ReadingGroupGuides
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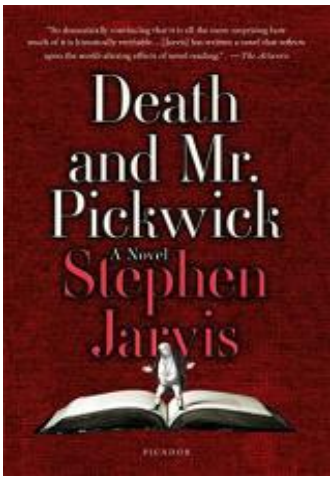
Death and Mr. Pickwick

by Stephen Jarvis



About the Book

DEATH AND MR. PICKWICK is a vast, richly imagined, Dickensian work about the rough-and-tumble world that produced an author who defined an age. Like Charles Dickens did in his immortal novels, Stephen Jarvis has spun a tale full of preposterous characters, shaggy-dog stories, improbable reversals, skulduggery, betrayal, and valor-all true, and all brilliantly brought to life in his unputdownable book.

THE POSTHUMOUS PAPERS OF THE PICKWICK CLUB, featuring the fat and lovable Mr. Pickwick and his Cockney manservant, Sam Weller, began as a series of whimsical sketches, the brainchild of the brilliant, erratic, misanthropic illustrator named Robert Seymour, a denizen of the back alleys and grimy courtyards where early nineteenth-century London's printers and booksellers plied their cutthroat trade. When Seymour's publishers, after trying to match his magical etchings with a number of writers, settled on a young storyteller using the pen name Boz, THE PICKWICK PAPERS went on to become a worldwide phenomenon, outselling every other book besides the Bible and Shakespeare's plays. And Boz, as the young Charles Dickens signed his work, became, in the eyes of many, the most important writer of his time. The fate of Robert Seymour, Mr. Pickwick's creator, a very different story-one untold before now.

Few novels deserve to be called magnificent. DEATH AND MR. PICKWICK is one of them.

Discussion Guide

Introduction

Transporting us to the raucous time and place that produced one of the world?s most enduring novelists, DEATH AND MR. PICKWICK celebrates the world of Charles Dickens while telling the story of the genius artist who launched Dickens?s spectacular rise to fame. First published in single-chapter parts starting in 1836, THE POSTHUMOUS

PAPERS OF THE PICKWICK CLUB brought comic relief to a weary public in the form of the lovable Mr. Pickwick and his Cockney manservant, Sam Weller, along with dozens of other whimsical characters from all walks of life. The project was the brainchild of the brilliant, erratic, misanthropic illustrator Robert Seymour. Bringing to life Seymour?s previously untold story, the novelist Stephen Jarvis makes his debut with a tale that is packed with preposterous characters, improbable reversals, betrayal and valor --- all true and all brilliantly woven into this captivating book.

A novel worthy of Dickens himself, DEATH AND MR. PICKWICK is a rollicking ride that unlocks a provocative publishing mystery. We hope that the following discussion topics will enrich your reading group?s experience.

Questions and Topics for Discussion

1. How was your reading enhanced by the frame story of Mr. Inbelicate and Inscriptino? How did your theories about their identities and motivations shift throughout the novel?

2. What did you learn about nineteenth-century Britain?s publishing industry, which produced so many classics? What has been lost and gained as television serials have replaced serial fiction?

3. As you read about Robert Seymour?s career, from his apprenticeship with Vaughan to his rivalry with Cruikshank, what did you discover about the world of illustrators? How does Seymour negotiate the difference between commercial art and fine art?

4. How much of Seymour?s angst do you attribute to his closeted sexuality? Does Jane have a more realistic image of Seymour than Wonk does?

5. Jarvis captures a world in which caricaturists possess the best medium for conveying provocative images of power brokers. What is the value of satire? To what extent should it be censored, if at all? How has Seymour?s line of work been transformed in the age of *Charlie Hebdo*?

6. From the life of Henry Seymour, the cursed upholsterer, to the fact that Moses Pickwick was descended from a foundling, DEATH AND MR. PICKWICK provides the backstory behind the backstory. How do these elaborate turns of fate affect your reading?

7. What works have you read by Charles Dickens? What are the similarities between Dickens?s novels and Stephen Jarvis?s world in DEATH AND MR. PICKWICK?

8. Jarvis chose to deliver the findings of his research into PICKWICK in the form of a novel rather than a nonfiction book. How does this change the way we receive the information about the creation of PICKWICK? Are his theories about Dickens and Seymour more convincing as fiction?

9. How is the novel shaped by the demise of the clown J. S. Grimaldi? Why do clowns resonate with Chatham Charlie so deeply?

10. Discuss the issue of inheritance raised by Jane and her two children. If you were a judge, how much would you award them?

11. As dozens of characters make their way into the story line, from Prime Minister Melbourne, on trial for adultery, to the unlucky heir Thomas Clarke, to Mr. Pickwick himself, what does Jarvis indicate about the creative process? Should novelists draw a clearer line between fact and fiction, or is the best material ripped from the headlines?

12. Few authors have created satires that have surpassed the popularity and complexity of Dickens?s intricate, enduring work, but who has come close in the twenty-first century? Is there a modern American equivalent to THE PICKWICK PAPERS?

13. How did you react to Dismal Jemmy?s tale and to his transformation in the closing scene? What does it say about good storytelling, and about the performances required in daily life?

14. Ultimately, how do you feel about Dickens?s success and Seymour?s demise? How much responsibility do you place with Chapman and Hall? In your opinion, who had the right to own the PICKWICK concept and characters?

15. How does Dickens?s concept of Pickwick and his cohorts differ from Seymour?s? Does a storyteller create a more substantial portrait with words than an artist creates with visual elements?

Author Bio

Stephen Jarvis was born in Essex, England. Following graduate studies at Oxford University, he quickly tired of his office job and began doing unusual things every weekend and writing about them for *The Daily Telegraph*. These activities included learning the flying trapeze, walking on red-hot coals, getting hypnotized to revisit past lives, and entering the British Snuff-Taking Championship. DEATH AND MR. PICKWICK is his first novel. He lives in Berkshire, England.

Critical Praise

?In this astounding first novel, Jarvis re-creates, in loving and exhaustive detail, the writing and publication of Charles Dickens?s first novel?. The book offers an impressively imagined account of Seymour, Dickens, and a huge host of others (the sheer scale of the book is, itself, Dickensian)?[DEATH AND MR. PICKWICK] is a staggering accomplishment, a panoramic perspective.?

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