

The Top 10 Charles Dickens Books

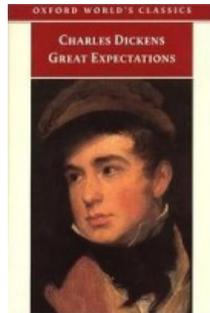
By Robert Gottlieb | Nov 30, 2012

Great Expectations: The Sons and

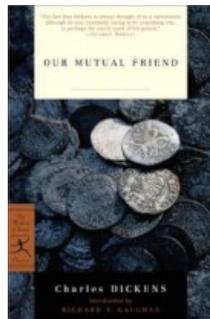
Daughters of Charles Dickens *is an outstanding biography of the writer with an eye toward his children, including the scandalous possible existence of an 11th child, born to Dickens's mistress. Robert Gottlieb, former Knopf editor, New Yorker editor, and lifelong Dickens reader, gives us the 10 best books from the master. For more on the book, check out our Q&A with Gottlieb.*

Charles Dickens left us fifteen novels, and in an ideal world everyone would read all of them. (Well, maybe not – *Barnaby Rudge* is a tired and tiresome historical novel that the young Dickens kept putting off writing until contractual obligations forced him to finish it.) His first published book was *Sketches by Boz* – a collection of short pieces that brought him considerable attention. By the time he was finished with his second book – *The Pickwick Papers*, serialized between March, 1836 and October, 1837 – he was, at twenty-five, the best-known writer in England, and such he remained until his death, at fifty-eight, in 1870. The energy, the fun, the power, the compassion of his work is unmatched in English literature, with the obvious.

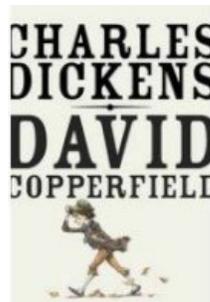
How do you rate works of genius? Partly by personal inclination, partly by accepted wisdom, partly by popularity. Perhaps his most widely known works are *A Christmas Carol* and *A Tale of Two Cities*, and both are wonderful, but they don't make my own top ten list. Instead:



1. *Great Expectations* - With its thrilling story that is also a profound look at the moral education of a boy who has been persecuted and deceived but whose essential goodness of heart eventually rescues him from snobbery and delusion. Everything is in harmony in this almost perfect novel: the character of Pip himself, and his interaction with the immense figures of the convict Magwitch, the embittered and half-mad Miss Havisham, and the beautiful, cold Estella. This is Dickens's most finely crafted book, and his most moving.



2. *Our Mutual Friend* - His final complete novel, with its vast panoply of characters, its emotional generosity, its violent drama, its rich humor – and its author's most likeable (because imperfect) heroine, Bella Wilfer. I've actually read this book aloud twice, and still find it irresistible.



3. *David Copperfield* - Of course – the book closest to Dickens's heart (it's not by accident that the hero's initials reverse Dickens's own). The first-person narrative sweeps you along, and the characters -- from the wicked Murdstones and conniving Uriah Heep to the warm-hearted if feckless Micawbers, from Aunt Betsey Trotwood, Little Em'ly, and Steerforth, her seducer and betrayer, to the stout-hearted Peggotty and the silly lovable Dora, whom David marries – are indelibly printed on our literary consciousness. (Among its greatest admirers: Tolstoy, Kafka, and Virginal Woolf.)

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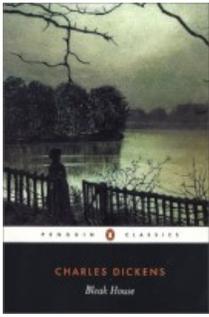
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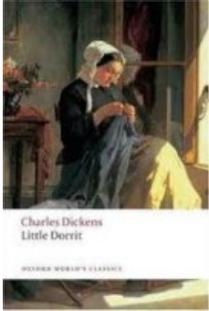
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4. *Bleak House* - With its vastly complicated plot and its immense cast of characters swirling around the case of Jarndyce vs. Jarndyce that has been grinding away in the Court of Chancery for decades, *Bleak House* is for many readers Dickens's greatest novel. An assault on the legal system, a satire on foolish philanthropy, a gripping melodrama, and an interesting use of point of view (told in both the third and first persons), it is a perpetual fascination.



