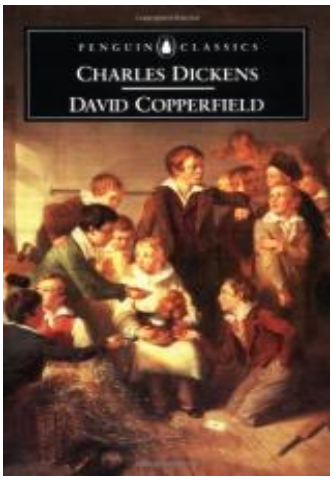
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David Copperfield

by Charles Dickens



About the Book

Even now, famous and caressed and happy, I often forget in my dreams that I have a dear wife and children; even that I am a man; and wander desolately back to that time of my life."

Charles Dickens composed this passage between 1845 and 1848 referring to the dark times of his youth when his family moved to London in the early 1820s. The imprisonment of his father forced the family to send the twelve-year-old Dickens to work in a blacking factory. This disruption to Dickens's childhood and education remained a source of intense grief throughout his life. Dickens found these memories too painful to continue his autobiography; in fact, he jealously guarded the facts of his London youth. It was only after his biographer John Forster published his **Life of Charles Dickens** in 1872 that readers learned of Dickens's difficult youth and of the autobiographical nature of one of his finest creations, **David Copperfield**.

Originally published in serial form from May 1849 through November 1850, **David Copperfield** is the first of Dickens's novels written entirely in the first person. Converting his autobiographical impulse into fiction allowed Dickens to explore uncomfortable truths about his life. David Copperfield's time at Murdstone and Grinby's warehouse, his schooling at Salem House, and his relationship with Dora all have their bases in Dickens's own life. But, it may be Dickens's most autobiographical novel, **David Copperfield** is a work of fiction.

Dickens divides the life of Copperfield into two distinct parts, the first recounting the untimely loss of his innocence. In this orphan tale, Copperfield endures the hardships of his mother's death, a wretched education at Salem House, the toiling at Murdstone and Grinby's, and a desperate escape to his aunt's. Made aware of the vicissitudes of life, Copperfield also learns of the cyclical patterns of life as "David Copperfield of Blunderstone" is reborn at his aunt's as "Copperfield Trotwood"; the barbarous schooling of Mr. Creakle is replaced by the kind instruction of Mr. Wickfield and Dr. Strong; the callous neglect of his stepfather is replaced by the solicitude of his aunt. The practical lesson for Copperfield is to eschew the sternness of Murdstone as well as the carelessness of Micawber, the grandiloquent and

improvident father figure who lodges Copperfield.

In the novel's second part, Copperfield establishes himself first as a legal clerk and parliamentary reporter, and later as a novelist. But his professional matters are of less importance than Copperfield's two emotional attachments that frame this part of the novel: his relationships with James Steerforth and Dora Spenlow. Both relationships are portrayed as the "mistaken impulses of an undisciplined heart," and we are meant to second Betsey Trotwood's comment, "Blind! Blind! Blind!" In retrospect, Copperfield confesses that he "loved Dora to idolatry." Dora, who resembles Copperfield's mother in looks and manner, lacks the maturity required to share actively in David's life or to take up the Victorian burdens of housekeeping. The relationship falters and Copperfield begins to see parallels with the marriage of the aging Dr. Strong and his "child wife" Annie. When the marriage dissolves, Dora dies in labor?quite conveniently, some critics have charged, for her death releases Copperfield of his conjugal obligations. Idolatry also characterizes his relationship with the Byronic James Steerforth, whom Copperfield unwittingly assists in the seduction of young Emily away from her uncle's care at Yarmouth.

The concluding chapters function as an epilogue to the first two parts. Copperfield, now a famous novelist, takes his sufferings to Europe in a listless journey. He eventually returns to London with renewed vigor to learn of the emigration to Australia of the Micawbers, Peggotty, Emily, and Martha, and of the imprisonment of Steerforth's servant, Littimer, and Uriah Heep. The novel concludes with Copperfield marrying Agnes.

