



## Charles Dickens

*Claire Tomalin*

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**Charles Dickens** Claire Tomalin

**The tumultuous life of England's greatest novelist, beautifully rendered by unparalleled literary biographer Claire Tomalin.** When Charles Dickens died in 1870, *The Times* of London successfully campaigned for his burial in Westminster Abbey, the final resting place of England's kings and heroes. Thousands flocked to mourn the best recognized and loved man of nineteenth-century England. His books had made them laugh, shown them the squalor and greed of English life, and also the power of personal virtue and the strength of ordinary people. In his last years Dickens drew adoring crowds to his public appearances, had met presidents and princes, and had amassed a fortune.

Like a hero from his novels, Dickens trod a hard path to greatness. Born into a modest middle-class family, his young life was overturned when his profligate father was sent to debtors' prison and Dickens was forced into harsh and humiliating factory work. Yet through these early setbacks he developed his remarkable eye for all that was absurd, tragic, and redemptive in London life. He set out to succeed, and with extraordinary speed and energy made himself into the greatest English novelist of the century.

Years later Dickens's daughter wrote to the author George Bernard Shaw, "If you could make the public understand that my father was not a joyous, jocosely gentleman walking about the world with a plum pudding and a bowl of punch, you would greatly oblige me." Seen as the public champion of household harmony, Dickens tore his own life apart, betraying, deceiving, and breaking with friends and family while he pursued an obsessive love affair.

*Charles Dickens: A Life* gives full measure to Dickens's heroic stature-his huge virtues both as a writer and as a human being- while observing his failings in both respects with an unblinking eye. Renowned literary biographer Claire Tomalin crafts a story worthy of Dickens's own pen, a comedy that turns to tragedy as the very qualities that made him great-his indomitable energy, boldness, imagination, and showmanship-finally destroyed him. The man who emerges is one of extraordinary contradictions, whose vices and virtues were intertwined as surely as his life and his art.

## Charles Dickens Details

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# From Reader Review Charles Dickens for online ebook

## Heather says

I'm no Dickens scholar. This is the first bio of him that I've read and really the first time I've sought out information on his life story. I thought this book was well done. It struck me as a fair, honest account of his life. He was most certainly an immensely talented writer. And apparently quite the actor and reader, as well. He had a huge heart. Was a champion of the poor and a devoted friend. But, like all of us, he was flawed. Human. He was an interesting man with lots of layers. This was an informative, absorbing read. Definitely recommend.

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## Jonfaith says

**I know things about my father's character that no one else ever knew; he was not a good man, but he was not a fast man, but he was wonderful!** Katey Dickens speaking about her father.

Reading this in a relentless spree, I was helpless but to observe similarities to the recent Bob Dylan biography *Behind the Shades* I had finished just about a week ago. Despite their massive reputations, both men were guarded about their privacy, both had a number of children (19 between the pair?) and both embarked upon whirlwind tours late in life. Ms. Tomalin is fairly evenhanded in her analysis of Dickens' novels but appears undecided to a degree about his contradictions as a person. I felt likewise distanced by both the biographer's prose as well as the detailed nuances of the literary titan.

My favorite aspect of the biography was surprisingly Dickens first trip to the United States, especially his two meetings with Poe, the possibilities of such I imagine to be dizzying. I was also struck by a casual omission: when one crosses the Ohio River from Indiana to Louisville, Kentucky there is a plaque which notes that Charles Dickens once spent the night at a hotel on that site. This "flyover moment" didn't merit mention in the chapter on America. I don't find that as interesting as the fact that it is difficult to locate acknowledgement in Louisville as to its past as a hub for the slave trade.

