

The 2009 Dickens Universe

The 29th annual Dickens Universe was held at Kresge College at UC Santa Cruz August 1 through 8, 2009. More than 200 people attended to discuss *David Copperfield*: approximately 40 faculty members, 50 graduate students, and 120 members of the public. The Universe has worked with *David Copperfield* twice before: in 1983 and in 1997, when the novel was paired with *Pride and Prejudice*.

Many of the discussions throughout the week tried to answer the question posed in the novel's first sentence: Who, indeed, is the hero of David Copperfield's life? Is it David, or is it one of the other characters? Or is it David's creator, Charles Dickens? Meanwhile, the Dickens Universe itself is searching for a "hero," as the University of California has responded to state budget cuts by cutting off all funding to the Dickens Project, which presents the Universe and a number of other events throughout the year. If the Universe is to continue, it will have to raise money from other venues, through either grants or donations from its participants, or both.

For many years, a separate weekend conference was held immediately following the Universe, with a different set of speakers and a Victorian studies topic related to the Universe's selected novel for the year. In recent years, that conference was changed to a symposium, and it was further changed this year to what has been christened a "Collaboratory," a new format that allows scholars who are members of schools that participate in the Dickens Project consortium to share their ongoing work. Three new schools have recently joined that consortium: Royal Holloway University of London, the University of New England in Australia, and the University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

Faculty and graduate students arrived in Santa Cruz on Saturday afternoon for dinner and orientation, and began their seminars and other meetings on Sunday morning. On Sunday afternoon general participants began to arrive, and one important event was the 3:00 meeting of the board of directors of the Friends of the Dickens Project, a group that takes the challenge of fundraising to ensure the future of the Universe seriously.

On Sunday evening, the first lecture of the week was presented as Bob Patten, currently on sabbatical from Rice University, presented “Higgledy-Piggledy: Illustration, Memory, and Text in *David Copperfield*.” This lecture set the tone for the week as it focused on the novel’s illustrations, often seen, Patten said, as “auxiliary” to the text. Hablot K. Browne (“Phiz”) did 41 drawings for *David Copperfield*, and modern editions often include only up to eight of those. (The edition recommended to Universe participant was the latest Penguin Classics paperback edition, which contains all of the illustrations.) However, Patten argued, Dickens meant Phiz’s drawings to be “integral parts of a composite project.” While authors such as Henry James considered illustrations competition with their writing, Dickens, Patten said, saw the pictures and text as what today would be considered a “multimedia production.” In fact, Patten argued, some of the pictures give the reader insight into how David’s childhood memories have been filtered through the narrator’s adult “psychic screen.” The picture titled “I return to the Doctor’s after the party” (below), which shows young David almost as an intruder, at the side, witnessing the young Annie’s confession to her older husband, is an example. The young David cannot know, Patten said, what he is seeing. Thus the illustration, like others in the novel, may offer the reader a view of the story that is not actually related in the text. The picture titled “Our pew at church” (right), for example, may contain a grown David in the foreground, creating a scene the very young

David would obviously never have seen. After the evening lectures, film versions of *David Copperfield* were screened: 1935, directed by George Cukor, and the 1999 BBC version.

On Monday morning the week got underway, with 8:30 sessions led by five faculty members: Tricia Lootens of the University of Georgia; Gerhard Joseph of Lehman College, CUNY; Jeffrey Spear of NYU, and the team of Elizabeth Hale and Jennifer McDonnell of the University of New England in New South Wales, Australia. We were happy to be included in Gerhard Joseph's group, which spent the week discussing character, gender, shame, guilt, and other concepts as related to the novel, its main character, and its narrator.

After a break for coffee, the Monday morning lecture was preceded by the introduction of the two high school essay-contest winners, Larissa Walder of West High School in Madison, Wisconsin, and Ben Gittleson of Henry W. Grady High School in Atlanta, Georgia. Each year, two high school students are selected based on their essays, and the students and their instructors win a trip to the Dickens Universe. Ben Gittleson's instructor, Scott Stephens, is a returnee, having had a student win the contest in 2007. Amy Keyes, Larissa Walder's instructor, now resides in Santa Cruz and was on hand for the week. The high school scholarships are made possible by donors Anne Bay and her family, and by Rivkah Yerushalmi. These exceptional student essays are available for your perusal at http://dickens.ucsc.edu/high_school/highschool_archive.html.

