when up north on his reading tours in that he made sure that he had regular visits back to the capital so that he would not be without her for too long at any one stretch.

Once begun the book is compulsive reading and the final chapter concerns speculation about where Dickens

actually died. Was it Gad's Hill as was widely reported and accepted or was it elsewhere? I will leave the reader to find out!

The book was so good that I actually read all the footnotes (please see one of my quotations for how much that meant to me!).

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## **booklady says**

I highly recommend Donada Peters reading of *The Invisible Woman: The Story of Nelly Ternan and Charles Dickens*. It's an excellent book anyway and her reading of it was thoroughly enjoyable.

The double biography begins by setting the Victorian context into which Ellen (Nelly) Ternan was born as a female in a family of actors. We learn about her early life, how her family became acquainted with Charles Dickens and then watch as her life seemed to disappear from history after she met him. The author, Claire Tomalin, explained how even what information as she had, was obtained, then painstakingly pieced together and looked at retrospectively. Although Tomalin avoids idle conjecture and speculation, she does offer interesting observations about Dickens' views of women which are both astute and acerbic. It's interesting but I guess I always enjoyed his stories so much I never gave much thought to the shallowness, pliability and lack of faults in most of Dickens' heroines. The others, the ones who are flawed, Dora, Estella, etc., can't ever *really* know love or peace.

After Dickens' death, Nelly makes a new life for herself while continuing the Dickensian love of deception: she lies to her new husband about growing up as a actress, misrepresenting her age by over 10 years, never mind her relationship with the most famous writer of the day. Although he never discovers the truth, when Nelly's son, Gregory learns of it after her death, in connection with her association with Dickens, he is devastated, further adding to the destruction of letters, papers and evidence which might have shed light on the years the two spent together.

Both of Nelly's two children died childless. There is circumstantial evidence that Dickens and she had a child who died shortly after being born. However this has never been proven. This year, 2012 is the 200th year of Dickens birth.

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I'm listening to the audio version of this book. As a lifelong lover of Dickens, this book is an eye-opener. Don't get me wrong *The Invisible Woman: The Story of Nelly Ternan and Charles Dickens* is not an exposé.

Claire Tomalin isn't interested in dragging Boz through the mud or settling some secret feminist agenda. She does an exceptional job of putting his life into the context of the day and revealing the existence of a woman he did his best to keep hidden from the world for the last thirteen years of his life. In fact, Nelly Ternan's life and the role she played in history has remained largely a mystery ever since Dickens' death as well, adding to his mystique, confounding his biographers and confusing readers alike.

How does this leave me – one of those devoted fans – feeling? Somewhat chagrined but as a Catholic I believe in our sinful nature as well as the redemptive power of Grace. In fact, I can well imagine Dickens' rueful realization that he—like the rest of us—hadn't lived up to his "Great Expectations", which ironically

was written not too long after he had 'fallen' for Ms. Ternan.

Perhaps more 'expectations' when I finish...

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### **Caroline says**

What a fascinating, intriguing story that was almost lost to history! This is biography of the very best kind, reconstructing Nelly Ternan's life from just snippets and fragments, portraying a life that was lived almost entirely in the shadows. It would have been a great loss to posterity had this aspect of Dickens' life being entirely obliterated, as so much effort was put into attempting.

Dickens has never been one of my favourite authors, for a multitude of reasons - so I came to this book with no real preconceived notions of the man or his work. Dickens' life itself was almost a complete blank to me, but in his day he was very much held up as the model Victorian gentlemen - honest, hardworking, industrious, generous to the poor, a paragon of domesticity. That in many respects he was no such thing should come as no surprise - these days it seems rare to come across any Victorian without some kind of dark murky secret. Such are the perils, no doubt, of an era that extolled uprightness, righteous, honour and domestic chivalry - who could ever live up to such things?

It is hard to know what to make of Dickens' relationship with Nelly Ternan, not just because there is so little real evidence and so much conjecture involved. It all smacks very much of the typical midlife crisis - a middle-aged man tiring of his middle-aged wife and family, lusting after a woman young enough to be his daughter. Indeed, there was something immensely Freudian about the relationship, on both sides. I had very little sympathy with Dickens in reading this, and an immense amount of sympathy for Nelly. It is hard to see what other options Nelly had in life, with her situation, family and background; and Dickens' treatment of his wife and the sheer mental contortions and complexities of his double life do not leave him emerging from this story with much dignity or honour.

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### **Bionic Jean says**

There is a fashion at the moment for "warts and all" biographies. The popular press delights in exposés of formerly much loved "celebrities". The more salacious the detail to be revealed, apparently, the better. And Charles Dickens would certainly fit into this group. Much loved? Certainly! Influential? Another decided Yes! But what of his private life. Does that bear scrutiny? And on that question there perhaps should be a meaningful pause.

