

and “dashing.” The portion of the letter to John Forster in which Dickens detailed his reaction is missing, thus making impossible a broader assessment of his later tastes.

For all the insularity Dickens deplored in the work of some of the painters he knew, it's clear that Victorian artists themselves found much in his fiction to appreciate. At a pedestrian level, several of them turned to his novels for characters. Little Nell and her grandfather, Dolly Varden and Florence Dombey stand out as favorites; significantly, Quilp, Fagin, Maypole Hugh and Bill Sikes fail to appear. For other painters, dramatic scenes and exteriors proved more popular. William Powell Frith in particular found Dickens's work congenial and used his treatment of social issues to mediate between the sharper, satirical English tradition exemplified by William Hogarth and social commentary with a softer focus adjusted to Victorian sensibilities. The treatment of this subject by Mark Bills makes his chapter, “Dickens and the Painting of Modern Life,” the highlight of an informative and useful collection. Leaf through the entire volume, however, and you won't be disappointed.

David Paroissien



***Dickens and Childhood*, ed. Laura Peters. Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2012. Pp. 632. \$300.**

This collection of essays comes sixth in the Ashgate series “A Library of Essays on Charles Dickens.” The six volumes cover a variety of topics, including Victorian print cultures, sexuality and gender, the city, Dickens adapted and global. The present volume gathers twenty-two essays published between 1976 and 2010 on the topic of “Dickens and Childhood.”

As Laura Peter indicates in her substantial introduction, the essays record a sequential trajectory, marking the development in Dickens criticism and the culturally relevant issues that have emerged on the subject of childhood. Thus, after a short biographical section, in which Dickens's early years are vividly represented by Michael Slater, the second section, “The Romantic Child in Victorian Times,” draws on the seminal critical work initiated by Philippe Ariés in the 1960s. Two models stood at the opposite ends of an ideological, religious, philosophical spectrum: innocence vs. sinfulness, spontaneous growth vs. necessary coercion and discipline. The clash – should we say the transformation undergone by these notions during

the first half of the nineteenth century – was indeed momentous, and its dialectics are described by Peter Coveney in “The ‘Cult of Sensibility’ and the ‘Romantic Child.’” Dickens’s complex attitude towards the received notion of childhood is well described in the essays by Dirk den Hartog, Jacqueline Banerjee and Jerome Hamilton Buckley. Malcolm Andrews in “The Savage, the Child, and the Caves of Ignorance” traces the cultural transition occurring in Victorian times, which transformed the formerly idealized child figure into a tiny sinful vessel that had to be crammed with useful notions. The connection between childhood, savagery, orphans and foundlings roaming the slums of London gave rise to institutions of which Dickens was well aware, both in his support of Thomas Coram’s Hospital and in the literary creation of the rebellious Tattycoram in *Little Dorrit*, whose savage attitude exposes the fallacy of filial obedience and accepted sacrifice of the “daughters in the house.”

“Childhood and the Family,” the third section of the collection, receives equally careful analysis. Family ties, and the ideology of the family – the middle-class fantasy of domesticity, the myth of dynastic models, based on lineage, blood ties, and patriarchy – are exposed in essays by Hilary Schor, Catherine Waters, and Holly Furneaux. They point out the role of surrogate parents, faux sisters, illegitimate daughters and sons, and the parody of these familial relationships that Dickens staged in almost all his novels. Dysfunctional families, fractured families, trans-normative and queer families figure as evidence of the abundance of alternative versions to a concept once considered safe and sound on biological grounds, on the certainty of monogamy and procreation – a concept which in Dickens’s times was threatened by thrift and the economic value to be got from orphans, either from adoption or by their straightforward exploitation. Thus, Victorian family household goods, openly celebrated in Dickens’s fiction, especially in his Christmas stories, also prove to become the embarrassment of riches as far as the same ideal family is concerned, since they create a problem of surplus production: on the one hand, by causing an ideological and sentimental excess in the family discourse, and, on the other hand, by prompting the proliferation of faked imitations of happy families, whether successful or abysmally disappointing.

The fourth section, “The Child, Empire and Difference,” considers the colonial experience and the ways in which the periphery came to bear upon the center. The analysis pairs the political scene with the life experience of the writer, examining (in Grahame Smith’s essay) or rather juxtaposing biography and fiction; other essays discuss the savages who were paraded in London and the symbolic savagery of Quilp, as well as Little Nell’s pilgrimage, which is likened to the experience Kipling would portray with Kim in 1901. “Nurse’s Stories” in *The Uncommercial Traveller* ideally

responds to such wealth of material; thus, the vast panorama of reception of stories and characters re-fashioned by Dickens into the discourses of childhood is the subject of the essays by Deirdre David, Harry Stone, Goldie Morgentaler, Catherine Robson, James E. Marlow and Shuli Barzilai. Popular orphan adventure narratives bring the focus back to the child, as a popular genre investigated through the lens of a Christmas story written by Dickens and Collins, “The Perils of Certain English Prisoners” (1857). The orphan protagonist of this adventure was sent like many others to the far edge of the Empire and civilization: his adherence to the Arnoldian values infusing the Tom Browns of his times is cast against his low social condition, which does not prevent him from endorsing such values and becoming a bulwark of colonial ideology. Paradoxically this orphan abides by the very colonial values which make him an outcast at home, and, by sending him away, a defender of the *status quo* on the far margins of the Empire. The paradox is nicely exposed by Peters, who connects the popular genre of the orphan adventure narratives with Dickens’s attitude towards the Noble Savage. The orphans starring in a genre very popular in the 1870s and 80s easily fall into the stereotype of the demonized “other” – and Dickens was no exception to the rule.

The last section, “The Child as Theoretical Vehicle,” inscribes the child within the categories of literature which are conditioned by the aesthetics of the sublime and specifically, as argued by Jonathan Loesberg, by the contrast between the Kantian sublime and the Hegelian historicization of it. Of course, Longinus and Burke loom (not) too far in the distance, and John Ruskin is summoned. Dickensian characters like Tiny Tim and Jo in *Bleak House*, the one physically affected, the other depicted in emotionally grotesque terms, are connected with Dickens’s uses of deformation as the aesthetic tool needed to represent historical conditions. Finally, John Bowen’s argument about Little Nell’s centrality as an allegory of death – which can be extended to the whole category of childhood in Victorian times – agrees with my own conviction about *The Old Curiosity Shop* as a text staging death from its very beginning, through visual strategies that suggest her eternal sleep among gothic ruins. Thus, the volume reaches its closure and shows its value and is warmly to be recommended to all scholars and readers. However children’s literature *per se* will be seldom found in these pages: *A Child’s History of England*, *A Holiday Romance*, *The Life of Our Lord* are not discussed, nor Dickens’s reception in Europe as an author for children, which leaves room for yet another assessment of Dickens’s genius and its reception.