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## MJ Nicholls says

This breakneck biography touches upon all the important events of Boz's blistering life, omitting the copious detail on his journalism covered in Michael Slater's exhaustively entertaining tome, along with too many of the pivotally opinionated rants on social reform and whatnot. Tomalin is stronger on Dickens's personal relationships, especially with women and male friends, and creates a more emotional portrait of a restless but tormented man, in comparison with Slater's love-in where Dickens is shown as a dynamo with sparks of lightning streaking from his quill, inflaming every room with his lively presence. Overly critical of many of the works, Tomalin's enthusiasm for what Dickens does seems to lag at times, whereas Slater can barely bring himself to cast aspersions over a single shopping list, but the second half of this bio establishes a truly painful tone of weariness, physical pain and melancholy, which seems more accurate for Boz's post-Catherine life: he'd lost out on true reciprocal love, and clearly his heart had been wounded beyond repair when he embarked on some of his most trenchant books. Dickens simply seems lost, aggressive and lacking the same mercurial magic of his younger years: his transformation from energetic buck to grizzled lion is much

clearer and painful with Tomalin. Detail of the Nelly affair is discussed more speculatively here, offering a more convincing case that Boz *did* consummate: Tomalin published *The Invisible Woman* about this dark part of his life in 1991. Otherwise, a serviceable, brisk bio. Given Tomalin's pedigree—several bios of major writers in under a decade—this can't be taken as an essential work, but the writing is adorable.

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### **Peter says**

There seems to be a never-ending stream of biographies on Charles Dickens. Johnson, Ackroyd, Smiley, Slater and Tomalin. I have recently read Claire Tomalin's and find it the best. Let's face it, *The life of Charles Dickens* has been effectively documented, analysed and speculated upon. Scholar upon scholar has brought their own slant, twists and insights, but the overall biography remains generally the same.

So why give Tomalin 5 stars? To me it was her style and willingness to poke around the established details of Dickens's life. I found that reading her biography was like finding a new view from a window that others have looked through before with scholarship but not the touch, the personality, the occasional surprising anecdote, speculation or even guess that both delighted and intrigued me.

Any of the great biographies will bring the reader closer to Dickens both as a person and a writer. For me, however, it is the Tomalin I would refer to most and recommend most highly to others.

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### **Ruthiella says**

Please excuse the pun, but after finishing Clare Tomalin's *Dickens, A Life* I thought, "He was the best of men, he was the worst of men." Dickens was a force of nature, almost incapable of being idle. A prodigious and talented author and champion for the poor and downtrodden and the public loved him for it. He was also a lousy husband, an indifferent father and sometimes a vindictive friend, who ascribed to the "Do as I say and not as I do" principle.

This is the first biography of Charles Dickens I've read, although I have gleaned information about his life from the introductions in the Penguin editions of those books I have read and also from Dan Simmons' enjoyable *Drood*, which is fiction, but no doubt well researched. My only quibble is that Tomalin sometimes goes into detail regarding the plot of certain books. She doesn't give everything away, and this was no big deal for books I have read or books such as *Oliver Twist*, the plot of which I have absorbed by osmosis, without ever having actually read it or seen a televised version of it ("Please sir, can I have some more?"). But she did spoil *Dombey and Son* for me. I will still read it, but I wish she hadn't revealed who dies in chapter 6.

Bottom line: *Dickens, A Life* is an excellent biography of a remarkable genius who was complicated and often unlikable. I highly recommended it for fans of inimitable Boz, who want insight on his novels and what shaped them, but if you don't like plot spoilers, you might want to read the books before dipping into this biography.

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## Maggie says

This is more of a 3.5, but certainly not a 4. Tomalin took on a great challenge - telling the story of Dickens (an oft-told tale) in a mere 400 some-odd pages. What we get is a solid overview of Dickens' life. We start with his complex and often sad childhood, the frenzy and energy of his early years, his struggle in middle age to find understanding and security, and finally the crisis of Nelly Ternan and his decline. Tomalin is particularly strong in the early chapters, her care in charting Dickens' peripatetic lifestyle and inability to stay put in one place for a few months really gives the reader the sense of his energy, all that was bubbling just below the surface and ready to explode. Her discussion of his domestic arrangements give us a Dickens who was clearly supported and tolerated by a select group of minders - his sister in law Georgy and his best friend Forester paramount in this group who tended to the somewhat mercurial Boz. She is taking on the image of "the great man" and giving us a more interesting, if certainly flawed, person.