Claire Tomalin says,

*"The rewriting of history is a central theme in this whole story, since Nelly, too, almost succeeded in her attempt ... the problem arises in people's shifting view of morality: what constitutes innocence or guilt, what makes a man or woman good or bad, who is to blame when someone is shocked or outraged, or exposed."*

It has never been a secret that Charles Dickens made his wife Catherine live apart from him, after bearing him 10 children, or that she was allowed no contact with 9 of these children. The general public were aware

of this at the time. It is a matter of conjecture whether they idolised him so much that they went along with his fantasies about the justification for such actions, or whether they simply turned a blind eye. Clearly there must be a lot more behind such behaviour by an upstanding author, one with a great social conscience; one who tirelessly campaigned for better conditions for the poor and underprivileged. There must be a reason behind the paradox. Is it our place to investigate it?

Claire Tomalin is one of our finest literary biographers, having won many awards for her earlier works. She has written scholarly biographies of Mary Wollstonecraft, Thomas Hardy, Samuel Pepys and Jane Austen. **The Invisible Woman** from 1990 attracted my attention, partly because it would have information about my favourite author, Charles Dickens, partly because it was (misleadingly) marketed as a novel, and partly because it was by a writer whose earlier books I have enjoyed, and for whom I have the greatest respect. I wondered what a novel by her would be like. And I was also interested in the woman Nelly Ternan, of whom I, in common with many readers, only knew a few facts.

I knew that Dickens's private letters had been subjected to infra-red photographic analysis in the 1950s. Beneath the crossings-out, references to Ellen Ternan were discovered. Whether or not this might constitute an invasion of privacy, I was not especially worried that Claire Tomalin's book would be inappropriate, a grubby little piece. I knew better. And don't you find that knowing something of an author's life is sometimes enlightening? To know that they were imprisoned for their beliefs, or escaped an oppressive regime, or family? Simply to visit the country, area or even the house they lived in, can sometimes cast a new light on the preoccupations, thrust and whole timbre of their work. This is what I find. So I had great hopes that this book would be both an entertaining or absorbing read, and also may even help a little in understanding the enigma that is Charles Dickens. I am sorry to say, after this long preamble, that it did neither.

The point is surely that the book is misconceived. Claire Tomalin's book **The Invisible Woman** is a literary biography. But does it really qualify as this? In part it is about Charles Dickens's relationship with a young actress, Nelly Ternan. But is the focus on Dickens or Ternan? Decidedly the latter, in this book. So what is the "hook"? For what can be our reasons for reading about the (probable) mistress of a celebrated author, if they are not prurient, as we have begun to consider. Would we really be interested in Nelly on her own account, had she not been Dickens's mistress? It is extremely doubtful. Her acting career was very brief. In fact it came to an end at the age of 21, as her fortunes rose. By that time she owned a fine four-storey house near Mornington Crescent, very probably bought by Dickens.

So what we are left with is a biography of a Victorian woman, who had a relationship with a famous man, which both they, and others at the time and since, were desperate to conceal. It certainly is an incredible story, with a lifetime's work in the obsessive attention to detail. It is as scholarly as one would expect. Every single railway ticket or mention in a letter is credited in a footnote. If you are an historian, or love reading historical biographies, you may find this fascinating. But for a general reader, this attention the minutiae is simply ... dull, and perhaps doubly so for a Dickens enthusiast. For Dickens, whatever you think of him as a human being, knew how to entertain.

Invariably Dickens imparts his information in a humorous way. His myriad of minor characters pop in and out of his pages as bright stars, enchanting us with their colour and personality. In this biography there are an equal number of minor characters; the people Tomalin credits are equally great in number. Because of the sheer weight of evidence of items bought, homes established, and seemingly endless trips made here and there, the evidence is overwhelming. And we appear to have to read every single shred of it. Only in the final chapter, where Tomalin presents an alternative to what we think we know about Dickens's death, is there no hard evidence, except for circumstantial evidence (such as the exact amount of money in his pocket, differing from his earlier withdrawal at the bank, which implied that he had spent some of it.)

*"Appearances had to be kept up",*

could be a mantra for the entire book. The first part is from a sociological and historical point of view. It describes Nelly's antecedents in great detail, both their lives and their difficulties. Her grandmother, mother, father and sisters were all all very hard-working professional actors, serious about their careers, very badly paid and never considered respectable. The father disappears from the story quite soon, a victim of the Victorian catch-all for men, the so-called "General Paralysis of the Insane" or syphilis, affecting the brain, leading to him being committed to the Bethnal Green Insane Asylum, with his family not only having to paying the expenses, but also cover up the *"dreadful and humiliating"* fact.

Often actresses were mistaken for, or grouped with, prostitutes, because the theatre itself was disreputable. Tomalin describes the acting world, how difficult and hand-to-mouth an actor's life was, and how fundamentally it was looked down on by Victorian society. No respectable person would be involved with actors and actresses. Yet the alternative for females having to make their own way in society was either to marry money, or,

*"the near-slavery of becoming a servant, seamstress or milliner."*

Tomalin scrupulously describes the hypocrisy in society; how the values expressed were never a match for what was actually happening. She also makes it clear that an actress such as Ellen Terry was very much the exception, in making her name great, and almost achieving what everyone craved at that time - what was considered to be both critical and crucial - respectability.

