



## The Great Charles Dickens Scandal

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Charles Dickens was regarded as the great proponent of hearth and home in Victorian Britain, but in 1858 this image was nearly shattered. With the breakup of his marriage that year, rumors of a scandalous relationship he may have conducted with the young actress Ellen "Nelly" Ternan flourished. For the remaining twelve years of his life, Dickens managed to contain the gossip. After his death, surviving family members did the same. But when the author's last living son died in 1934, there was no one to discourage rampant speculation. Dramatic revelations came from every corner—over Nelly's role as Dickens's mistress, their clandestine meetings, and even about his possibly fathering an illegitimate child by her.

This book presents the most complete account of the scandal and ensuing cover-up ever published. Drawing on the author's letters and other archival sources not previously available, Dickens scholar Michael Slater investigates what Dickens did or may have done, then traces the way the scandal was elaborated over succeeding generations. Slater shows how various writers concocted outlandish yet plausible theories while newspapers and book publishers vied for sensational revelations. With its tale of intrigue and a cast of well-known figures from Thackeray and Shaw to Orwell and Edmund Wilson, this engaging book will delight not only Dickens fans but also readers who appreciate tales of mystery, cover-up, and clever detection.

## **The Great Charles Dickens Scandal Details**

Date : Published November 13th 2012 by Yale University Press (first published September 10th 2006)

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Author : Michael Slater

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## Tcook says

Have been very interested in analyzing the man vs. the literary myth but this book is too heavily concerned with Dickens's detractors and admirers rather than dealing with the man. Great for research and documentation. Very little story here however and seemed extremely repetitive.

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## Janette says

Well documented but not engaging writing.

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## Alison says

I was drawn to this book by its tabloid style headline and the fun cartoon artwork on the cover. I was expecting a light read and hoping for an entertaining account of the breakup of Charles Dickens' 20 year marriage and its aftermath, hopefully with plenty of juicy gossip thrown in.

Unfortunately, I found that the book matched the cover as little as my expectations. It is a very dense, dry read explaining how historians through the decades have unearthed various small pieces of evidence, which are quoted from at length. The end effect of this piecemeal information is a very unsatisfying and incomplete jigsaw from which no unequivocal conclusions can be drawn. The reader is simply left to make of the evidence what they will.

I found the style of the book thoroughly confusing and was simply overwhelmed by the information. I didn't know what to make of the evidence as I am not a historian, and wished the author had thrown his own opinion in and tried to convince readers to agree with him. At least then I could have decided whether to agree or disagree with his conclusions.

I was actually quite surprised by how little known evidence there is regarding Dicken's relationship with Ellen Ternan, and was impressed again by how easy it is for the rich and influential to project a public image of themselves of their own creation. Perhaps then after all the most damning evidence comes from Dickens himself in his passionate protestations of innocence and allegations of slander. I wonder if a man who truly had nothing to hide would have bothered.

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## Maggie says

This latest work from eminent Dickens scholar Michael Slater traces how the alleged relationship between Dickens and Nelly Ternan what's been investigated and represented over time. This is more of a scholarly critique than biography of Dickens and Nelly, an in-depth study of the various versions of the story and the people who published them. Presented chronologically, Slater gives special attention to the nature of the various sources and how they've been used/quoted in subsequent biographies and articles. If you are unfamiliar with many of the works investigated here (such as "Dickens and Daughter" or "This Side Idolatry"), Slater's contribution might be difficult to parse - I've read a number of the works he investigates

and still found myself sometimes lost in his analysis.

This isn't really about Dickens so much as it is about representations of Dickens, how his family and early admirers fought to protect his reputation and how, despite their efforts (or because of their efforts), this scandal was picked up and reexamined by each generation. There is something about the story of Nelly and Dickens that calls to us. Is it because it seemed so out of character for the epitome of Victorian domesticity? Or it is exactly what we expect from a paragon, his dark and seedy side? Is it because the relationship is, at its core, a love story? Slater doesn't linger on this overmuch, though he does highlight how attitudes to the story changed over time, particularly in regards to the alleged sexual nature of the relationship and possible children.