But in the middle, there's a muddle. There's a sense that Tomalin is ticking off the boxes, touching on the novels and the major characters in his life without really delving too deeply into his motivations, feelings etc. Tomalin finds her voice again when Nelly Ternan enters the scene (I heartily recommend that everyone read *The Invisible Woman: The Story of Nelly Ternan and Charles Dickens*). But that might not be enough to make this a truly great biography. Other than a handful of pithy, penetrating asides, Tomalin really isn't saying anything new - which, in the case of Dickens, is a herculean task and not something that many people could accomplish at this point.

However, this is an excellent overview of his life and perhaps a better start for those new to Dickens than the towering tome by Peter Ackroyd or the more scholarly work by Michael Slater. Her prose remains throughout light and buoyant, with the occasional raised eyebrow, but never smirk, that makes her books a joy. But for those of us already deeply familiar with his story and his struggles, Tomalin doesn't give us much to chew on.

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## Jane says

Where I got the book: my local library.

Claire Tomalin's biography of Jane Austen has been on my bookshelf for what seems like 20 years, although the Goodreads editions roundup has 1997 as the earliest date. Whatever. I'm quite surprised, seeing how much I enjoyed that biography, that *Charles Dickens: A Life* is only the second Tomalin biography I've read.

From this very limited sample I would say that you go to Tomalin for the close-up, human portrait of your subject. In 417 pages of narrative, Tomalin displays Dickens in all his contradictions: generous yet selfish, open-handed but capable of great secretiveness, a man of enormous warmth yet able to turn ice-cold on a friend or family member once he decided he was done with them.

My strongest impression was of Dickens' vast reserves of energy; he strides about the pages as he would walk the London streets, always immersed in action, always moving. Tomalin's narrative moves forward at a fast clip, eating up the years chronologically, although there are occasional irritating bursts of foretelling (to keep us reading? As if I wouldn't.)

I would say that Tomalin comes down on the side of Catherine Dickens in the story of the couple's doomed

marriage, and on behalf of plump wives everywhere, I thank her. On the whole Dickens gets a poor rating as a husband, father, friend and even occasionally as a writer (it's certainly true that he wasn't always on top form in his books, but considering he wrote for serialization these were pretty much first drafts, an astounding thing when you think about it.)

Good bibliography and index, and lots of interesting photos including a very arresting one of the mature Dickens, clean-shaven. It is the clearest glimpse I've ever had of Dickens the businessman, and Dickens the man of susceptibility to the ladies. It's a shame they were inevitably such young ladies, but he clearly had a very Victorian ideal of womanhood and it wasn't his wife. Hmm, do you think Tomalin's sympathies were persuasive?

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### **Book Riot Community says**

An impressively readable biography that will give you so much insight into what drove Dickens to write what he did. Tomalin successfully walks a fine line: she lets Dickens be the genius that he was, but she never lets him off the hook for being a jerk (and he was often a jerk). Hero worship in biographies of "great" men and women bothers me to no end, and there's none of that here. If you know little to nothing about Dickens and just want an intro course, go here.

From Our Favorite Biographies of Dead Writers: <http://bookriot.com/2014/12/18/favori...>