By the end of this section, maybe a quarter through, Nelly is three years old. It was perhaps necessary to expound on the earlier history, the ideas and facts about society, so that we should not judge the "main characters", Charles Dickens and Nelly Ternan, too harshly in the light of subsequent events. For Nelly's life, and that of her immediate family is carefully chronicled from then on, despite the fact that Nelly did not actually met Charles Dickens until 1857 when she was 18.

At the time, Nelly and her family were performing in Dickens and Wilkie Collins's production of *"The Frozen Deep"*, (which has since been all but forgotten). Charles Dickens, we know,

*"grew up in poverty and with little education, loved the theatre passionately and cherished its reliance on imagination and spontaneity, allied to discipline and self-reliance."*

He would thus greatly admire a family such as the Ternans. Yet Dickens was now 45, already the most celebrated writer in England, so the fact that he showed interest in the young actress must have seemed ... intriguing, providential, surprising ... who knows? Dickens was quite the dandy,

*"he had rather more of the Regency buck in him and less of the Victorian paterfamilias than is usually believed."*

What is clear is that Dickens's solicitous attention was flattering enough to Nelly to result in a secret love affair, one which lasted thirteen years, a time during which Dickens destroyed his marriage, cruelly rejected his wife, *"brutally and publicly"* as Tomalin says, and covered his tracks at every point he possibly could. He attempted to erase all trace of Nelly Ternan from the public record. And he very nearly managed to do so.

One diary, for 1867, escaped being destroyed, as it was in a stolen suitcase in America. It resurfaced in 1943. Nelly appears frequently in it, although she is never more than a letter "N". The diary reveals that at this

time, Dickens was spending about a third of his free time with Nelly, and often lying to everyone else about his movements. Also his bank account shows regular payments to someone called "Miss Thomas". Some of his friends were in the know, despite Dickens's best efforts. William Thackeray heard the rumours of a possible liaison with his sister-in-law, but protested to his mother,

*"No such thing - it's with an actress ... It's a fatal story for our trade."*

In the famous train crash of 1865, at Staplehurst in Kent, Dickens heroically saved the lives of several passengers. Yet it was nearly his undoing, since Nelly and her mother had been accompanying him. Dickens tried to conceal their identity, but in trying to recover Nelly's jewellery he inevitably let slip some details.

Of course there are other instances too. The task of covering up for so many years must have been well nigh impossible. Some people did not burn the letters as Dickens had begged them to. Although he had various pseudonyms, such as "*Tringham*", even across the English Channel in France, Dickens's face was well known, and people remembered it. And there was a limit to how often he could protest that he was in one place, whilst dashing to another. The pace at which he lived his life seems frenetic, even without taking account of the sheer amount of time he must have spent on setting up all the various subterfuges Tomalin details. And this central part is what has been described as a,

*"thrilling literary detective story and a deeply compassionate work".*

The facts possibly merit this description. The writing does not. It is tedious. Claire Tomalin herself has said,

*"Biographers search for traces, for evidence of activity, for signs of movement, for letters, for diaries, for photographs."*

This can be skilfully woven into a riveting biography, and indeed Tomalin has additionally written an acclaimed biography of Charles Dickens himself. But **The Invisible Woman** just seems to be a catalogue of events, without much life, which the reader slogs through - whilst perhaps becoming increasingly uneasy. It is only by remote chance that any incriminating letters survive at all. We know that Dickens's son Henry, and Ellen Ternan's son Geoffrey Robinson, both destroyed all the letters they could. Dickens himself burned any personal letters that he could find, and also destroyed his diaries at the end of every year. Since everyone involved, including all Dickens's biographers (roughly one every decade since his death) went to such great pains to conceal these facts, since his family, his descendants and his friends sometimes went through great personal difficulties to enable this, since we can gain nothing of substance by "knowing the truth" at this stage, what really is the point?

During her life, there are strong indications that Nelly bore Dickens a male child, but that it died. As Tomalin says,

*"There is too much soft evidence to be brushed aside entirely."*

Dickens the celebrity went from strength to strength. He developed public readings of his works, which became enormously important to him. The couple eloped to Boulogne, although Dickens travelled between all his homes incessantly. He also wrote two of his greatest novels during these years, "*Great Expectations*" and "*Our Mutual Friend*". He sent proofs of these to Nelly, and seems to have discussed his work with her. Yet after her busy active life as an actress, her fight for independence and respectability, she now remained hidden in France for several years, presumably now twiddling her fingers and bored out of her mind with loneliness. Dickens never acknowledged her as his companion in public. Indeed, Tomalin says,



*"He was so successful in imposing his version of what happened on the world that when, sixty years after his death, it was first publicly stated that he had kept a mistress and that she had been an actress, the British public was deeply upset and outraged."*

After Dickens's death in 1870, ironically, Nelly seems to develop into a new person. The final part of the book describes her life after Dickens's death. In 1876, she became, "*Mrs George Wharton Robinson*", having married a younger admirer, a schoolmaster. Unfortunately he turned out to be a rather dull, unambitious, disorganised person. Their fortunes went from bad to worse, but she did subsequently have two children from the marriage. None of her family knew of her close relationship with Dickens and she managed to fraudulently place her age at between 10 and 12 years younger than her actual age until after her death. This is a significant period as it almost exactly mirrors the length of time which her relationship with Dickens lasted.

