In this very big and wide-ranging novel, Dickens follows his eponymous heroine from the Marshalsea Prison for Debtors in south London, where she had lived for the first twenty-plus years of her life and the first half of the book, across France and Switzerland with her newly-rich family on a Grand Tour to Italy, where she spends a couple of years rubbing shoulders with the hordes of semi-expatriate upper-class English that congregated there at the time - the novel is set in the mid-1820s - and then back to London, where the Marshalsea Prison again features prominently, to deal with the dramatic events and revelations and turns of plot with which the last part of the novel is filled and which you will enjoy discovering for yourself when you read or reread this masterful novel, one of Dickens's finest.

This is a riches-to-rags-to-riches-to-rags story featuring anew, after *The Old Curiosity Shop* (with Little Nell) and *Bleak House* (with a quite forgettable heroine whose name escapes me for the moment), a wispy, pure, almost impossibly perfect young heroine, here nicknamed Little because she is, at 22, mistaken for a 10-year-old by all and sundry, including the male lead, who only wakes up to the fact that she is marriageable during the last few pages. Her dreamy father had sort of wandered into the Marshalsea prison after squandering his family's means, without in the least understanding how or why, and had promptly established himself there as a kind of gentleman-guru to be honoured and admired and above all nourished because of the lustre his presence brought to the institution and its inmates, precisely because of his otherworldly, absent-minded way of being somehow superior in a nice, gentlemanly and admirable manner. He is yet another example of Dickens's genius for creating the most amazingly offbeat but credible and enjoyable-to-read-about secondary characters that is his unmistakable trademark, although Mr. Dorrit is probably the secondary character with the biggest role in any of his novels: nincompoop and irritating and phoney as he may well be, with his endearing absent-minded ways and his gentleman-mania he is nevertheless the one who steals the show here from his eponymous but rather too anonymous daughter.
As is usually the case with Dickens's novels, which generally feature bland but boring heroes or heroines who are overshadowed by stunningly vivid minor characters (if there were Oscars for novels, Dickens would certainly be the all-time champion for the number of Best Supporting Role winners), the main interest is provided once again by the multitude of secondary characters which populate its pages, and by its villain, another Dickens strongpoint. Although here the portrait of the nasty Monsieur Rigaud turns somewhat to caricature in the rush of events at the end (but then he is a Frenchman, so the blacker the better for the English reader of the day, and probably of today too), the irresistible magnetic force exuded by this hard, glib and intelligent evil-doer, probably modelled on the celebrated assassin Lacenaire, provides a note of harshness and menace from the very first page onwards that keeps the whole story well centred on the worldly realities that are so foreign to the Dorrit family's mindset. Although when one thinks of Dickens one thinks mostly of the horde of full-of-life minor characters that are constantly bursting out of his pages, I wonder if in the end his villains do not contribute at least as much to Dickens's final stature. Monsieur Rigaud here, the unscrupulous Fagan and the criminal Tom Sykes of Oliver Twist, the miserly Squeers of Nicolas Nickleby, the hypocritical Mr. Pecksniff of Martin Chuzzlewit, the suave and brilliant John Chester of Barnaby Rudge, the glib Carker of Dombey and Son, the cold-hearted stepfather Mr. Murdstone in David Copperfield, and so on (redoubtable villains feature prominently in all of his novels after The Pickwick Papers) are as vividly portrayed as the extravagant or eccentric, typically Dickensian minor characters that populate all of his books including of course this one (here you will particularly enjoy discovering Young John and Mr. Sparkler, the hapless suitors of Little Dorrit) - but they are less purely Victorian-Dickensian, they are far closer to modern prototypes that we can relate to, they touch upon the universal to remind us of the nature of our own society and times in a way that the more positive and typically Dickensian characters do not, and they thereby express a facet of Dickens's genius that is essential, I do believe, to his generally recognized status as England's greatest novelist.