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### **Tig says**

Balanced, clear, very readable and gave what I imagine is a very accurate picture of the contradictions of Dickens' character. Without fudging his more unpleasant aspects (he appears to have been a terrible father, for example: partisan, uninterested and burdened) it also stresses his immense warmth and likeability. I would have liked more quotation from his letters and diaries and perhaps slightly less detail about his huge circle of friends and how often he met with/went on holiday with/walked with someone or other. In other words, the writer's pride in her meticulous research did sometimes seem to get in the way of us getting the really in-depth portrait of the man we might have got if she had quoted his own words more often and indeed given us a bit more of her analysis of his motivations and characters; I found it fascinating when she did. Her discussion of the books was very good. There were some surprising weaknesses which a better editorial input would have cleared up: her technique of summing up at the beginning of each chapter what is to come meant there was a lot of repetition, and there was more that cannot have been intentional: twice we are told Dickens gloried in the bare mahogany-coloured legs of the women at Bordeaux, for example, and the slim appendix quoting some of his interesting letters includes two which have already had the meat of them quoted in the text: this seemed a waste. But it's unfair to carp when this was so interesting and engaging, written with a tenderness for the subject that did him justice while not denying the appalling aspects of his behaviour especially towards poor Catherine, his turned-out wife.

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## Superstine says

Nesten fem stjerner, eller, hvis jeg hadde en egen skala for biografier så ville denne ha fått fem. Lenge siden jeg har lest en klassisk biografi, - trodde faktisk jeg bare likte memoarer, men denne var rett og slett veldig god. Fikk lyst til å lese alt av Dickens med en gang (selv om jeg ikke tror at alt er like bra).

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## Jan-Maat says

This is a brisk biography that demonstrates the value of knowing and discussing the author's life in considering their written work.

Briskly pacing through the life just as Dickens walked through city and countryside, the four hundred pages of text seem slight. At every turn there was potential for Tomalin to depart the narrow path and have a digression on mesmerism or any of the people that Dickens brushed past or dealt with. These are summed up in a sentence if at all. When Edwin Landseer was mentioned I wondered if this was the painter or somebody else with the same name.

### **Monarch of the Glen, Edwin Landseer**

Writing a life of Dickens could easily turn into an encyclopaedia of mid-Victorian Britain. Tomalin avoids doing this - the Monarch of the Glen is off the beaten track so she doesn't go there. However if you do want a book that uses Dickens life as a springboard into a wider exploration of Victorian Britain: look elsewhere.

Having finished the book I felt enormously reassured that I haven't read much of the early Dickens. I did either give up on Barnaby Rudge or forget what happened from about half way through, Martin Chuzzlewit was...oh, sorry I must have dropped off there for a minute. My appreciation of the mid Dickens Bleak House and Hard Times sharpened and I'm inclined to read some more of his later works. And if I am not sure if I would return to Dickens favourite David Copperfield on account of how intensely annoying I found Dora (I think it is possibly a bad sign that I was glad when she died) and how disappointingly insipid I found his Agnes, at least I do have a sense of the ironies involved in his characterisation of the Dora-David relationship and how these characters fit more generally into Dickens' difficulties with women (difficulties isn't quite the right word, but it will have to do for now).

Tomalin gives a few pages to each of the novels and to some of the stories, giving an overview of the plot and characters but no great analysis. Again if you want a thorough discussion of Dickens' output: look elsewhere. This is a life of a Dickens. Having said that there are interesting insights - I was taken by how Dickens split his experience of parents into the Micawbers and the Murdstones in *David Copperfield*.

Likewise I was surprised to read that Dickens was a Francophile, which conflicts completely with my memory of *A Tale of Two Cities*. At one stage Dickens did complain that he felt that his readers wouldn't accept a realistic hero, the implication was that this was in regard to contemporary sexual mores, but more generally suggests that Dickens was writing with a certain audience in mind and was prepared to give his public what he thought they wanted. In the particular case of *A Tale of Two Cities* I would have been interested to see what his French translators made of it.

Tomalin describes Dickens' father as Mr Micawber yet Dickens' own habit of life as a young writer seemed no less Micawberish. Delighting in the cash flow and the fine life on credit it allowed Dickens wasn't to



achieve financial security until the publication of *Dombey and Son* when he had been writing fiction to huge public and critical acclaim and massive sales for over ten years, yet still was frequently a sixpence shy of happiness.