Monday morning's 9:45 lecture was delivered by Rob Polhemus of Stanford University and offered a thesis that was debated throughout the week. Moving from the starting point of the week's discussion of illustration and other peripheries to the novel itself, Polhemus took the conversation a step further and argued that Victorian artist Richard Dadd had *David Copperfield* in mind when he painted his nine-year project titled "The Fairy Feller's

Master-Stroke,” now at the Tate Gallery in London, from 1855 to 1864. Dadd was a patient at Bethlem Royal Hospital, or Bedlam, at the time he painted the work, having been committed for murdering his father. Polhemus cited the copper-colored field studded with daisies on which the intricate painting is set, and he identified several of the small fairy-like figures on the canvas as characters in the novel, most specifically Mr. Dick, who accounts for the other half of Polhemus’s argument. His paper was titled “Dickens’s Master Stroke: *David Copperfield*, The Tower of Babley, and the ‘Fairy Feller,’” and he focused on Mr. Dick’s real name, Mr. Richard Babley, as a connection to another work of art, Pieter Bruegel the Elder’s Renaissance work, “The Tower of Babel.” A text like *David Copperfield*, Polhemus argued, “has no end of meanings,” and no other novel “ties its dialogue so blatantly and exuberantly to the Babel effect”; witness the dialogue of Micawber, Uriah, Dora, and others. It is, Polhemus said, both a Tower of Babel story and a fairy story.

Afternoon Activities

After the morning lectures, attendees broke into hour-long workshops led by graduate students. After lunch, conference afternoons offered a rich variety of activities: high school teachers’ workshops, faculty-led graduate student seminars, and seminars for non-affiliated scholars. These groups broke for a Victorian Tea each afternoon at 3:00. The teas, sponsored by the Friends of the Dickens Project, offered hot, freshly brewed Earl Grey tea and a ginger-tea punch, real china teacups, a silver tea service, and homemade cookies. Always a popular event, the teas this year served an important function in making the Friends of the Dickens Project, and their task of raising money to support the Project, visible.

After tea, various faculty members presented talks. These talks offer a forum for papers

and ideas that are related to Dickens or Victorian literature but not geared to the year's novel. This year's afternoon talks covered a variety of topics. Monday afternoon's talk, "The Other Side of the Dickensian Child: The Split Child Figures of the Late Forties," was delivered by Galia Benziman of UCSC. On Tuesday, Dickens Project Founding Director Murray Baumgarten, who also, with Peter Kenez, holds the Neufeld-Levin Chair in Holocaust Studies and is Co-Director of the Center for Jewish Studies at UCSC, spoke on "Neither Exile Nor Homeland: Inventing English Jewish Writing and Culture." On Wednesday, Maria Cristina Paganoni of the University of Milan delivered a paper titled, "Fiction as Cyberspace, Cyberspace as Fiction: Dickens and New Media." Graduate student presentation and pedagogy workshops were also held in the afternoons.

On Monday evening, Universe souvenirs in the form of T-shirts, books, and sundries were offered for sale outside the Kresge Town Hall while attendees enjoyed post-prandial potations served by graduate students and perused the silent auction items offered by the Friends of the Dickens Project as part of its fundraising campaign. To start the evening's proceedings, John Jordan announced that the Project Faculty would match up to \$30,000 in donations made during Universe week (the estimated cost to keep the Project running without university funds is \$60,000 per year). UCSC's Dean of Humanities George Van Den Abbeele and Chancellor George Blumenthal visited Kresge Town Hall Monday evening, and Van Den Abbeele spoke briefly to attendees, pledging his support of what he called a "high quality program" and saying that his office is "planning to do what we can on our end to make this happen, and we will make it happen."

The Geography of the Novel

Monday evening's speaker, Rosemarie Bodenheimer of Boston College, unfortunately

could not attend the Universe, so her paper, titled “Copperfield’s Geographies,” was presented by Carolyn Williams of Rutgers University. Bodenheimer continued the week’s theme of discussing elements surrounding the novel by exploring the geography of *David Copperfield*, a topic in her new book about Dickensian London. Her paper pointed out that although *David Copperfield* largely takes place in Yarmouth, Canterbury, and Highgate, without the “urban vision” present in novels such as *Dombey and Son* and *Bleak House*, the young David never seems lost when he is in London; he is never in real danger. In fact the novel makes fun of the city’s dangers in Aunt Betsey’s fear of it. Also, Bodenheimer has mapped David’s geographic movements and compared them to those of the Dickens family itself. David “moves gradually toward his personal memory sites as the novel proceeds,” she said. As David’s story moves him upward and away from painful memories, Dickens himself moves back into the past. For example, Bodenheimer said, the Micawbers’ residence just before they sail for Australia is the site of the blacking factory where Dickens worked as a child. David’s family ends up, as did Dickens’s family, in a London household.

