

John, Juliet. *Dickens and Mass Culture*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2011. viii, 321 pp. \$99.00.

McParland, Robert. *Charles Dickens's American Audience*. Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2010. vii, 244 pp. Cloth \$78.99. Paper \$34.99.

Dickens's 200th birthday on February 7, 2012, has been accompanied by a year-long, world-wide celebration including film screenings, theater productions, academic conferences, educational exhibits, and festivals, as well as the publication of numerous books about his life, his works, and his legacy. At least two books released just before the bicentenary of Dickens's birth deal primarily with his reception in both England and the United States. In *Dickens and Mass Culture*, Juliet John takes a comprehensive look at Dickens's relationship to popular culture from the nineteenth century to today and in *Charles Dickens's American Audience*, Robert McParland examines Dickens's tumultuous but ever-present impact on American readers. Both books situate Dickens as a literary celebrity who has had an unprecedented impact on the development of literature across multiple centuries and nations.

John begins her book with an analysis of the image of Dickens on the ten-pound note and ends with a discussion of her family trip to Dickens World, two instances that illustrate Dickens's continued importance in our commercial, industrial, and democratic cultural consciousness. John argues that this is no accident as "Dickens did his utmost to ensure that he was a cultural phenomenon or, more accurately, a mass cultural phenomenon, in life and in death" (2). Perhaps more than any other literary figure, Dickens was able to "broadcast his affinity with the 'people'" while eschewing the "the logic of politics and of class struggle for the politics of intimate publicity" (5). He pleased both the general public--appealing to upper, middle, and working classes alike--and critics, a fact that led Anthony Trollope to call him "Mr. Popular Sentiment." John points out that Dickens was unique because his appeal contained three important elements that no other author has combined as powerfully: 1) a self-consciously broad commercial appeal in the dawning age of mass cultural production; 2) a sustained impact on popular culture over the past two centuries; and, 3) a seriousness about his art that has afforded him respect as an author.

*Dickens and Mass Culture* is a broadly conceived book divided into two parts: "Dickens in his Day" and "Afterlives." Chapters 1-5 comprise Part 1 and focus on Dickens's critical reception and cultural politics, his 1842 tour of the United States, his journalism, his public readings, and the culture industry that he inspired. Part 2 shifts its focus to Dickens in film and heritage tourism. John notes that she considered writing several shorter books about discrete Dickensian cultural topics but decided that taking a more "panoramic" view was called for, given that no one had done it before. This is an admirable goal, though one that makes the book seem disjointed at times. Still, the ever-present issue of mass culture and Dickens's self-conscious relationship to it unifies the whole volume and makes for an enlightening journey that Dickens himself would enjoy.

John points out that her "aim is to explore the tensions and contradictions that attend Dickens's construction of the idea of mass culture as well as mass culture's construction of Dickens" (30). She argues that Dickens destabilized the high/low cultural binaries of Victorian critics by insisting that his work be taken seriously while also writing in a melodramatic and sentimental style that attracted the mass reading public. Likewise, since he wanted to appeal to a mass audience, his gentle social reform message was suitable because it was not too radical for the upper classes. John states that Dickens's idea of culture enabled "imaginative social mobility" while also bridging the gap "between social classes" and submerging class differences

“beneath a sense of community” (40). Dickens’s goals to both educate and entertain also served his social agenda well. Simultaneously, Dickens brilliantly marketed his own image in *Household Words* and *All the Year Round* as well as in speeches, prison visits, and advertisements for products, thus “maximizing the visibility of the Dickens brand” (50).

While America symbolized for Dickens the kind of democratic culture he thought he wanted, the experience of touring the country brought him “face-to-face (often literally) with a dystopian vision of mass culture” (76). The rampantly sensational press, the bad manners on display at every turn, his lack of privacy, and the negative response to his quest for an international copyright agreement all contributed to his disillusionment with the nation and with his own status as a cultural icon. At this point, according to John, Dickens realized that his real interest was cultural inclusivity rather than cultural democracy. Dickens hoped to save mass culture from itself by curbing its excesses, which he saw blatantly on display in America. The final chapters of Part 1 examine the ways in which Dickens’s magazines and public readings reinforced his views of culture as well as his iconic status, perpetuating a kind of “intimate publicity” that was simultaneously personal and impersonal, respectable and popular, intimate and global.

Part 2 of the book highlights the global reach of Dickens's posthumous fame. John outlines many reasons for Dickens’s “filmic appeal” from the dawn of the silent film until today, including his use of melodramatic narratives, visual language, and realistic effects to encourage a belief in his stylized realism. Dickens’s use of detail, which has often been described as photographic, creates a sense of realism despite being exaggerated. John contends that his writing style and characters “recreate the feeling of emotional innerness and intimacy” that is actually supplied by the reader. These qualities have translated well into the external medium of film. John analyzes film adaptations of Dickens novels using *Oliver Twist* as a case study. She concludes that Dickens’s transformation in film--despite some less than admirable adaptations--has, perhaps surprisingly, “aided his upward cultural mobility” while diminishing his political impact (236-237).