The impression is hard to escape that in his fiction Dickens showed a degree of self-knowledge that didn't inform his way of life. His treatment of his children could be cold, his behaviour towards his wife a role model of what not to do. The intensity and role of his male relationships coupled with his domineering attitude towards women gives insight into why so many of his leading women seem flat - they weren't allowed the space in his life to be much else unless they admired him uncritically. On the other hand he wasn't much better in his male friendships, although perhaps there was some space between drinking and tearful reunions for small differences of opinion. I wondered if Dickens could have coped had the relationship with his later biographer Forster and his wife Catherine been combined. The separation between Forster as friend and confidant on the one hand with Catherine as sexual partner (despite being a Francophile, even learning French, Dickens doesn't seem to have picked up any French Letters, as a result Mrs Dickens was regularly pregnant, and ten of the couple's children survived to adulthood) assisted Dickens to compartmentalise and control his life. Being in control, unsurprisingly perhaps given his childhood experience, comes across as of central importance to Dickens in Tomalin's account, and writing fiction is one way of being able to continually reinvent yourself and re-imagine your own life with complete power.

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### **Judy says**

This was a fascinating and comprehensive look at the life of Dickens. We learn how his own childhood, with his father's inability to manage money, which led him and the family to go to debtors' prison, also led a very young Charles Dickens to work in a "blacking factory," which made him a lifelong advocate for children's rights and for a better way to deal with the poor.

It's also easy to see in following Dickens' life how much of the personal became the professional in his writing. As a writer, I was astonished at how much writing he produced under enormous time pressure.

His personal life, including a wife and 10 children, as well as many siblings and even his parents who remained a financial drain on him, continued to add enormous financial pressure even when he had become fantastically well received and one of England's most popular writers.

Tomalin doesn't spare Dickens when it comes to his weaknesses, either, but I won't spoil that for you. If you have ever loved a Dickens book and want to know more about the man and his time, I strongly recommend this book.

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### **Mary Ronan Drew says**

Charles Dickens was a monster. I know, he spent enormous amounts of time and energy raising money for charitable causes. I know, he was sympathetic to the poor, demonstrated their plight in his books, and fought for social reform. I know, he was the most popular writer of the 19th century and his books are still read today, in part because of the vivid caricatures, those children of his fertile imagination.

But his ego was monumental. He was selfish on a scale hard to imagine, he was sarcastic about people who had done him no harm. He was almost unbelievably cruel to his wife, abandoning her after 20 years of

marriage, 10 children, and at least two miscarriages, primarily because he fell in love with an 18-year old girl and his wife, was, not surprisingly, after all those children, growing fat. He was angry at her for having so many children - his sudden hatred for her was that irrational.

He spread lies about her so fantastic most people were embarrassed for him. But if, like Thackeray, his publishers, and other formerly very close friends did not back him entirely he cut them off. His daughters were instructed to cease being friends with Thackeray's daughters and never to speak to their maternal grandmother again. At a time when he was making 10,000 to 12,000 pounds a year he offered his wife 400 pounds a year in alimony. He hired a doctor to declare her of unsound mind. The doctor would have none of it. Mrs Dickens quietly did as he asked and moved out of their house, making little complaint and maintaining her dignity. She was a lady.

Dickens was no gentleman. He dressed like the 19th century equivalent of a used car salesman and his word was about as good. He broke contracts with his various publishers many times in order to get more money for his books. He lied with facility, verbally and in print, all his life.

His sentimentality knew no bounds. When he was writing about the death of Little Nell he worked himself into a tempestuous emotional state, demanding sympathy from all his friends. When the three-year-old daughter of one of those men died and another of Dickens' friends spent days consoling the bereaved father, Dickens wrote that he found this excessive.

Claire Tomalin has done a splendid job of presenting this larger-than-life character with all his strengths and his many horrifying weaknesses. Often a biographer will fall in love with her character and excuse behavior that is inexcusable. Tomalin does not do that. She is as fair to Dickens as it's possible to be and she evaluates his work with great skill and perception (meaning she agrees with me about which books are great and which are laughably bad.)