Tuesday morning’s speaker was Andrew Miller of Indiana University, with a paper titled “Not Forthcoming,” a reference to David’s sister, the unborn Betsey Trotwood Copperfield. This novel, Miller said, is “crowded with characters not present”—the dead, the imagined. Thus *David Copperfield* is designed “to evoke and understand these lives we have not led,” Miller said. Marriage is one version of these “unrealized possibilities,” in Ham and Emily, David Sr. and Clara Copperfield, Annie and Jack. “Only by acknowledging that another marriage might have been possible can Annie explain to her husband,” Miller said. Individual identity is something else that is potentially “not forthcoming.” At the “sides” of any life, he said, is everything that did not happen to us, that we did not do. Thus this

narrative is one of uncertain identity, even from the opening sentence. These questions about what is not forthcoming in the novel all bear on the readers' experience, unifying characters and readers.

After the morning speaker, Tuesday's events proceeded as before, with graduate student workshops, lunch at College Eight, the variety of meetings following lunch, then the Victorian Teas and the afternoon talk. The Santa Cruz weather was cooler than usual, with some autumn-like winds in the redwoods. On Tuesday evening, Leah Price of Harvard University gave a talk she said had won the faculty prize for the shortest paper title: "Speed." Another work that explored elements that surround the novel, Price's paper focused on the function of stenography, reading, and writing in the novel and in the Victorian era. Lecturing and note taking, she said, create a very old, common scene, being replicated in the Kresge Town Hall as she spoke. She noted Dickens's own distance from taking notes as a court reporter to having others take notes on what he said as a lecturer. In addition, Dickens's books, including *David Copperfield*, were used in several shorthand textbooks, some of which Price displayed. Given the fascination with taking and reading notes, however, the "self-made reader," she said, is a Victorian myth. Although books, paper, and writing exist in the novel, reading is not at the forefront in *David Copperfield*. The Murdstones, for example, handle rather than read books; the Micawbers destroy David's innocence by forcing him to find out what books, like the ones belonging to his father, are really worth.

Time and Tenses

Wednesday morning's speaker was Rebecca Stern of the University of South Carolina, and she spoke on "David Copperfield's Times." She noted that the preface to *David*

Copperfield is one of the shortest in the canon; Dickens says only that he is not far enough away from the book to write the preface. David himself is posthumous as well as premature, a contradiction in tenses, as it were. And past, present, and future are mixed in paragraphs and episodes throughout the novel, Stern said. David resolves immediately not to meander, but his “narrative control is endangered by memory.” His recollection of the fowls in the yard at his mother’s home is in the present tense; the scene where, in his drunken state, he sees Agnes at the theater in London, uses the present participle: “Agnes, sitting on the seat before me...”. These are examples of what Stern called “seasick grammars,” which take place throughout the book. The “structure of regret” is also present in the novel, she said, using retrospective emotion to color memory. This structural prolepsis, she argued, “invites the mind to work in two directions at once.”

As has been the practice in recent years, Wednesday evening was kept free so that attendees could choose to go to the nearby Shakespeare Santa Cruz productions; however, *Julius Caesar*, in the indoor theater, was sold out, and it was just too windy to go to *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* in the outdoor theater. Post-prandial potations and the fundraising silent auction went on as usual, and the evening’s movie started early.

David on the Stage

Thursday morning’s lecture was given by Marty Gould of the University of South Florida on “*Copperfield*, the Stage Sensation.” This was a fascinating exploration of the numerous theatrical versions of *David Copperfield* that popped up immediately following the completed version of the novel. Not surprisingly, dramatizations could not encompass the entire story, so they selected parts of it. Play titles reflected this, many of them focusing on Little Emily’s story. One version concludes with Ham and Steerforth miraculously alive, and

Steerforth married to Emily. “To be dramatized,” Gould said, “David had to be de-traumatized.” In fact, in the 1870s and beyond, Emily became the focus of the plays; in some, David is barely present. The reason for this, Gould explained, is that Emily’s story is where the drama is. In the novel, the reader does not see the seduction of Emily, but it is what fascinated Victorian viewers. In addition, the idea of emigrating to Australia was uppermost in Victorian theatergoers’ minds; several of the plays end with the sailing of the ship to Australia. Gould presented pieces of dialogue from the various plays—those that focus on the Peggotty family, those that focus on the Micawbers, and so on. This talk served as a wonderful introduction to the afternoon’s presentation, a reading of a play by John Brougham, who adapted five of Dickens’s novels to the stage.