Sadly her son did discover the truth - when he was older, and when his mother was dead. Not surprisingly he did not find the lies easy to accept, and just became another casualty in this sorry saga. Nelly died in 1914, her son taking her to be buried with her husband, the gravestone naming "*Ellen Wharton Robinson*", rather than her birth name, "*Ellen Lawless Ternan*". Even this inscription has become almost obliterated over time. As Claire Tomalin says,

*"From Dickens, Nelly learned how to deceive. Just as he had tricked the world by using false names and installing her as "Mrs Tringham" in the houses he shared with her, so after his death she used the simple trick of taking 10 years off her age to protect herself from questions. She reinvented herself."*

A sad story. A story with many casualties, not least Dickens himself, who not only worked himself to an early death, but also died trying to keep too many balls in the air. He said,

*"I am here, there, everywhere, nowhere."*

John Sutherland, the great Dickens scholar, has said,

*"Everyone who knew the full story of Dickens and Ternan took their knowledge, or almost all of it, to the grave. What we can gather about the relationship falls into three categories: incontrovertible facts, controversial facts, and hypotheses drawn from the facts."*

This book is admittedly probably the most well-balanced of the theorists, with virtually none of Sutherland's "*hypotheses*" until the very end part mentioned before, about the circumstances of Dickens's death. Tomalin added this after the book's first publication, when yet more evidence was forthcoming.

It has been said that this biography provides,

*"a compelling portrait of the great Victorian novelist himself."*

I personally disagree. He was a man of his time, an individual trapped within his culture and time, as we all are. We may not like what we read, for at the root of it all, this is more a story about the hypocrisy in the Victorian Age. Perhaps you want to know the story, to become immersed in the colour and personalities of the tale, but are not an historian. Perhaps you do not have an obsessive need to dot every "i" and cross every "t". Well then, on this rare occasion, I would suggest you watch the film instead. This is a faultlessly detailed chronicle, yet I am finding it difficult to rate, for the reasons I have stated. I have settled on my "default" of 3\*.

*"his adult life was lived out during a period of acute hypocrisy in these matters. The domestic virtues were loudly proclaimed, public displays of bad behaviour - such as royal princes consorting with actresses - were no longer tolerated, and while prostitution of every kind flourished, discretion, or hypocrisy was required from all but the lowest social class. Dickens's response to this hypocrisy was never simple."*

For all its attention to detail, this book still raises more questions than it answers. As early as 1939, George Bernard Shaw had his suspicions, wryly saying,

*"The facts of the case may be in bad taste. Facts often are."*

**Poor Nelly, she was not to know that fashions in sin change as much as other fashions.**

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## **Andrea Lim says**

<http://jukeboxmuse.com/2014/02/16/how...>

Usually the most I read about people's lives is casual Wikipedia surfing. Unless I'm in historian mode, biography does not float my boat.

So why did I read *The Invisible Woman*? Because I saw that it got made into a movie Ralph Fiennes is in it (duh, it's Voldemort with a beard, THAT's why). I haven't watched the movie yet. After reading the plot summary, I decided that I would make an exception for Charles Dickens' mistress and read her life story instead of going straight for the well-made period drama.

I did not know Charles Dickens had a mistress. That's really why I started reading (and the truth is out). But don't shy away from the word "mistress," because this book is not racy entertainment. This book is not a love story. This book isn't even the "sad life of a girl manipulated to believe her body is her only value" sob story. This book is an attempt to salvage the parts of Nelly Ternan's life that weren't deliberately erased by her, her family, and Dickens.

Claire Tomalin is a detective historian, first and foremost. I am kind of in awe of all the research she did, and the way she stitched all of her information together to make a coherent picture of a woman's entire life. Tomalin had a huge puzzle on her hands, with this woman of whom there is no record of but was apparently the longtime companion of one of the greatest writers of all time. Who was Nelly Ternan and why was she kept a secret? Well, I think Tomalin did an awesome job answering both questions. If anything can be said about this book, it's that Tomalin was very, very thorough. The first three chapters aren't even about Nelly; instead Tomalin goes back a couple generations and introduces us to Nelly's grandmother and her life as an actress. At first I was a little put off by the long background of theatre life and hardship, the lists of all the places Nelly's grandmother performed. But then Nelly comes into the picture as a little girl in the middle of chapter 3 and I realize how much of her childhood was onstage. In fact, she was acting it up in London until she met Dickens at 18. So yeah, those first chapters, however boring, were important.