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## **Jason Koivu says**

Oh! Now it all makes sense! Now I understand why so many of the characters in Dickens' novels seem so theatrically dramatic. Read *Charles Dickens: A Life* by Claire Tomalin and you too can unlock such mysteries as they expertly unfold in this top-notch biography!

After reading so many of his novels I figured it was high time I got to know the man behind the words. Tomalin combines his personal story with just enough historical detail while sprinkling in a compact summary and review of all of his works as each was produced when that point in time is reached in an ever-unfurling scroll upon which his life is written. Always with energy and passion the poor, unfortunate Dickens becomes the famous, benevolent Dickens, who then decays into the elderly and selectively vindictive Dickens. See how the man of the people rose to untouchable heights so high he felt free to snub the Queen, and yet remained earth-bound and ever-able to reach into the souls of the lowest of the low and play sorrowfully sweet upon their heartstrings. Finally understand what in the Dickens was going on in Dickens.

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## **F.R. says**

Charles Dickens was such an alive and energetic figure, a ball of energy who seemed to dominate and encapsulate his age; so much so that to read about his life – even these two hundred years later – is to be inspired, invigorated and somewhat dazed. For most people those heavy books alone would have been difficult to manage, let alone the reading tours, plays, charitable pursuits and overseas tours (let alone an extremely complex personal life). He was a complicated man, one who seems to have been totally overwhelming to be around (or, if we're honest, read about).

However if I was going to point a curious reader in the direction of a fantastic Dickens' biography, I would send them to Peter Ackroyd before I sent them to Claire Tomalin. Ackroyd's larger book really gives scope to the epic quality of Charles Dickens' life, and of the world around him. While Tomalin's slighter tome just feels more truncated and rushed.

The main point on which these two authors disagree (as is flagged up in Tomalin's book) is what level of intimacy existed between him and the companion of his later life – Nelly Ternan. Even though I lean more towards Tomalin's view that sexual relations existed, it's where – if you've read her earlier book, 'The Invisible Woman' – this new biography falls down. It feels like a retread of what went before, heated up and turned into something akin to gruel, so a lot less substantial than it once was.

No book about Dickens will be a dull read, but still you don't want any book about Dickens to be in too much of a hurry.

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## **Marguerite Kaye says**

I think I've read almost everything that Claire Tomalin has written and loved every one. She has the ability to make even the most dislikeable subjects fascinating, to even make some aspects of them empathetic, and that's exactly what she has done with Dickens.

I am not a fan of Dickens's work though I've read quite a bit of it. He's sentimental, he can't do women, and he's the master of coincidence. That said, some of his novels have made amazing tv or films, and I've always said that if he was writing when either of those media were invented, that's what he'd have written for. To an extent, I think this opinion is vindicated by the man's fascination for theatricals.

I first came across the personal life of Dickens in Tomalin's biography of Ellen Ternan, *The Invisible Woman*. I was appalled by him, and had no sympathy with what seemed to me his hypocritical behaviour, not only towards his wife, but towards Ellen herself. Reading a fuller life of Dickens, which Tomalin wrote at least ten years after the Ellen Ternan book, gave me a more rational view. He was without doubt a genius. He was one of the hardest working writers I've ever come across. He was a 'man's man' in that he preferred the intellectual company of men, confided in men, found his deepest friendships with men, yet ironically, his eldest son aside, it was his daughters he preferred to his sons. He was the type of man who people revered, whom his friends loved, who engendered a deep devotion in his friends that blinded them to his faults. The type of man who showed a very different character at home and to his family, who could wish his son dead, who could disown his own brothers and children - forever. A sentimental man fond of crocodile tears who

didn't attend several of his children's weddings, and who, when he separated from his wife, took the 'you're for me or agin me' attitude with everyone. He was loathsome, yet he was very much adored.

