Adjudication Save As Dickens Centenary Competition 2012

Introduction
Thirty seven stories were entered this year, from as far afield as Australia and the USA. I was tremendously impressed with the high standard, and I do truly mean that. There were no redundant, 'throat-clearing' first paragraphs, no laboured explications of back story, no extraneous characters or actions, no unbelievable characters. And I think this partly reflected the fact Dickens' novels were such a clear and detailed starting point.

Thirteen of Dickens' novels were used directly and, of these, *Great Expectations* and *Oliver Twist* were the most popular. The inventiveness and imagination that went into thinking up so many different plots was staggering. These included a first person tale by Charles Dickens' illegitimate son, a hilarious conversation between three ghosts treble-booked to haunt Scrooge, a Victorian detective story, Mr Pickwick's grandmother trying out her coffin for comfort and an illiterate farmer borrowing Dickens' books from Faversham library as he fancied the librarian. There were a couple of science fiction tales and even one ingenious story told from the point of view of a cat. Some were set in Dickens' time, some in modern times, one a hundred years in the future. Some caught the Victorian idiom beautifully; others were written in a Cockney accent.

Unfortunately it is the nature of a competition that only a few entries can be shortlisted but I would say to all the entrants they can be proud of their stories. Judging proved extremely difficult and some stories that fell just short of making it on to the shortlist contained truly sublime passages.

All were well told, well-structured and coherent and there were impressive character studies. I had wondered beforehand whether 'good' or 'bad' characters would predominate: good characters are easier to 'empathize' with, but there is a dash and impact with evil characters that makes them more impressive. In the event, there were plenty of both.

Finally, the themes Dickens wrote about are universal. Love; rejection; death; poverty; greed; the cycle of ill treatment begetting ill treatment; inability to reach full potential; over-stretched, woefully inadequate or non-existent social care: all these are as relevant today as they were in Victorian Britain and gave the entries an extra dimension that made them all a joy to read.

7 Nameless by Anne Armstrong
'Nameless' is metafiction. Most novels and stories aim to create a whole world of make-believe into which they draw the reader. But in metafiction, the author keeps the reader aware of the story as artificial construct. It is almost a kind of witty in-joke between author and reader.

In 'Nameless' Mrs Joe Gargery of *Great Expectations* steps right out of the novel to address the reader directly, venting her fury at Charles Dickens for not giving her a name of her own until the next to last chapter. Without a name, she has been unable to fully develop as a character in her own right and reach any sort of potential: so, her anger throughout the novel is understandable and we should sympathize with her as it's only her way of expressing frustration at being held under.

It's a *tour de force,* almost literally given the energy of Mrs Joe Gargery's furious personality before her accident. (If you remember, Dickens describes Pip as being brought up 'by hand', using humour to soften the fact she often uses her fists or a

cane known as Tickler). It uses the device of a monologue, giving her thought processes after she's had her accident and has become a shadow of her former self. She is, in some ways, an unreliable narrator as she claims all her anger has now 'melted away'; she may no longer be able to vent it in physical terms yet is still furious inside with Dickens, her creator. The timing is clever as it puts distance between her younger violent self and now. If she had addressed the reader back when she was abusing Pip and her husband readers would have found it difficult to sympathize with her. So, a comic story about a deeply flawed character who asks for our sympathy by explaining cause and motivation.

9 Headstone by Kath Lumson
'Headstone' features Bradley Headstone from *Our Mutual Friend*. For anyone not familiar with Dickens's novel, he is one of three characters locked in a 'love triangle': both he and Eugene Wrayburn are in love with Lizzie Hexam and Headstone has been rejected in favour of Wrayburn.

The characterization is masterly. Headstone is disturbed and deeply flawed. He is one of Dickens many 'twin' or 'split' characters, characters with two distinct sides to their personality. Outwardly and by day, he is a respectable schoolmaster but the violence and obsession of his jealousy of Wrayburn, the preferred suitor, has unbalanced him.

