
A scathing review by a twenty-two-year old Henry James has dogged Charles Dickens’s *Our Mutual Friend* since 1865. Writing weeks after the appearance of its final installment, James dismissed Dickens’s last novel as his “poorest” work. By opening with the scornful critique of one who would go on to become another literary great, Grass sets the stakes high for his own efforts: he is out to prove Henry James wrong. With this book, the results of rigorous and probing research recounted in energetic prose and with captivating storytelling, Grass fully succeeds.

Grass offers his publishing history on *Our Mutual Friend* as a contribution to the novel’s “ongoing critical reassessment.” Grass delights in the increasing attention *Our Mutual Friend* has received in recent decades after much neglect – this is, after all, one of the few amid Dickens’s literary output to have not benefitted from a major film adaptation. Grass provides a welcome tool for the novel’s reappraisal by telling the story of how *Our Mutual Friend* came to be, creatively and commercially, and how it has been evaluated ever since its publication in 1864–65.

Grass begins with an engaging biographical overview of the upheavals in Dickens’s life in the years leading up to and during the serial publication of *Our Mutual Friend*. We start with the horrific Staplehurst railway crash, from which Dickens emerged unscathed but deeply traumatized. *Our Mutual Friend* is directly implicated, as not only did Dickens pick his way across the wreckage of destroyed carriages and bodies to retrieve the manuscript for chapter sixteen from his overcoat pocket, but its dark events possibly contributed to the sombre tone of what would be his final novel. Grass tells how Dickens met Ellen Ternan, and how his violent infatuation with her not only energized the writer, but also led to the dissolution of so much he had seemingly held dear, from his long marriage and cozy home life, to numerous friendships and working relationships. Changes abounded in Dickens’s professional life too, as he threw himself into the role of a celebrity writer, embarking on whirlwind reading tours and obsessing over ticket revenues. Around this time, Dickens also launched and fully funded a new magazine, *All the Year Round*, that would become the major platform for his work and the work of others, Wilkie Collins included, and which would drive the changes in the writing and publishing activities of his last years.
Grass grapples with the original manuscript at the Morgan Library and the book’s first proofs in the Berg Collection at the New York Public Library in an attempt to reconstruct the difficulties Dickens had in writing *Our Mutual Friend*. He lays bare the complications Dickens experienced in the overwriting and underwriting of its monthly installments, issues that had not affected him previously, but that directly contributed to the development of certain characters and story elements. Grass draws attention to how the proofs at the Berg – especially the lesser known “Copy 4” – reveal Dickens’s active engagement with the novel’s illustrations and wrapper design. The later chapters explore the book’s contemporary critical reception – this was mostly positive; only four of the forty-one reviews, James's included, were overwhelmingly negative – and contextualize this reception in light of broader trends in how Dickens was being discussed at the time. Grass considers how the book’s intense and expensive marketing campaign, unusual for its time, might have led to unreasonable expectations for a runaway literary success. Along with comparisons to the sales of previously published Dickens novels and other literary works appearing around the same period, larger economic and social factors are explored – from the American Civil War to crises in the book and printing trade – all of which might help explain why this particular novel was tagged a failure, and why this impression has persisted over time.

Grass’s genuine appreciation for Dickens’s last novel is felt throughout this book, which is what makes it such an enjoyable read. Despite Grass’s evident interest in Dickens and his work, he maintains a healthy skepticism towards Dickens the man, and in no way offers answers or excuses for some of Dickens’s more questionable personal and professional behaviour. In his efforts to illuminate the context of everything from *Our Mutual Friend’s* creative genesis to its later lacklustre reputation, Grass succeeds in creating real drama around its writing and publication. The result is not only a valuable argument for the novel’s reappraisal, but an engrossing retelling of Dickens’s later years, as well as an excellent scholarly contribution to the history of publishing and the book trade in Victorian England.

Despite the exhaustive nature of this work, there were moments where Grass could have delved deeper. For instance, Dickens’s creativity is repeatedly referred to as an important resource in solving his writing problems respecting *Our Mutual Friend*, but what is meant by this creativity and creative problem solving is left vague. This somewhat weakens Grass’s overall ambition for this book – to
restore Dickens’s credibility as a creative writer who was not losing his edge during the writing of his last novel, as suggested by Henry James. Lack of clarity was sometimes an issue elsewhere; this reader was left fairly muddled during the textual study in the second chapter, with its dizzying references to proof and manuscript pages, which was disappointing considering Grass’s valiant attempt to trace Dickens’s creative efforts through the book’s composition.

Grass ends his book with a rich trove of appendices, which include all of Our Mutual Friend’s Victorian reviews, newspaper coverage of the Staplehurst incident, and an exhaustive bibliography. By illuminating the context around the writing, publishing, and reception of this novel, Grass succeeds in providing a rich resource towards the growing scholarship on Dickens’s final work, and more than drowns out the harsh words of a young American critic that have too often dwarfed the book itself.

PAMELA CASEY

McGill University, School of Information Studies


This book is a real treat: a well-written publishing history, it is meticulously researched, full of new details about the books we know, and follows a lively narrative. It takes a sociology-of-the-text approach that fits its subject perfectly, remaining as sensitive to childhood and cultural change as it is to the evolution of the texts.

Like all good stories it opens by setting the scene: “On a beautiful summer’s day in a tranquil Oxford, Charles Dodgson, Robson [sic, for Robinson] Duckworth, and three of their young friends rowed up the River Thames” (1). The tale told that day in 1862 that would eventually become Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland does not survive; as Jaques and Giddens emphasize, it was a live event, spontaneous, adventurous, and performative, as different from the fixed, textual, and historical nature of publishing history as it is possible to be. Yet the life of the text, its survival over 150 years, its perennial freshness, and the many genres and media into which it has so easily moved, indicate a vitality that transcends time and cultural change. Jaques