5. *Little Dorrit* - In some ways Dickens's most personal if not autobiographical novel, it has an autumnal quality, given its aging hero and quiet, staunch heroine. Its central characters not only prevail but mature, and its situations – even its comedy – resonate for its readers in countless affecting ways.

6. *Oliver Twist* - With its larger-than-life villainies and its endless excitements, is the perfect book to begin with. Who will ever forget the supremely wicked Fagin who co-opts homeless boys into a life of crime, the murderous Bill Sikes, the brave young Oliver himself, however idealized? No wonder it had such an immense triumph as successor to the benign and lovable Pickwick!

7. *Nicholas Nickleby* - Perhaps the most high-spirited of all Dickens's novels, yet also a grim, devastating attack on the Yorkshire schools to which unwanted children were dispatched. The comically radiant picaresque adventures of young Nicholas with the Crummles traveling theatrical troupe provide a wonderful contrast to the tragedy of the boy Smike, the saddest victim of the Squeers family who run the unspeakable school called Dotheboys Hall.

8. *Dombey and Son* - A powerful tragedy of a distant, cold businessman who comes to realize too late the value of his worthy daughter, Florence, after the death of his beloved son, Paul – Dickens's most famous death scene after that of the famous Little Nell of *The Old Curiosity Shop*.

9. *The Pickwick Papers* - And, yes, *Pickwick* itself – not quite a novel (it started out as a series of sketches to be illustrated) but filled with glorious characters – the benign, naïve Pickwick himself, his cockney valet Sam Weller (who steals the book; the Sancho Panza to Pickwick's Don Quixote), the rascally Jingle – and hilarious episodes like Pickwick's trial for breach of promise. The most decisive debut in English fiction.

10. *The Selected Letters of Charles Dickens* - Finally, not a work of fiction but the recently published *The Selected Letters of Charles Dickens*, edited by Jenny Hartley from the twelve volumes of the monumental Pilgrim Edition of Dickens's correspondence. Here you find in Dickens the man, all the fun, acuity, sensitivity, and tough realism that characterize Dickens the supreme novelist.

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Ellen Gunderson Traylor

A Christmas Carol, Tale of Two Cities, David Copperfield and Great Expectations: my favorites! How about you?

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How many have you read?

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Mena Mohamed

I read all Charles Dickens books and am just 12 years

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Jan Davis

Menatalla Mohamed Khamis

Hello. We are in CPe Coral Florida. How wonderful that you have read all Charles Dickens books!

We are deciding on a summer read for a 12 year old granddaughter who is visiting from Austin, Texas. Which book would you recommend for a 12 yr old girl? Thanks you. Andra

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Sue Slator

Christmas Carol, Pickwick Papers and Great Expectations..most read of 3..Christmas Carol.

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Trish Bosch

David Copperfield is dearest to my heart and Little Nell (character--Old Curiosity Shop). Pickwick Papers and Bleak House and Tale of Two Cities are ones I give as gifts, often, depending on the recipient. I believe I have read all the novels, except the Mystery of Edwin Drood, though I would have to revisit Martin Chuzzlewit.

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William Adair

you know you can get all of his books on line, free, on Gutenberg?

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Michael Greco

Heh heh thank you for first mention I have seen of Martin Chuzzlewit? Such a humorous name, gets stuck in the front of the mouth, Pecksniff is an absurd prig in a most Dickensian way but I am stalled at page 200, needing to come back to it. Serves me for not starting at Copperfield or Bleak House!

Like · Reply · 1 · 4y



David Hamilton

A Christmas Carol, Oliver Twist, Nicholas Nickleby, Great Expectations... those are my favourites.

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Abanoub Boles

Nice books

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Lillian Dabney

Reading this list gives me chills! I must say, though that I'm one of those that rate Bleak House as number one. Thanks for the excitement of revisiting the works of Charles Dickens.

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Elena Leal Santiago

I love Bleak House, Our Mutual Friend and Little Dorrit

Like · Reply · 3 · 7y



Paul Schlitz

exactly my top tier too!

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Sean Doolan

David Copperfield

Great Expectations

A Christmas Carol

Oliver Twist

Nicholas Nickleby

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Vivian Zuluaga Papp

My favorite is Oliver Twist. I teach it every other semester.

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