And then there is Nelly (Ellen) Ternan. The Invisible Woman of Tomalin's earlier biography, who was kept hidden away for decades and whose relationship with Dickens even now causes controversy. Was she forced into a sexual relationship with him that she didn't want? Was it even sexual? Did she love him or manipulate him? So many unanswered questions that if they could be answered would give us yet another version of Dickens to debate.

I absolutely loved this biography, even though I don't love Dickens. It didn't make me go and want to re-read any of his books, though I'm going to dig out my copy of *The Invisible Woman*. In my opinion, Claire Tomalin is one of our best working biographers. Her *Pepys* is a masterpiece, as is her book on Austen. And this one is right up there with those two. Fab.

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### **Darlene says**

I actually had very mixed feelings about reading this biography of Charles Dickens once I actually had it in my hands. I fell in love with the writings of Charles Dickens back when I was a teenager. I love the Victorian England time period. I loved the characters Dickens created... even the odious ones. I admired his superb ability to use the English language to create characters and scenes that were absolutely unforgettable to me. I think the thing that drew me to his writing was my discovery that he had this huge sense of social consciousness. He could not only see the plight of the poor.... he had an incredible ability to empathize with them. He wrote about these characters with such compassion. I was afraid of what I would find out. I have to say though that what I found through this impeccably researched book was that Dickens was indeed all of the things I had hoped he would be.... but at the same time he was exactly the opposite of what I hoped he would be. I don't wish to just list facts... you can read those for yourself. What I discovered by reading this wonderful biography is that Charles Dickens was a complex man with many contradictions in his personality. He did indeed feel compassion for the poor and mistreated in society but he often seemed to be lacking in compassion when it came to people closest to him.. his family and friends. He not only was socially conscious... he actually worked very hard to help those who were unwanted. At the same time, he seemed to easily turn his back on family members if he didn't approve of their behavior.

This book was a wonderful look at the life of Charles Dickens... starting with the time period of his grandparents and ending with several years after his death. It was well researched (as the huge bibliography demonstrates) and always interesting. The only thing I didn't like about it was that it wasn't long enough. It left me wanting more.

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### **Ben Dutton says**

It is a monumental task. To summarise a life – especially a life like Dickens' – into a 400 page volume. If anybody was up to the task, it would be Claire Tomalin, biographer extraordinaire. Her *Charles Dickens: A Life* is a rambunctious, whistle-stop tour through the life of one of Britain's – nay, the world's – greatest novelists (if not the greatest?). It takes in births, marriages, deaths, affairs, walks, and shines a light into the dirty corners of the great man's life. His affair with Nelly Ternan, his treatment of his children, the neglect

and cruelty to his ex-wife in later years – all is exposed in thrilling, page-turning prose. For those who know nothing of Dickens's life, this biography is most certainly the place to start.

Here, though, is the biography's biggest problem: A life such as Dickens's cannot be adequately summarised in just over 400 pages (417 to be precise). There are numerous moments in this biography where you wish Tomalin would just slow down, take pause, consider the true ramifications of a certain decision, or what such an affair truly meant to Dickens and to those who knew of it. Of course not all knowledge is at hand – Dickens was brutal at times to future biographers, burning letters, demanding correspondence kept by others be destroyed – and he knew in life how to protect his reputation intact. In many respects he was the proto-celebrity, a man whose every aspect of his life needed to be presented to the public in certain deliberate ways to help maintain the myth. If he were alive in the twenty-first century, it is certain Dickens would be employing the greatest PR men in the world: though it is certain his affair would have come out in the tabloid press.

Tomalin, then, has done something very admirable in her biography. She has distilled the essence of the man, laid him bare on the page, and told a cracking true story with deft skill, and with an eye on being fair, but not uncritical, to a man who deserves no less. I am sure Tomalin's biography will remain the definitive word on the man for at least a decade now, and much read: but as with Dickens, there is always more to know, and I am certain this will not be the last word on the great man.