“Every Man Must Have a Kite” was presented in readers’ theater format in the Kresge Town Hall by the Peggotty Players after the teas on Thursday afternoon. Adapted and directed by John Glavin of Georgetown University, the play featured eleven Universe attendees, including Tim Clark as Mr. Micawber, Camille Campbell as Uriah Heep, and Laurie Lober-Tracy as Mr. Dick. “Every Man Must Have a Kite” was first performed at Brougham’s Lyceum on January 6, 1851, and while the Universe version was, in its director’s words, “very curtailed,” it nevertheless featured a dance by Mr. and Mrs. Micawber, a redheaded Heep, Mr. Dick’s kite (decorated with 20th-century cartoon “heroes”), and a Chorus of Donkeys. This version focused on the Wickfield-Heep story, with Mr. Micawber as the hero, as he was in several of the Victorian dramatizations.

Thursday evening brought a paper by John Bowen of the University of York, “A Mort of Talk.” In Chapter 32, after Emily’s departure with Steerforth has been discovered, Mr. Peggotty says to David, “We have had a mort of talk, sir, of what we ought and doesn’t ought

to do.” A “mort,” Bowen explained, is Suffolk dialect for “a large quantity,” but it also has the meaning of a harlot, or prostitute, according to the OED. And, of course, there is the morpheme’s meaning of “death.” All three of these meanings come together in the scene and in the novel, Bowen argued. “Like Traddles’ drawings, *David Copperfield* is covered with skeletons,” he said. “The novel smells dreadfully of ruin.” And, oddly, both the word’s meaning of death and the meaning of “a large quantity” are bound together in Micawber, of whom G.K. Chesterton said, “We can only walk round and round him wondering what to say.”

After the Thursday evening lecture, the films were not shown in favor of attendance at the Grand Party, hosted by the Friends of the Dickens Project. This party always features wine and cheese, cakes, fruits, and other delicacies, put together this year by Beverly and Clay Ballard, with help from Barbara Keller and Dan Atwood.

“Tempest”

On Friday morning, Project Director John Jordan of UCSC presented his much-anticipated paper, “Tempest.” He was introduced by Teresa Mangum of the University of Iowa, coordinator of this year’s speakers, who said John is “a master of collaboration, bringing people together to do wonderful things.” The unique experience of presenting hour-long papers to a room full of scholars and non-specialists has transformed the writing of faculty members who have participated in the Dickens Universe, Mangum said, and “this visionary plan is simply extraordinary.” The attendees packed into the Town Hall responded with a standing ovation for John, which he received in his characteristic selfless manner, quieting the applause and saying he needed the time to present his paper.

Jordan started out by saying, “I don’t much like *David Copperfield*,” and he thinks

Dickens didn't either. He quickly clarified that he doesn't like David, the novel's narrator. Although Dickens as a novelist is a hero, Jordan is not sure David is; we don't know what kind of novels he writes. He admires himself and thinks he is the hero, but he doesn't act like one. He betrays his working class friends to side with upper class friends, Jordan said, adding that there are clues in the novel to David's "complicity and self-deception." Both Steerforth and David are responsible for what happens to Emily. Yet Dickens allows David to succeed while exposing his "ethical failure."

The second part of Jordan's talk addressed the paper's title, which refers to the storm that takes Steerforth's, and Ham's, life. The chapter in the novel that contains this event, Jordan said, is "one of its finest achievements." The sea in *David Copperfield*, while not as obviously symbolic as in *Dombey and Son*, is nonetheless present from the beginning, in David's caul, which is supposed to protect its owner from drowning. The wind at David's childhood home in Blunderstone foreshadows the storm, and David even says of Emily, in Chapter 3, "There has been a time since—I do not say it lasted long, but it has been—when I have asked myself the question, would it have been better for little Em'ly to have had the waters close above her head that morning in my sight; and when I have answered Yes, it would have been." Is this, Jordan posited, a fantasy, on David's part, of drowning Emily? Jordan went on to dissect David's memory of the storm, which starts with his statement, "I do not recall it but see it done." The shipwreck represents, Jordan said, a "turning outward of David's internal crisis." Although he can "see" the wreck, he cannot see Emily: "But Emily I never saw." Jordan even goes so far to argue that at the very end of the novel, it is Steerforth, not Agnes, that is the "dear presence" beside David. "Oh Agnes, my soul, so may thy face be by me when I close my life indeed" should be read, "so may *thy* face be by me,"