When Tomalin finally gets to Nelly, it's funny how I didn't see the punchline coming. Nelly is the invisible woman, therefore she was made to be untraceable, and therefore there's practically no record of her. No letters from her to Dickens, no pictures of her with Dickens, no diary, no nothing. So what does Tomalin do? She writes around Nelly. She writes about her two sisters, her mother, her friends, the places Nelly travels, where she lives. Most of all, she writes about Dickens. This is where the acting history came in; a lot can be

gleaned from knowing someone's profession. Gradually, Tomalin builds the outline of Nelly's life, in the hopes that one day that outline will become a fully fleshed-out woman. Here, try this: Tomalin is Giuseppe and Nelly is her Pinocchio.

So, was Tomalin successful? Did Pinocchio become a real boy (or girl, in this context)? Yes, I think she did. Even with all the meticulous research, Tomalin understandably had to fill in a lot of holes with her own imagination. But Tomalin's imagination was very well prepared to bridge the gap and assume things that we'll probably never know (for example, whether Nelly ever had a child by Dickens. Tomalin says yes, while most others say no).

That said, I think I appreciate her detective skills more than her writing. At times, she described Nelly with such sympathy and understanding, especially during those times of educated-guessing-imaginative-gap-filling:

"However cultivated she might become, there was not much to do with her cultivation if she was destined for a life of nervous isolation."

But most of the time, Tomalin's narrative voice was restrained and carefully unbiased. So we're back to the beginning, where I wonder if biographies are really worth it if the writing never gets me emotionally attached to a character. Certainly Nelly represents a lot of historical significance, as she was proof of Dickens' hypocrisy and the rest of London society at the time. I am certainly more informed. I think Tomalin's intent in writing this biography will save me then. The last chunk of the book occurs after Dickens' death. Nelly marries and lives a totally normal life. The fact that Tomalin strove to paint a complete picture of Nelly, and not just focus on the blaring, destructive relationship with Dickens tells me why this biography was worth reading.

Musings:

~Tomalin also did a great job explaining Charles Dickens. Knowing that she's also written a biography on Dickens makes more sense. He was so fearful of separating his public and private life that Tomalin claims he literally died of exhaustion from all the traveling he had to do between his office, Nelly, and his family. It was nice to get a clear and concise understanding of the beloved author who stressed clean-cut, good/bad characters in his own novels but struggled with his own morality on the inside.

~The power of public image, my friends: Claire Tomalin attributes Nelly's disappearance from written record to Dickens' public relations people.

~Dickens isn't even one of my favorite authors; *Oliver Twist* was a little painful to read the first time, though I appreciate his sentence-shaping more after English class. But that doesn't mean his vibrant, conflicted life isn't worth knowing about.

~I said I was bored by the beginning chapters, but the ending makes up for it: Tomalin's last chapter deals with Nelly's impact on her son Geoffrey when her affair with Dickens is revealed to the public. The longevity of Nelly's life was well captured, from her great-grandmother's acting career to Geoffrey's silence on discovering his mother's hidden identity.

Jukebox: My own picture of Nelly reminds me of "The Greatest" by Cat Power.

Rating: 7 - good: would recommend, above average, has some problems but I can deal

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## **Lisa Webb says**

I found this book (read for a reading group) very hard to get into - firstly it wasn't a non-fiction subject I would have chosen, not being particularly interested in the life of Charles Dickens for one! Initially the author bombards you with information about the actors, plays etc of the era as if we, the reader, are well informed and know who and what they are. It is only when Charles enters the picture that it started to get a little more interesting and I found that I did want to find out what happened in the end. Unfortunately, despite thorough research by the author, it is mostly conjecture and supposition, choosing to attach significance to the few remaining references, letters and such like. I am sure if the book had been about Jane Austen or the Bronte sisters or other such authors then I would have been more interested and enjoyed reading about it but I just found myself bogged down with too much information that appeared to be either true or false depending on what you wanted to believe!

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## **Richard Kramer says**

It seems, on the evidence of Tomalin's heroic reanimating of a woman who was, quite consciously, erased from the memory of life, that Charles Dickens, he of the endless words and boundless talent, was as gifted at creating whole selves in his own life as he was on the page. I'm not sure that sentence would parse dramatically, but who cares? Ellen Ternan was his shadow wife, wife in all but name, his secret for many years and, thanks to zealous biographers, forgotten, wiped out, inconvenient. Until Tomalin, and some retrieved letters ... One doesn't think more or less of Dickens because of this. There was earth, air, fire, and water, and Dickens, too. But there was also this young actress who allowed herself (easily, I'm sure) to serve him, to soothe him, to be subsumed by him. Tomalin is a detective and a tireless one, following cold cases of women (with the exception of Samuel Pepys, Thomas Hardy, and Charles Dickens, notable exceptions, certainly) unjustly consigned to anonymous graves, women who greatly contributed to the achievements of the great men whose shadows they were forced to inhabit.

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## **I. Merey says**

I have an awful habit of losing books lately, the moment after I've read them. So I've also lost this book which is too bad, because there was a quote in it by Charles Dickens' daughter that I wanted to highlight. As I don't have the book, I will just have to paraphrase it. After her father's death, she said something to the effect of, she would appreciate if the media would stop making her father out to be some kind of jovial benevolent Father Christmas figure.