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### •Karen• says

Claire Tomalin is a no-nonsense schoolmarm of a biographer, marshalling her facts into order and marching them across the page in seemly double crocodile lines, one two one two. A sort of Joyce Grenfell type, pleasant, but firm - George, don't do that - No, Susan, put Sydney down dear - No, Neville, you can't go home. The effect of this patting and prodding and pummelling into shape is that Dickens' life appears oddly reduced. The Slater biography gives the impression of a man constantly struggling to keep all the plates spinning at the same time, and often in danger of letting them slip, whereas Tomalin has him taking *holidays*. Slater gives details (perhaps too many for most readers) of exactly how each work was produced, how often he over- or underwrote, how many months ahead of publication he was, all the other articles, letters, speeches he was producing at the same time as his novels and stories, whereas Tomalin even occasionally just says something like he wrote a book over the next year and a half and then took a break.

Slater interprets the works, but when it comes to the man's private life he gives facts and allows readers to draw their own conclusions. Tomalin, again rather like a firm schoolmistress, knows exactly what she thinks of Mr Dickens, and is more than willing to take the readers firmly by the hand and guide them to the 'correct' conclusions, her conclusions, i.e. that he was a rotten husband and could be ruthless and cruel as well as cheerful and wonderful company, and that yes, his Nelly bore him a son, who died. There's even a theory that he may have collapsed at the home he shared with Nelly in Peckham and she had to get him back over to Gad's Hill secretly, by brougham, where he later died. A most singular idea, that is backed only by the evidence of some missing cash from his pocket. It seems to be pure speculation, and as such, you wonder why it sits there. Thanks to my GR friend Troy I was able to read the review at the LRB in which Deborah Friedell also questions the inclusion of this highly speculative alternative death scene; Tomalin's answering letters can be read here.

All in all, I think that Tomalin's assessment is very similar to the one I had already reached after reading the Slater, but I'm certainly glad I read Slater first. I like to have the feeling I've made my own mind up,

deceptive as it may be.

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## **Chrissie says**

This biography provides a clear and balanced view of Charles Dickens (1812-1870). I feel it is important to state that Dickens is not one of my favorite authors. For me his writing is too florid, his tales too melodramatic and his characters too stereotypical. I wanted to understand the man, and I was not looking for a hagiography! Balance is what I sought most and balance is what I got.

The book starts with his parents and moves forward year by year. Friends and family and all that he involved himself in are thoroughly covered. He certainly wasn't merely an author. He was an indefatigable writer, a journalist, an editor and a publisher. Active in the theater and a public reader, touring in not only England but also in Europe and twice in the States. He was an active proponent for help to the poor and needy. He set up and managed a home for destitute women in Shepherd's Bush. What he did and what he wrote are covered meticulously, year by year.

**Who** he was, his weaknesses and strengths, are covered too. He was a bad husband; there it is straight! He was charming and convivial; he could also be dictatorial and moody; he was an actor and a ham. He disliked scandal. He was filled with eager, restless energy up to his death. The book goes on to say what happens to close friends and family members after Dickens' own death.

Facts that are disputed are stated as such, with clear information explaining why the author draws the conclusions she does. There is a thorough discussion of Dickens' relationship with his mistress Ellen Lawless Ternan (1839 – 1914), known as Nelly Ternan.

I have come to understand how Dickens' writing mirrors his own life. Each book is discussed with the same balanced analysis employed in portraying the weaknesses and strengths of the man.

The audiobook is narrated by Alex Jennings. Only in the beginning was it read a bit too fast. I smiled when hearing the contrast between the American and English accents. The reading is easy to follow. I've given both the narration and the author's written text four stars!

It can be hard to get excited about balance, but that is exactly what I was looking for when I chose this biography on Charles Dickens. I got exactly what I was looking for!

ETA: I didn't give the book five stars because although it was informative, interesting and balanced I never came to care for anyone. I neither emotionally suffered nor rejoiced. Emotionally it is flat.

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