Recommended for anyone particularly interested in Dickens scholarship or the mechanics of biography.

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### **Jason Furman says**

The most thorough account one could possibly want, or even imagine, of the history of the "Great Charles Dickens Scandal"--that is his relationship with Nelly Ternan. The book doesn't tell very much about his relationship with Nelly Ternan (and contains no new information or definitive judgments about just what exactly occurred). It also has no literary criticism or attempt to understand how it affected Dickens' writing. Instead, it is a history of the various accounts of the scandal--starting with contemporary newspaper accounts (many of them in American newspapers because of the lack of libel laws), the coverup by John Forster and Dickens other friends, going through the explosion of the scandal following the death of the last of Dickens' children and the publication of the novel "This Side Idiotry," through the more careful modern accounts by scholars, papers in the Dickensian, and Claire Tomalin's popularizations.

An interesting point it makes is that for nearly a century now newspapers have been fascinated by the discovery and rediscovery of the scandal, printing sensationalist articles that attempt to take down the great British moralist and raconteur of home and hearth a peg. But that almost none of them are actually new.

Michael Slater, probably the leading Dickens scholar alive, does vast amounts of minute research, for example citing an article that appeared in 1874 in The Bangor Daily Whig and Courier and another story in 1885 in The Rocky Mountain News. Some of it is fascinating. Some of it is tedious. And sometimes it can be confusing because rather than presenting a unified account, it presents a large number of accounts--some of which have subsequently been falsified, some of which are grounded in clear evidence, and some of which are speculative and thus unproven.

If there is a hero for the book, it is a century of Dickensians--and their opponents--who have gone over layer after layer of minutia in an attempt to piece together events that will likely be permanently lost to history.

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### **June says**

I found this book really hard to follow as it goes through more than 150 years worth of letters, essays, newspaper articles, books and biographies that have been written about Charles Dickens and his private life. Did he have an affair with an actress who was much younger than him? Did they have a child who died in infancy? Did they then have another child who lived? In the end I didn't really care.

I finally thought it was going to get interesting on page 113 when Slater describes how one essay writer used infrared photography to decipher a paragraph in one of Dickens's letters that had been heavily inked out, but still there is no definitive evidence one way or the other.

One of the most bizarre things I found was that several times towards the end of the book, Slater accuses the actress of pretending to be 10 years younger than she actually was. She is said to have done this after Dickens died. Slater says that she claimed to be 26 rather than 36 when she got married.

Ho Hum. It's all pretty dry and dreary.

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### **Mary Ronan Drew says**

Michael Slater's *The Great Charles Dickens Scandal* is one of those books that tries to be both academic and popular and falls somewhere between the two. The Dickens scandal, as scholars and biographers now agree, is Dickens' love affair with the actress Ellen Ternan. It is thought he rented a house for her and it is possible they had a child together.

More shocking to me is Dickens' treatment of his wife of many years, the mother of his 10 children. . . .

To read more of my review go to my blog at:

[http://maryslibrary.typepad.com/my\\_we...](http://maryslibrary.typepad.com/my_we...)

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### **Chris says**

It's hard to rate and review a book I could not finish. Sad, but this was neither "great" nor "scandalous." It was, however, like reading an academic treatise. Before I put it down for good, Charles Dickens was already dead and it had become a listing of what various people, newspapers, journals, etc. were saying or writing about the affair Charles Dickens had with either his sister-in-law, or an actress. I honestly couldn't tell which it was.

I'm sure there is an audience for this type of book, but it wasn't me – the chance you take when you win a book on goodreads.com.