We know Dickens as the witty destroyer of injustices, protector of orphans, master of that dry, erudite Victorian wit-- a man who reached an immense celebrity in his own lifetime, based on his novels which highlighted the hypocrisy and injustices of the times.

Tomalin offers us a very different and fascinating view of Dickens, through a mirror whose trace has almost disappeared--her name was Ellen Ternan, an actress in a family of actresses, in an age where actresses were some of the few women in society who were able to marry, work and hold financial security, on their own terms. With his career so firmly bulwarked by respectability, Dickens could only hope to dabble in the world

of performers, who at the time, were surrounded by a stigma similar to say, independent porn performers of today (admired and sought out for what they produce, but completely disposable as examples of 'fallen' society, when it so suited).

Because of who she was (an actress, with her origins firmly rooted in a 'loose' world) and who he was (an almost deified public figure with a wife and large family), they could never officially be together. Still, the presence of one changed the course of the other's life completely.

An excellently researched book--the photos and the thorough groundwork laid to best understand Victorian England's actor class, made this the most enjoyable to me.

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## **Jennifer (JC-S) says**

‘It seemed like a good moment to start putting something on paper which might restore Nelly to visibility.’

This book, first published in 1990, is about the actress Nelly Ternan, who had a relationship with Charles Dickens from 1857 until his death in 1870. Ms Tomalin writes that Nelly Ternan ‘played a central role in the life of Charles Dickens at a time when he was perhaps the best-known man in Britain.’ While Nelly Ternan was the first person named in Charles Dickens’s will, there is very little documentary evidence of her involvement or importance in his life.

So, who is Nelly Ternan, and why was her name effectively removed from history?

Sadly it appears that none of the letters between Charles Dickens and Nelly Ternan survived. By piecing together clues found in contemporary playbills, other documents and photographs, Ms Tomalin has created a portrait of Nelly Ternan and her family. As a consequence of Ms Tomalin’s research, we also have a clearer picture of the last years of Dickens’s life, some potential insights into his writing, as well as of the times in which he lived.

The main reason that Nelly Ternan does not appear in most accounts of Charles Dickens was because he and others worked so hard to protect his image of respectable Victorian morality. After his death, Nelly Ternan kept quiet as well because of her fear of scandal and humiliation. The second reason had to do with Nelly Ternan’s origins: as an actress and as a member of an acting family, she belonged to a class of women not considered respectable. Ironically, Charles Dickens first met Nelly Ternan through his own fascination with the theatre: when her family were hired by his amateur theatrical company.

After Dickens died in 1870, Nelly Ternan married a schoolmaster with whom she had two children. Neither of these children learned of her involvement with Dickens until after her death in 1914.

Much of this biography is based on interpretation and speculation, and Ms Tomalin makes this very clear. I found this an absorbing and often sad story about the shadowy life of a woman who was a hidden part of Charles Dickens’s life.

Jennifer Cameron-Smith

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## **Claire says**

The fiction section of the library was uninspiring on Monday so I extended my usual browse to the biography section. Somehow I didn't realise a) that Charles Dickens had a mistress. b) that there was a biography about her and c) a recent film adaptation!

I think perhaps my total ignorance made the reading experience all the more enjoyable. I had a very basic knowledge of Dickens life and work, and so I was able to enjoy learning about Nelly's life, rather than having any preconceived notions of Dickens character.

The author mentions the historiography of Dickens, how his image has always been managed (starting with himself when he was alive) and how Dickens enthusiasts will rebutt even the thought of his affair with Nelly.

It was a good social history of the theatre and of the lives of women in Victorian Britain. It's also a very interesting look at the attempt to erase ones past, and oneself from history. It's amazing what Tomalin has written and "rescued" from being completely forgotten about.

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## **Rebecca Foster says**

I made the mistake of leaving this on the shelf for many years – until I'd already read Tomalin's full-length biography of Dickens – which meant that too much of the contents felt familiar, and speculative. I was particularly impatient with the first few chapters, which just fill in the backdrop with some generic information about what life was like for actors in the early nineteenth century. Still, Tomalin's project was a noble attempt to salvage what few facts we know for certain about Ternan's early life and her relationship with Dickens, and where she has to guess – that Nelly was living in France, that there was a child (or two) – she states that plainly. I enjoyed the Ralph Fiennes / Felicity Jones film.

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## **Emma Flanagan says**

I don't normally read non-fiction. Fiction is my wheelhouse, so this was a bit outside my comfort zone.

Nelly Ternan, Dickens mistress for the final 13 years of his life, is an enigma. A woman who's existence was concealed by Dickens during his lifetime, and effectively whitewashed by his estate after his death.

