

No better time for a Dickens celebration

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Illustration by Scott Woods

Consider it a tale of two centuries.

Charles Dickens, one of the 19th Century's most popular writers, found himself abandoned by scholars for nearly 100 years. Considered less important than contemporaries *Gustave Flaubert*, *George Eliot* and *Thomas Hardy*, he found himself relegated to a less-serious shelf occupied by serial writers with little to say about a world outside their own. Popularly known for *Oliver Twist* and *A Christmas Carol*, his works were seen as 'loose baggy monsters' that championed sick-faced children through two-dimensional characters and frayed plots.

But today, in the days of the Occupy Movement, his tales of class, inequality and struggle have forced more than editorialists to dust off the term *Dickensian* as he gains new audiences outside the high school classroom and a second look from scholars.

And all just in time for the literary master's 200th birthday on Feb. 7.

Christopher Keep, Faculty of English professor, has wrestled with Dickens for years.

Keep, who teaches many of the author's works, sees the rekindled appreciation for Dickens stemming from a number of angles – the interconnectivity of the world he describes mirroring our own, his sense of his moment, even his rekindling of Christmas cheer. But it's the revisiting Dickens as a political thinker, he argues, that has made him more relevant to scholars today than any other aspect.

"As literary criticism has turned to understand art has political dimensions, that it's not a failing of art to be political, but it's as much a part of art as formal artistry, Dickens has come back into his own," Keep said.

Literature toward political ends was seen as stuck in its time, and not aspiring for the timelessness of 'true art.' That type of thinking was difficult for a writer like Dickens to overcome.

"He is very much a writer of his period, who wrote for his period. He has specific reforms in mind," Keep said. "He is very specific about wanting to work toward these particular ends. Perhaps that desire for very specific political ends within a very specific moment made Dickens seem to be of his moment, and unable to transcend that."

But today, Keep nods to the forward-thinking nature of Dickens merging art and politics, as unseen at his time as it is overtly prevalent in ours.

Take the world of *Little Dorrit*, a satire focused on the world of debtor's prisons, more specifically on Marshalsea where the Dickens' father had been imprisoned. Dickens is a novelist with immense sympathy for the working class, though he himself is middle class. But when his father was imprisoned, young Dickens was forced to work in a blacking shop, pasting labels onto boot shellac. Those conditions forced on the boy shaped the man.

“It left a fundamental mark on his person and his literature,” Keep said.

In *Dorrit*, Dickens reflects on that time and paints a familiar world – of struggling families and Ponzi schemes – very much like the one we live in today.

“These finances are as precarious as our finances. This is a culture that is premised on an inequity of wealth in which there are vast disproportions of those who have and those who have not. Dickens’ world is very much a world of the one and the 99. Dickens’ world is a world in which that disparity, that inequity is the fundamental truth of industrial capitalism. Whatever else might be true of it, that is its principle, subjective truth,” Keep said.

Dickens would develop the politically minded reformist novel, a unique pursuit of the time. “Dickens as a political thinker,” Keep said, “as a political artist makes him feel much more contemporary than those writers who tried to quietly step away from or paste over the larger political problems of the age.

“Perhaps it reflects our better understanding of what art can do, what art should do, what the novel could do, what the novel should do. And Dickens was very much ahead of his time.”

If he were writing today, Keep sees Dickens working on multi-part television dramas – like on HBO. But he also thinks comics might hold a temptation for the man who worked hand-in-hand with his illustrator.

“The Dickensian world is a visual world, not a psychological world or an intensely interior world, but a world of surfaces and appearance and the monstrosity and confusion of the world,” Keep said. “In the same way the graphic novel struggles for a kind of artistic status, to be treated as a serious work of art, that’s what Dickens did for the novel, a form nobody cared much for, the bastard child of drama and verse. He would see that same challenge in the graphic novel.”

All in all, scholars couldn’t have picked a better time to find relevance in Dickens.

“It is quite clear Dickens time has come,” Keep said. “Again.”