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### **Mlg says**

This very detailed, chronological account of Dickens and the actress Ellen Ternan tries to put all the pieces of their relationship together, but never quite jells. According to Dickens' daughter, he and Ellen had an illegitimate son who died. After reading this, I still couldn't figure out if they had or not. No mention is made of Ternan's reported remark "I so loathed the old man's touch" which struck me as saying a lot about their

relationship. The Dickens' family seems devoted to keeping the truth about their relationship a secret. No matter what the truth is, Dickens was a pretty horrible husband who treated his wife abominably and who loved the company of young women. Great writer, not such a great husband and father.

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### **Leslie says**

Slater's book goes into less detail about his relationship with Ellen Ternan and more about the scandal rumors and the efforts made by Dickens and those around him to suppress them. The book answers the questions: Who outside his inner circle suspected Charles Dickens had a mistress, who suspected it was Miss Ternan, when did they begin to suspect, who did what to keep the relationship a secret, for how long, and when did those efforts finally prove in vain? In that context, this was a fascinating read, showing who helped to bring the secrets to light and how they did it.

Readers who want a more detailed account of Ellen Ternan's life—before, during, and after Dickens—should read Claire Tomalin's book, *The Invisible Woman*.

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### **Lauren says**

3.5 stars.

This book gives a great succinct account of all of the reporting and documentation of the Dickens scandal, but it was not what I expected. It is not really a narrative of the scandal as it unfolded, although the use of the word "scandal" is highly appropriate and should have tipped me off. A scandal does not belong to the people involved, but rather to the public that perpetrates it. Therefore, it makes sense that this book is more a history of how the drama was reported on by journalists, resurfaced by scholars, and pieced together like evidence over decades of literary detective work. Because I am very interested in this narrative, I did enjoy the various accounts, the letters that were discovered, the painstaking research done to try to truly get to the bottom of the relationship that C.D. had with Nelly. But, this was not the narrative itself, and for good reason. As Slater points out in his epilogue, that narrative does not exist, and it most likely never will. The letters between the author and the actress were destroyed, and it seems that nobody in Dickens' inner circle was willing to spill the beans on his personal life.

This book offered some nice insight into the world of archiving, and of primary, secondary, and indeed tertiary sources of information. It was a useful history of just how hard the world has tried to unearth the beloved British writer's most cherished secret. But it favors the chain of events over the event itself, and this is why I will look to *The Invisible Woman* next, because Claire Tomalin, as even Slater points out, has gone the furthest in trying to uncover the lost narrative of Nelly.

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### **Kathleen says**

Not particularly engrossing.

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## Stacy says

I won this book as a FirstRead.

I expected this book to be about Charles Dickens, but instead it is basically about everyone who has written about Charles Dickens and his personal life. I found the book to be tedious and repetitive.

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## Wealththeow says

Twelve years before his death, at the height of his popularity, Charles Dickens separated from his wife. Various women were said to be the reason, generally either his sister-in-law Georgina Hogarth or an actress, Ellen Ternan. It was a scandal at the time, but his popularity survived it. Few of the numerous biographies that were rushed to press after his death mentioned his possible affair(s). It was only after not only his death, but the death of his last child in 1933 (many of whom devoted themselves to maintaining his image) that biographies with salacious rumors really took off. The attempt to dig up all the dirt possible on Dickens was at least partly based on a newspaper circulation war--one newspaper had just secured the rights to Dickens's last unpublished&finished work, and so all the others tried to make Dickens out to be as terrible as possible, in hopes of poisoning the well. But since there are no letters admitting to the affair, there's really no proof. The author thinks it likely that Ellen and Dickens had an affair, and possible (if not likely) that Ellen bore him a child that died early, but even now there's no way to tell one way or the other.

Slater clearly has an excellent grasp on the subject, but I found this to be a really boring book. It's not actually about Dickens at all--Dickens is just the subject that Slater's *real* subjects (the biographers, Dickensians and newspapermen of the time) were concerned with.

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## Rachel Aucoin says

A bit academic but full of interesting information about how Dickens was perceived and what it meant to the Victorian Era. Obviously there is also intriguing information about Ellen Ternan and how they would have grown close. I would recommend to anyone interested in their story and the subject.

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