Tomalin's task was not an easy one, to reconstruct the life of a figure who clearly had a profound impact on Dickens, yet history and respectability would rather remained in the shadows. It is a task she manages with expert skill, piecing together a life from playbills and covert references in the few letters and papers which escaped the bonfire. She presents a woman both pulled along a path by powers and wills stronger than hers, but also a deeply resourceful woman who through everything life threw at her found a way to survive and at times thrive. Inevitably we also gain an insight into Dickens. A man of contradictions who bares little resemblance to the personal persona he wished the public to see. On the one hand he had an interest in helping "fallen women" and others in need, on the other was a man with an indomitable will who could bully those into getting what he wished, cruelly and unceremoniously separated from his wife, and took a mistress. Not exactly the personification of the respectable Victorian gentleman.

Ultimately the book raises as many questions as it tries answer. With such little information to go on, the



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## Julie says

Wow! I approached this book with some trepidation, being a nearly idolatrous Dickens fan. The most unfortunate thing about putting someone on a pedestal is that the act of doing so creates an almost irresistible urge, in others, to push the subject off. For some, there is no enjoyment in life quite like bringing a good man down. With this in mind, I was concerned that *The Invisible Woman*, justifiably or not, might lower Dickens in my esteem. Thankfully, it did not. While the book did not increase my worshipful adoration of the great writer, it did, interestingly, increase my passionate fascination for the great man – and I still think him a Great Man, mistress or no. The book offers a glimpse of Dickens as a mortal, a flesh-and-blood man torn between desire and duty; a romantic in the truest sense of the word, longing for the love of a lifetime, but intensely conflicted between the pulls of Victorian moralistic norms and truly-held Christian values on the one hand, and an unflagging yearning for love, adventure, and passion on the other; a man whose deep devotion to –and dependence on— his public forced him into living a secret double-life in order to protect his own reputation and avoid disappointing them, even if it meant invisibility and near-captivity for the woman he loved and a probably-fatal level of stress and anxiety in his own person.

But the book isn't only about Dickens; in fact, he appears in only about half of the story. The rest of the book paints a fascinating, poignant, and at times tragic picture of four unconventional women endeavoring to make tolerable lives for themselves within the unforgiving confines of Victorian England: Ellen (Nelly) Ternan, her two sisters, and their widowed mother. The story is told from a feminist perspective which derives quite naturally from the histories themselves, and not from any contrived agenda on the part of the author. The book, from start to finish, is well written, impeccably researched, restrained and candid in its handling of unavoidable speculation and logical in its advancement of reasonable inference, un-sensational and even-handed, and absolutely riveting as it explores, among other things, the impact of obsessive secrecy on generations of innocent people. One word of advice: the reader may find the book has a somewhat slow start. Trust that the first few chapters provide a necessary backdrop and that once the principals enter the stage, so to speak, the book really takes off. Stick with it and I don't think you'll be disappointed.

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## Dana Loo says

Un biografia curatissima e tra le più complicate che la Tomalin ha dovuto ricostruire dando fondo a tutte le sue capacità intuitive ed investigative, avendo a disposizione pochissimi elementi sulla vita di una donna rimasta nell'oblio, cancellata da ogni documento, lettera, testimonianza che potesse confermare la veridicità del suo legame con uno degli scrittori più famosi d'Inghilterra e non solo.

Interessantissimi i primi capitoli nei quali, attraverso la storia della famiglia matriarcale di Nelly, l'autrice fa una disamina sociale del ruolo della donna all'interno del teatro che stride enormemente con la figura classica femminile vittoriana. Una donna emancipata, che godeva di libertà impensabili, dirigeva teatri, gestiva i propri affari pubblici e privati senza nessuna interferenza maschile senza generare grossi scandali purché non oltrepassasse la soglia del perbenismo e moralismo, spesso falso, dell'epoca in cui vissero.

Una vita da nomadi, irta di sacrifici, sempre in viaggio tra una rappresentazione e l'altra, tra alti e bassi dal punto di vista professionale e finanziario, eppure di grande dignità quella della famiglia di Nelly, cresciuta insieme alle sorelle con saldi principi e una discreta cultura che approfondirono con gli anni.

L'incontro con Dickens fu favorito dalla grande passione e amore che lo scrittore inglese ebbe per il teatro. Uomo gioviale, irrequieto, intratteneva famiglia e amici con i suoi spettacoli, teneva letture pubbliche in giro



per l'Inghilterra, organizzava rappresentazioni teatrali e fu proprio grazie ad uno di questi lavori che ingaggiò le donne della famiglia Ternan che, dopo la morte del padre, si ritrovarono in gravi ristrettezze economiche. Era l'estate del 1857, lui era un uomo potente, ammirato, famosissimo e rimase imbrigliato dal candore di Nelly, dalla sua giovinezza, lui era molto maggiore di lei, tanto che lasciò la moglie e i figli in modo brusco, gettando gravi accuse contro l'innocente Katherine e cercando di arginare lo scandalo negandone ogni addebito.

Da quel momento inizia la doppia e oscura vita di Dickens che non mostrò lo stesso coraggio di Collins, il quale intratteneva e manteneva con disinvoltura due distinte famiglie con tanto di prole in barba al moralismo vittoriano. Certo lui era molto più famoso, aveva molto di più da perdere soprattutto perchè ritenuto campione delle virtù domestiche, pilastro della moralità, almeno nei suoi scritti.

