

BEN'S NOTES

A TALE OF TWO CITIES BY CHARLES DICKENS



**Third
Thursday**
Book Club

CHARLES DICKENS' A TALE OF TWO CITIES

Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*¹ is rarely considered the best of his novels. Most commentators and critics consider the novel uneven, less character-driven than plot-driven, melodramatic. But the reason that *A Tale of Two Cities* carries as much weight as *David Copperfield* or *Great Expectations* is because it captures better than any other novel the rage and risk of revolution. Without flinching from the causes of the French Revolution or the shortcomings of contemporary England, Dickens draws a sharp contrast between the city of civilization and gradual change – London – and the uncontrollable sea of wrath represented by Paris, where the only religion is blood and safety can only be found in the mob.

The chief distinction between the two cities, Dickens makes clear, is a simple one: religion. That distinction lies behind the contrast between Sydney Carton and Madame Defarge. Carton is one of Dickens' greatest creations: a man laid low by his own incapacity to control his appetites or his future, but who finds redemption through Christian, selfless love, going to the guillotine to redeem his soul. And Madame Defarge's atheistic, indefatigable hatred makes her perhaps Dickens' greatest villain: a woman driven by desire for revenge so strong it obliterates all limits, both personal and political.

CHARLES DICKENS: A SHORT BIOGRAPHY

Charles Dickens was born February 7, 1812, in Portsea Island, Hampshire, and grew up in Kent and London. His father was a clerk in the Navy Pay Office; he also had a bad habit of running up debts he could not pay. When Dickens was 12, his father was placed in debtors' prison; so was Dickens' mother, Elizabeth, and some of his younger siblings. Dickens himself was boarded with family friends, but took a job as a pot-labeler for boot black. When Dickens' father received an inheritance that freed him from debtors' prison, Dickens' own mother apparently objected to him leaving the boot-blackening factory.

Dickens subsequently took a variety of jobs: at a law office, as a freelance reporter covering the court system, and then as a journalist covering Parliament. His first major hit as a writer came in 1836, when the 24-year-old Dickens wrote a series of stories known as *The Pickwick Papers*. His character Sam Weller became perhaps the most famous figure in mass literature.

That same year, Dickens married Catherine Thomson Hogarth; the next year he launched *Oliver Twist* as a serial. This was followed by *Nicholas Nickleby*, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, and *Barnaby Rudge*. All appeared as a series of stories; only later were they compiled into full books. In 1843, he published *A Christmas Carol*; in 1849, *David Copperfield*; in 1852, *Bleak House*; in 1854, *Hard Times*.

By 1857, however, Dickens had entered a tumultuous period in his life. He had worked with the great author Wilkie Collins on a play titled *The Frozen Deep*, which centered on a man who gave up his life so that his friend could be with the woman they both loved. During the production of that play, Dickens, 45, fell in love with 18-year-old Ellen Ternan and decided to leave his wife. Catherine never saw him again.

This was, however, a massively creative period for Dickens. In 1859, he released *A Tale of Two Cities*; in 1861, he released *Great Expectations*. An inveterate traveler and an indefatigable writer, Dickens spent the rest of his life writing and giving public readings, to extraordinary acclaim. In 1870, Dickens suffered a stroke; he died on June 9, and was buried in Poets' Corner at Westminster Abbey.

In politics, Dickens was a liberal; he thought seriously of running for Parliament against the Tories, whom he felt were too ensconced in Victorian class distinctions. In religion, Dickens was non-sectarian, although he was deeply Christian. His reputation as a novelist was waxed and waned and waxed again. Today, it is safe to say that Dickens is generally regarded as the greatest English writer outside of William Shakespeare.

THE ROOTS OF REVOLUTION

A Tale of Two Cities, like much of Dickens' work, is a piece of social commentary masquerading as a piece of fiction. The difference between *Two Cities* and other Dickens' works is

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