Dickens’s association with English national identity is the focus of the concluding chapters. John points out that the health of Dickens tourism in England is fitting, since “a heritage aesthetic is ingrained in Dickens’s novels, to which things and commodities are central” (254). Heritage tourism is as contradictory as Dickens’s own relationship to culture: it is a “nostalgic longing for an ideal of history” that “transcends commerce” while also being a “product of the industrial, commercial context of the Victorian period” that is filled with mass-produced souvenirs (252-253). While Dickens’s public image “from his day to ours has tended to repress his modernity and commercialism” while “fossilizing Dickens in an idea of the Victorian past,” John maintains that the controversial Dickens World theme park actually “reverses the dissociation of Dickens from the materialism that has accompanied his rise to ‘English iconhood’” and “foregrounds the conflict between culture and commerce that has been so important in the reception of Dickens over the years” (272-273, 285). Arguing against the onslaught of criticism about the park’s “Disneyfication” of Dickens, John insists that it productively “raises questions about the ‘real meaning’ of Dickens with more urgency than traditional literary tourism sites” (285). Dickens World is not literary, but, rather, experiential. Visitors (mostly children) are invited to enter and participate in a “Dickensy” theatrical production. John convincingly argues that the resistance of the cultural elite to Dickens World as a legitimate heritage site highlights the increasing gap between the commercial and the intellectual spheres in our culture and clashes with Dickens’s refusal to accept this gap in his

own time. John's amusing account of her family visit to the park is an aptly entertaining and educational conclusion to a very incisive and wide-ranging book.

John's book implicitly argues that Dickens is, perhaps, the author for whom public reception mattered most. Robert McParland takes up this question of reception more explicitly by exploring how Dickens's American audiences have assessed him and thereby influenced the development of literary culture in the United States. He focuses on many aspects of the reception of Dickens in the U. S., which reveal him to be a key influence on both the American reading public and American literature itself, by assembling an impressive array of responses from a range of readers and regions recorded in memoirs, letters, autobiographies, reviews, library catalogs and circulation records, reading group minutes, and publishers' archives. McParland traverses much of the same ground that John does, covering the 1842 American lecture tour, the 1867 dramatic readings, and the "afterlife" of Dickens in the early twentieth century. McParland's approach, however, is archival rather than theoretical. He sifts through hundreds of sources to compile a scholarly scrapbook of American reactions to Dickens between 1837 and 1912. While the sheer number of first-hand responses is impressive, the repetitive nature of these accounts borders on the tedious. Yet, McParland's book is valuable as a testament to the ongoing American fascination with Dickens.

Moving beyond the critical accounts of Dickens, recorded admirably in George Ford's *Dickens and His Readers* (1955), McParland shifts the focus to everyday folks who recorded their reading responses in letters and diaries, started reading groups and left behind minutes, and shared and exchanged library books. McParland argues that responses to Dickens were similar across region, race, class, and gender lines as reading Dickens was almost universally seen as "an enlivening, awakening, and emancipatory practice" (3). McParland, like John, claims that Dickens's wild success was related to his "ability to communicate effectively with his readers by suggesting a direct personal contact" despite the mass production of his fiction (31). Even during the Civil War, Dickens's novels "were a common denominator among a variety of constituencies throughout America, contributing to the conversation of democracy, even amid division" (121). Soldiers during the war read Dickens and wrote to their loved ones about his novels. Families divided by the war could relate to each other through their common experiences of Dickens. Though the nation was fractured, McParland argues that an imagined community of Dickens readers helped to maintain some common ground between the two sides.

McParland asserts that reading Dickens gave Americans a unified cultural experience that contributed to the creation of an American literary identity despite his English origins. Americans used Dickens's characters as shorthand for people they knew, thus creating new ways of seeing the society around them. The fact that much of the wide-spread access to Dickens was through cheap reprints or pirated copies of his works did not seem to make much difference to the general public, and when Dickens tried to advocate for an international copyright agreement during his 1842 tour of the country, many were dissatisfied with this focus. As newspapers of the day widely noted, Dickens's popularity in the U. S. depended heavily upon a lack of international copyright, which made his works cheap and accessible across the wide expanse of the nation. McParland traces Dickens's deals with American publishers such as Ticknor and Fields and the Harpers, made in an effort to retain some of the proceeds of his sales in the U. S. Yet publishers such as Hurd and Houghton, Appletons, and T. B. Peterson all continued to put out editions of Dickens's works without his consent. The competition among American publishers and their willingness to spend money creating entire book series around Dickens indicates his popularity and ability to bring in reliable profits.

With the publication of *American Notes for General Circulation* (1842) and *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1844), both of which depicted Americans in a negative light, McParland finds that Dickens's popularity briefly wavered. This change was compounded by negative press coverage that had "an adverse effect upon Dickens's reputation for a time" (69). Both the private and public complaints about Dickens were tinged with nationalism and a sense that the English author had transgressed a boundary that disturbed American readers. Yet McParland points out that bad sales could also have been caused by a coinciding economic recession. Regardless of the cause, later generations of Americans were more likely to recognize the accuracy of some of Dickens's critiques of their national character, and they continued buying his books, including these two questionable ones.

Dickens's resurgence of popularity was aided by his 1867 visit to America, which rekindled the excitement of readers and brought massive crowds to his public events. As McParland puts it, Dickens's theatrical readings from his works reconstructed Dickens in the public imagination. While some were disgruntled by the prices they paid to attend and their inability to hear or see Dickens because of the crowds, many were impassioned by the emotionally charged performances. McParland concludes that following the revitalization of his image, Dickens remained popular even through the turn of the century "as the gulf between 'serious' literary publications and popular fiction . . . widened" (204). The 1912 Dickens centenary inspired another spike in Dickens's sales to accompany the many enthusiastic public celebrations of his work, much as the bicentenary has today. For the past 100 years, Dickens has been an author for whom the public's affection has not waned. Both John's and McParland's book admirably begin to explain this never-ending fascination with Dickens.

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