instead of the other face. The Peggotty family, Jordan feels, is the hero of this book, and “David is a duplicitous narrator, blind in more ways than one.”

On Friday afternoon the Collaboratory started, with Faculty Research in Progress roundtables, the first featuring Jonathan Grossman of UCLA; John Jordan of UCSC; John Bowen of the University of York; and Hilary Schor of USC. Later that afternoon, attendees gathered for a special “Partings Welded Together: A Celebration of Our Friend Sally Ledger.” Ledger, a professor at Royal Holloway University of London and a much-loved member of the Project faculty, died in January of this year of a brain hemorrhage, and her friendship and her contributions to the Project will be missed.

Friday evening saw the farewell festivities for most Universe attendees. After the usual post-prandial potations, auctioneer Dan Atwell worked his magic at the Friends auction; the money raised at this auction and the silent auctions each evening throughout the week is part of the total that the faculty members promise to match. After the auction, John announced the books for 2010: *Oliver Twist* and *Sketches by Boz*. At 8:30, the Victorian Ball swung into action in the Kresge Town Hall with dance instructor Angela Elsey and the local musicians of the Brassworks Band.

On Saturday the Collaboratory continued, with a morning panel titled “A Roundtable on 19th Century Poetry” featuring Margaret Loose of the University of California at San Diego and Catherine Robson of UC Davis. The afternoon Collaboratory panel was titled “A Roundtable on Visual Cultures,” and it featured Luisa Cale of Birkbeck College, University of London; Bob Patten of Rice University; Rachel Teukolsky of Vanderbilt University; and Sharon Weltman of Louisiana State University.

We Need Your Help

In an open letter to this year's attendees included in the packets received at registration for the Universe, Director John Jordan, Co-founder Ed Eigner, and Founding Director Murray Baumgarten announced that UC funding for the Dickens Project has ended and asked for financial support from those who have experienced and participated in the Project. The letter reads as follows:

“The economic crisis sweeping through California has stuck the Dickens Project. The UC Office of the President has notified us recently that UC funding for the Project will end, effective July 1, 2009—in other words, immediately. We are writing to you as someone who has experienced and participated in the Dickens Project and knows firsthand what we are all about.

“With luck and belt-tightening, we may have enough carry-forward money to continue operating for another year, but in order to survive beyond that time, we need the help of our friends, alumni, faculty, and other supporters.

“The Project's annual Dickens Universe gathering is a unique event that brings together scholars, teachers, graduate students, undergraduates, high school students, and members of the general public. For 29 years, the Dickens Project has been the principal center for teaching and research on Dickens in North America. The Project has grown from its modest beginnings as a UC research group to its current size of 36 universities around the world. It has been a leader in graduate training and an innovative example of continuing education in the humanities. Its elimination would be a great loss to anyone who, like you, cares about Dickens, Victorian culture, or the role of great literature in our lives.

“We three—Ed, Murray, and John—were the original founders of the Project. We are

proud of what it has accomplished: the careers it has helped launch, the friendships it has nurtured, and research it has fostered, the example of collegiality across age, background, and profession that it has sustained. We do not intend for the Project to close up shop.

“What you can do now for the Project is to give us money. Even a small contribution will help. In the short term, we need to demonstrate to the university administration that the Dickens Project has a broad base of support. In the long term, we will be applying to private and public foundations for assistance, including a Challenge Grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities that would bring us matching funds and help build our endowment. We will also be looking for private donors who can help us with substantial endowment gifts.

“The easiest way for you to donate money is by credit card on the secure UCSC Foundation page (indicate Dickens Project as your area of interest). For instructions, go to the Dickens Project web site: <http://dickens.ucsc.edu>. You can also write a check, made out to UCSC Foundation (with a notation that it is for the Dickens Project), and send it to us at 1156 High Street. Thank you for any help you can give.”