

Charles Dickens

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What's the book about?

- 1 What books by Charles Dickens do you know? Put the letters next to the book titles.

- a I have heard of the book.
- b I have read the book.
- c I have seen a film of the book.
- d I haven't heard of it.

Can you add other books to the list?

<i>Oliver Twist</i>	
<i>A Christmas Carol</i>	
<i>David Copperfield</i>	
<i>Great Expectations</i>	

- 2 Talk to another student who knows the same story as you. What is the story about? What did you like about it? What did it tell you about life in the writer's time?

12 What happens first?

Look at the words in *italics> on pages 1 and 5 and the pictures in Chapters 1 and 2. What do you think? Write the correct words in the sentences.*

- 1 Charles Dickens was born in the

1700s 1800s 1900s

- 2 Dickens was born in

England the US Ireland

- 3 Dickens's parents had problems with

their marriage money their children

- 4 When he was young, Dickens had to work in

a school a prison a factory

- 5 Dickens's first book was mostly about

London country life rich people

The School of Life

*Suddenly life became harder. For the first time,
Charles began to understand the family's money problems.*

Charles Dickens was forty-three in February, 1855. After a birthday dinner with friends, he decided to walk home through the snow. His walk took him past a large house called Gad's Hill Place. Dickens knew this house from years before. When he was only a boy, he walked past the same house, near Chatham in the south of England, with his father. Now the adult Dickens remembered his father's words: 'If you work hard, one day you can live in a house like that.' To the young boy, the big, expensive house seemed like a dream.

But Dickens *did* work very hard and now he was rich and famous; he was the most popular writer in Britain. He decided something that cold February night – to buy Gad's Hill Place. Two years later, Dickens and his family moved in to the house. The young boy's dream was now real.

Not all of Dickens's memories of his early life were happy. Those years were often hard, but they helped to shape the adult writer.

Charles John Huffam Dickens was born in 1812 near Portsmouth on the south coast of England. His father, John, worked in an office. It was not a bad job, but John had a terrible weakness. He liked to spend more than he earned.

The Dickens family never stayed in one place for very long. Sometimes they left because John Dickens was not able to pay his **debts**. The family's money problems were made worse by the number of children. Charles had one older sister, Fanny. After Charles was born, his parents had six more children. There were six more mouths to feed.



Charles Dickens in his 40s

debt /det/ (n) borrowed money that you must pay back

Charles was five when the family moved to Chatham, a busy town on the coast. This was the happiest time for him. His father had a new job and the family was able to live comfortably in a nice house. Charles loved to walk around the town with his father. The family were able to pay someone to look after the children now. Charles loved to hear stories from their nurse, Mary Weller. She did not always tell the young boy pleasant stories; Mary preferred stories of blood and murder! Much later, Dickens thought that his interest in the darker side of life came from his nurse and her stories.

Charles's mother, Elizabeth, taught him to read. Then he and his sister Fanny were sent to a local 'school' – a room over a shop where an old lady taught a few children reading and writing. Charles was small and often ill, so he could not always play outside with other children. Soon he was reading as many books as he could. He also began to write his own stories. Sometimes his parents took him to the theatre. The boy lived in a world of stories, and he loved them all.

But John Dickens's money problems did not go away. In the Chatham years, he continued to spend too much and often borrowed money from friends or relatives. In 1821 the family moved to a smaller house. Then John Dickens's job was moved to London, and he was paid less money. At the age of ten, Charles moved with his family into a small house in Camden Town, just outside the city of London.

Suddenly life became harder. For the first time, Charles began to understand the family's money problems. Sometimes they had to sell their furniture, clothes and even books. They had no money to send Charles to school now. But they continued to send his sister Fanny to an expensive school.

With much more free time, Charles began to walk alone through the streets of London and by the River Thames. This was a time of great change in Britain.

New factories, railways and machines were changing British life for ever. The old ways were disappearing fast. More and more people were moving from the country to the cities for work. London was soon the biggest city in the world, but life was not easy for the poor there. They worked long hours in dangerous jobs at the new factories. Often more than one family lived in the same small house. Some people had no home or food; they lived on the streets and asked strangers for food or money. Some of them stole. The city was a strange, new world for young Charles. He often returned to this world in his **novels**.

At home, the Dickens family's money problems grew worse and worse. Charles's mother Elizabeth tried to earn some money by opening a school. Not one pupil came and the school failed.

...his time, a friend of the family, John Lamert, suggested a new idea. Lamert worked in a factory where black boot **polish** was made. He offered Charles a job at the factory. And so, two days after his twelfth birthday, Charles started work at a dirty, old factory by the river.

Six days a week, he walked more than five kilometres to reach the factory. Then he worked for ten and a half boring hours, putting the company's name on pots of boot polish. It was not unusual for children to have jobs like this in the 1820s. But Charles had bigger hopes for his future. The other boys were poor and most of them could not read. Some were **orphans**. They were kind to Dickens, but he hated every second of the job. He knew that he was different from the others.

What's in a name?

Charles's best friend at the factory was an older boy called Bob Fagin. When Charles was ill at the factory, Fagin helped him. Later Dickens used the name Fagin for one of the **characters** in *Oliver Twist*. In that novel, Fagin taught children to become street thieves. Perhaps Dickens used the name for this character because his time at the factory was one of his worst memories.



This picture from Life of Dickens by the writer's friend John Forster shows Dickens's feelings about the boot polish factory.

Ten days after Charles began this job, his father was sent to Marshalsea Prison, south of the River Thames. This was a special prison for people who could not pay their debts. It was different from other prisons – John Dickens continued

polish /'pɒlɪʃ/ (n) something used to shine shoes

orphan /'ɔːfən/ (n) a child whose parents are dead

character /'kærɪktə/ (n) a fictional person in a book, play or film

Charles Dickens

Paul Shipton

British English
Original

Charles Dickens is one of Britain's greatest writers. His novels have been popular around the world for more than 150 years. Through his writing he fought for better conditions for children and the poor, but most of all he is remembered today for his wonderful stories and his unforgettable characters.

Number of words (excluding activities): 13,439

Series Editors: Jocelyn Potter and Andy Hopkins

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ISBN 978-1-4058-5211-1



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