Throughout the novel, Dickens addresses several important social issues of his time: the problem of prostitution in nineteenth-century London, lack of professional opportunities for women in Victorian England, need for humane treatment for the insane, the injustice of debtors' prison, and indictments against the rigidly conventional, purse-proud nineteenth-century English middle class. Against these dilemmas, Dickens offers the intuitive wisdom of Mr. Dick, the genuineness of the Micawbers, and, above all, the simple earnestness of Peggotty.

But **Copperfield** is foremost a novel about memory. Amidst the tumultuous rise and fall of the London cityscape (obsessively cataloged in the novel), Copperfield's memory preserves the links to his past and brings continuity and coherence to his life while the sudden recollection of the past charges the present with meaning. However, memory also proves to be a source of anguish. Copperfield prefaces the time he spent at Murdstone and Grinby by remarking: "I now approach a period of my life, which I can never lose the remembrance of, while I remember anything; and the recollection of which has often, without my invocation, come before me like a ghost, and haunted happier times." The act of remembrance, even uninvoked remembrance, dredges up early trauma to experience anew.

Given the intimate connection between the lives of Copperfield and his author, it is little wonder that Dickens considered this book his "favourite child." And it is little wonder, given its vast array of memorable characters and its brilliant treatment of the quest for self-knowledge, that Copperfield is Dickens's best loved and most quoted novel. The words of the great English critic G. K. Chesterton perhaps best summarize the experience of reading it: "In this book of **David Copperfield**, [Dickens] has created creatures who cling to us and tyrannise over us, creatures whom we would not forget if we could, creatures whom we could not forget if we would, creatures who are more actual than the man who made them."

Discussion Guide

1. In the final chapters of the novel, evil is punished (e.g. Heep's and Littimer's imprisonment) and virtue rewarded (e.g. the success of Micawber in Australia), prompting some critics to argue that Copperfield is less a novel of self-discovery than a traditional fairy tale. Do you agree? While it may be the last of Dickens's novels with a "happy ending," how would you characterize the prevailing mood of the book?

2. Although Peggotty assumes heroic stature in the novel, do you find anything obsessive, or even sinister, in his reclamation of Emily? Recalling Mr. Wickfield's confession that his fears of Agnes leaving him caused him to drink, compare his anxieties of his daughter's coming of age with Peggotty's.

3. In his recent biography of the author, Peter Ackroyd claimed that London was for Dickens "an emblem of forgetfulness." Copperfield, in its record of the perpetual destruction and rebuilding of London, would seem to indicate this but is there anything redeemable about the city as it is portrayed in the novel? What about urban life? What is London's relation to Yarmouth?

4. When musing on Steerforth, there are times the narrator reaches a state of rapture. When Steerforth's treachery is discovered, Copperfield admits "I never had loved Steerforth better than when the ties that bound me to him were broken." Does Copperfield ever resolve his feelings for Steerforth?

5. The critic Edmund Wilson claimed that all of Dickens's work revolved around the idea of the prison. How does the prison function as a metaphor in **David Copperfield**? Examine the role of the various key holders who possess or attempt to possess control of others?e.g. Mrs. Murdstone, Heep, Steerforth.

6. Uriah Heep's career, in some respects, parallels Copperfield's: they both come from impoverished backgrounds; they both establish legal professions; and they both aspire to marry their employer's daughter. How is Heep Copperfield's double? What does his, at times extreme, hatred of Heep reveal about Copperfield?

7. Blunderstone and Murdstone are two examples of names pregnant with meaning. Discuss the thematic significance of other names in the novel, especially those given to Copperfield throughout the book?Daisy, Trotwood, Doady. What do you make of the names that echo the author's own: Mr. Dick, King Charles I, and the initials (reversed) of Copperfield?

8. From the caul with which Copperfield is born (believed to protect one from drowning) to the shipwreck scene at the end, **David Copperfield** contains countless allusions to and images of the sea. How do these elements function in the novel? Do they indicate a deliberate use of symbolism? What might they symbolize?

9. The narrator relates several important dreams in the novel, particularly the dream he has after seeing **Julius Caesar** and the cannonading dream that prefigures the death of Steerforth. What do these dreams reveal about Copperfield's anxieties?

Author Bio

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