I enjoyed this story right from the title, 'Headstone', which refers not only to the main character but also hints that his obsessive jealousy must surely end in tragedy. It's a tremendously *dramatic* story. The Victorians loved a good drama and this story plays up to that but stops just short of melodrama. Headstone is in deep trouble, both from the desperate situation he has manoeuvred himself into and because he is no longer able to hold together the two sides of his personality. It's written in the first person and comes across as stream of consciousness. It's psychologically riveting; the reader experiences with him the horror of a mind that is losing its grip on rational thought and knows it is slipping towards insanity.

The build-up of tension is masterly, aided by the device of counting his footsteps in the snow as he walks. Events will play out to their bitter end. The ending is truly shocking and packs a real punch. The reader has been swept up and carried along with the story. And then, you are suddenly alienated by his total lack of repentance and the vehemence of his last thoughts.

[Headstone has tried but failed to kill Wrayburn by drowning and plotted to frame Roger Riderhood for his crime. Riderhood knows Headstone is the real culprit and is using the information to blackmail him. The story depicts Headstone's state of mind as he walks through the snow by the Thames.]

22 Great Expectations Charles Dickens The Novel Factory by Luke Melia
This has the least direct connection to a Dickens novel of the shortlisted stories but I had to include it as it is so well-written and so incredibly funny. It's actually quite off the wall but, for me, it works on every level. It begins quoting Philip Pirrip, a.k.a. Pip, at the opening of *Great Expectations* and then, quite simply, goes its own way. A copy of *Great Expectations* has been found with several other books in the Rapti River but only the opening paragraph is legible, the remaining text having been washed away. Aditya Singh of Chitwan, Nepal, has been asked to reconstitute the novel by copying it from the Internet but decides instead to write and insert his own story. 'The Novel Factory' is remarkable for several reasons. Aditya Singh is totally believable. He is kind, intelligent, respectful, imaginative and a good student at college. He is not without ambition, he wants to write a novel about 'Nepal as

insightful and wide-ranging as *Great Expectations*. He is wholely without ego. His earnestness and naïvity (he ranks Dan Brown alongside Shakespeare as a great British writer) endear him to the reader from the outset. Luke Melia has caught his 'voice' perfectly, both his accent and speech rhythms and his slightly off-kilter grammatical constructions as he tells his tale. It is funny from start to finish, both in the small telling details that bring the narrative to glorious life and in the chaotic mishaps that befall the hero.

29 sewing glass into velvet by Hannah Morley
'sewing glass into velvet' is experimental and by far the shortest story entered. But I've shortlisted it for it's a brave attempt to push the boundaries of what constitutes a 'short story', taking a completely different approach to the concept from any other entry.

Prose, poetic prose and prose poem form a continuum and this story has much in common with poetry, while still falling into the category of prose fiction. I loved the way Hannah Morley plays with grammar and structure. There are full stops but no capital letters, not even for names. There are jump cuts between sections that are so short they are almost stanzas. The narrative is pared to the absolute minimum and yet is understandable in the elliptical way that poetry is.

'sewing glass into velvet' centres on the relationship between Louisa Gradgrind and Sissy Jupe in *Hard Times.* Louisa's father, Mr Gradgrind, advocates only 'facts' and 'calculations' at his school in Coketown. Intuition, imagination, wonder are dismissed as 'fancy'. Louisa is crushed by her father's insistence on 'facts' and yearns for a more fulfilled life. Sissy Jupe, also a pupil at Mr Gradgrind's school, is less crushed and has managed to keep a sense of wonder and enjoyment. 'sewing glass into velvet' tells the whole story in just 36 lines, putting a very different spin on Dickens' tale of repression and awakening.

[Encouraged by her father, Louisa drifts into marriage with mill-owner Josiah Bounderby, thirty years older than she is. Enter a young man, James Harthouse, who tempts her to be unfaithful but she refuses. Nevertheless, the marriage breaks down.]