Certo chi pagò di più lo scotto di questa misteriosa relazione fu senz'altro Nelly che rinunciò alla propria vita sociale, annullandosi in questo rapporto di cui si conoscono solo i contorni e non la vera portata sentimentale. Fu vero amore o mera idealizzazione?? Vedeva Dickens come un sostituto del padre, un uomo che poteva darle protezione e sicurezza?? Era una donna subdola e calcolatrice o un'innocente ragazza che sacrificò la sua giovinezza e le sue aspirazioni??

Certo che al di là di questo fumoso rapporto che durò per ben 13 anni, fino alla morte di lui, ciò che sorprende di più fu la straordinaria capacità di Nelly di costruirsi, dopo anni di buio sociale, una nuova vita, una nuova personalità, viaggiando, studiando, incontrando personalità del mondo letterario ed artistico. Sposò un uomo più giovane di lei, ebbe dei figli e tenne tutto per sè, come se quella parte della sua vita non fosse mai esistita.

Ci sarebbe molto di più da dire, personaggi da scandagliare come l'inquietante figura di Georgina Hogarth, la cognata di Dickens, le personalità poliedriche delle sorelle, la connivenza di amici e parenti che grande rilevanza ebbero in questa vicenda fino ad oggi non del tutto chiarita, la tragica figura del figlio. Un libro da leggere assolutamente!!

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## Lois says

Since Ellen Ternan, minus her connection to Charles Dickens, is not likely someone I'd have ever heard of, it seems reasonable to me that this book didn't really grab my interest until it gets into the time she met him (since I admit to reading the book only because of their connection). The section about her grandparents was a little more than I cared much about. A brief overview of the role of the actress in Victorian England would have sufficed (for me, altho others may find it more necessary to the book than I did).

The middle section, which dealt directly with Dickens' part in her (and her mother and sisters') life, was interesting to me, altho sometimes just a little too bogged down with dates and such, mostly pertaining to very routine details. This is probably because not much actual proven fact is known about the affair between "Nelly" and Dickens, and to write a whole book about them requires much speculation, as the author readily states. Dickens routinely burned all of his correspondence, and asked others to do the same, leaving many unanswered questions, especially dealing with Ternan. These questions included wondering if it really was an actual physical affair that they had. Was she directly the reason he left his wife? Did they have a child together, who died, as so many believe? Is this why she was sent abroad for a time, while he secretly visited her? Did she eventually wish to escape the life of secrecy that she was forced to lead in order to be with him? and so forth.

The third section deals with her life after Dickens has died. Nelly married, had two children, and remained close to her two sisters after her mother also died. This was interesting except that I didn't find it necessary to be given the whole plot of a book one of Nelly's sisters has written, or several pages detailing her other

sister's new life as a journalist, after leaving her husband. At first I was also curious why so much attention would be given to Nelly's son's life after she died, but when he found out for the first time (through reading some papers left to him that she hadn't destroyed) that she had been an actress and had been so closely linked to Dickens, it made sense, and brought forth even further the real secrecy and true effects of the supposed affair. Her son wondered then, if he was actually her first child, or if she'd already had another, who hadn't survived, and became quite embittered over the fact that his mother had a whole secret life he hadn't been told about. As the author states, this made him one of the most cruelly damaged in the story of Dickens and Nelly. Her own husband and both children thought that she was at least ten years younger than she was, because after Dickens died, she deducted the number of years she had been with him from the age she'd say she was.

Several early biographies of Dickens' life discreetly avoided mention of Ellen Ternan at all, and many of his acquaintances tried to keep anything they knew about her a secret, in a sort of allegiance to the great author. Only Ellen herself, plus one of Dickens' sons and one daughter spoke occasionally of the facts, and not until after her death and the deaths of all of his children did the little known story begin to come to light. Even so, nobody will ever know all of it, since very little correspondence exists to stand as proof.

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## **Carol says**

It is the true story of Dickens' longtime, clandestine affair with Nelly Ternan, who was 27 years his junior. In 1857, producer Dickens, 45, met Nelly, 18, while she was appearing in Collins' play "*The Frozen Deep*." Only a few friends of Wilkie Collins knew of this secret affair. Dickens was truly a man that everyone revered greatly.

Dickens' lust gets the better of him. He decided to change his life, and began a relationship with Nelly. Nelly's mother wanted Dickens' money. Dickens broke up his family, and everything fell apart. Unfortunately, his adult children go into different paths; the daughters side with their father, since he is their only source of income. His wife, not only lost her husband, but also her daughters, as well as her home. All this happens in a Victorian society which, was a man's world. And somehow Dickens is able to hide it from the public.

In the long run, after Dickens death, his financial support was given to Nelly. It did help her and her sisters to survive. It seems to me that this was a difficult book to write regarding the lack of information or possibly some that has been hidden away.

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