32 Little Wem by Victoria Grainger
'Little Wem' is a 'Son of' story, the main character, the eponymous Little Wem, being the son of John Wemmick, clerk and bill collector of the infamous lawyer Mr Jaggers in *Great Expectations.* John Wemmick is another of Dickens' 'twin' characters, with a 'good' and a 'bad' side. His public self serving Mr Jaggers is steely hearted and sharp; his private self is as loving son to the Aged P (or Aged Parent) in his self-built house in Walworth, designed like a castle complete with moat and drawbridge, and as warm friend to Pip.

But, as I said, 'Little Wem' is a 'Son of' story. John Wemmick has just died, having himself become the aged parent, and the story is told through the eyes of his son, Little Wem. It is clearly written, well-plotted and told in three parts, echoing Dickens' method of publishing his stories in instalments. Little Wem himself is well-drawn and sympathetic and I was impressed at how he develops and moves on as the story progresses, coming to terms with his father's 'dual' personality. He faces up to the nightmares he has had since his one visit as a child to Wemmick Sr's offices, when he realized his father's public face was, as he puts it, the 'wrong' father. His visit to Jaggers in his offices is well-handled; not one word of their conversation is redundant and the description of the wily old crow of a lawyer stays in the imagination. Ultimately, 'Little Wem' offers resolution both to its hero and his old acquaintance Pip, a neat way of linking the story back to the original novel.

33 The Final Words of John Steadman by Nick Banks
'The Final Words of John Steadman' follows on from Dickens Christmas story of 1856, 'The Wreck of the Golden Mary'. In many ways it is the closest in both spirit and language to the original story of Charles Dickens, yet it rises above mere pastiche. The thing that most struck me when I read it was the language; it is, quite simply, beautifully written. Nick Banks has a real ear for Victorian rhythms, which are caught in both narrative and speech, yet it is handled with such lightness of touch it never intrudes as 'mannered' or 'overdone'. John Steadman is an elderly sailor who has been at sea all his life and has survived a shipwreck and many days in an open boat. For me, the maritime and weather references in the truly lovely imagery throughout were magical and lent real weight and credibility to the portrait of John Steadman. Consider the following description of Ravender, his old captain: 'age had loosened his pale skin so it hung like draped sails from his face'. Perfect!

Steadman is thoroughly believable, loyal, steadfast and modest and I would defy any reader not to empathize with him. This is thoroughly confident writing. The back story is worked in effectively and coherently as Steadman moves several times back in time to remember aspects of the shipwreck, each time revealing a little more information, and then comes forward again to the present. And the ending might have been written by Dickens himself: it has the authentic stamp of Victorian writing yet is modified for a modern audience so it stops short of sentimental.

37 Convert by Monique Hayes
'Convert' depicts a rehabilitated Wackford Squeers, the cruel owner and head of Dotheboys Hall school in *Nicholas Nickleby*. It's set in modern times, which gives it a slightly unsettling feel mirroring the extreme wariness with which society views a rehabilitated child abuser (and here I should say the abuse has been physical rather than sexual). It also reflects Wackford's precarious position as an outcast not yet accepted back into mainstream society.

The characterization of Wackford is masterly. Persuading a reader to both like and sympathize with a character that once was out and out wicked requires sleight of hand but Monique Hayes uses several devices to achieve this. She individualizes him by using his given name, Wackford, and present tense brings the reader in close to his thoughts and actions. Wackford is truly repentant, having long ago faced up to the cruelties he inflicted. He is a broken man, damaged by the beating Nicholas gave him, by the brutality encountered in prison and by his own conscience. He has a visible limp, externalising the price he has paid for all to see.

The interaction with Jonathan, the choirboy who wants to be a gardener, is handled with a restraint that renders it believable. Not one word between them is redundant yet the subtle shifting in their attitudes to each other, mirrored in the boy closing the physical distance between them, is crystal clear.

The tale's three-part structure is handled with confidence. The moralising authorian voice of the third section echoes the Victorian tendency to sermonize without being heavy handed. I admired the lightness of touch in handling the difficult subject of child cruelty and enjoyed the ending, which allowed the possibility of Wackford's re-acceptance into society.

Marilyn Donovan 15.9.2012