Little Dorrit, published in 1857 when Dickens was 45 years old, was his eleventh novel. He was to write only three more before his untimely death of a stroke at the age of 58: his second and most

This is thus mature Dickens, written by the most popular author of his time, who had known quite phenomenal success from his first book (*The Pickwick Papers*) onwards. Since *Dombey and Son*, published ten years earlier, one has the impression that he had been consciously endeavouring to consolidate his literary reputation with novels of a more elaborate - and somewhat more sedate - nature than his initial works, which had been more directly written for the mass public (*The Pickwick Papers, Oliver Twist, Nicolas Nickleby* and *The Old Curiosity Shop*). This literary ambition is clearly present here, from the striking first sentence (always a good sign for the reader undertaking a lengthy journey through hundreds of pages) onwards ("Thirty years ago, Marseilles lay burning in the sun, one day"). On page 353 there is the very first purely descriptive passage that I can remember coming across in his entire oeuvre, and most excellent it is too, as I am sure you will agree: "A tranquil summer sunset shone upon him as he approached the end of his walk, and passed through the meadows by the river-side. He had that sense of peace, and of being lightened of a weight of care, which country quiet awakens in the dwellers in towns. Everything within his view was lovely and placid...........The long lines of red and gold in the sky, and the glorious track of the descending sun, were all divinely calm. Upon the purple tree-tops far away, and on the open height near at hand up which the shades were slowly creeping, there was an equal hush. Between the real landscape and its shadow in the water, there was no division; both were so untroubled and clear, and, while so fraught with solemn mystery of life and death, so hopefully reassuming to the gazers soothed heart, because so tenderly and mercifully beautiful". While it fits in well with the story line, the very rarity of such descriptive passages here and elsewhere does tend to highlight the authors desire to show just what he can do - and the reader can only conclude that he has proved his point: he can do much.

As usual with Dickens, there are many references to biblical and Shakespearean texts, perhaps more than ever before, and as usual he often and effectively employs colourful and appropriately-placed proverbs such as the following which particularly caught my eye: "Love lives in cottages and courts", "Thought is free" and "He who touches pitch will be defiled". There are some impressive adages of his own fabrication too, such as: "There is no playing fast and loose with the truth, in any game, without growing the worse for it" and "Every failure teaches a man something, if he will learn", and even more numerous than usual references to well-known poems and texts, among which these two memorable ones from Samuel Johnson: "For we that live to please must please to live", and (speaking of a dull, tiresome fellow whom he chanced to meet) "That fellow seems to me to possess but one idea, and that is a wrong one". And then there is the magnificent closing sentence, certainly the most lyrical end to any of his works: "They went quietly down into the roaring streets, inseparable and blessed; and as they passed along in sunshine and in shade, the noisy and the eager, and the arrogant and the froward and the vain, fretted, and chafed, and made their usual uproar".

So, given that the dialogues (yet another area of Dickensian excellence) are always up to his highest standards - and there are none higher - we can safely conclude that this novel is a prime example of the extent of Dickens's literary mastery.
"Little Dorrit", by Charles Dickens

*Little Dorrit* was the third (and last) of a series of novels sharply critical of various aspects of the England of his time, after the massive 975-page *Bleak House* (where Dickens can be said to have invented the genre of the detective novel with his brilliant hero Inspector Buckley), whose overall theme was the extravagant bureaucracy of the Chancery Lane civil-law court system, and *Hard Times*, set in the stark and, to Dickens, quite unfamiliar industrial landscape of northern England (his shortest and probably his weakest novel, in spite of its big theme). Dickens's social critique here is of a much broader scope than ever before: in sweeping, virulently sarcastic, often bitter tones he takes on a wide range of targets: the bureaucracy of the state in general and the Patent Office procedures for inventors in particular, the arrogance of the aristocracy and their monopoly of the state apparatus, the corrupt and antiquated rotten-borough system of allocating parliamentary seats, the general passion for lucre, the servility and indeed gullibility of one and all towards wealth and social status (the People of the day), and, notably, the unscrupulousness and hollowness of the world of high finance. All pretty strong stuff, often couched in no uncertain terms; witness the following passage (particularly significant in view of the novels provisional title, "Nobodys Fault") about the Bleeding Heart Yard area in central London where many of the protagonists live: "There was people of pretty well all sorts of trades you could name, all wanting to work, and not able to get it. There was old people, after working all their lives, going and being shut up in the Workhouse, much worse fed and lodged and treated altogether than - Mr. Plornish said manufacturers, but appeared to mean malefactors. Why, a man didn't know where to turn himself, for a crumb of comfort. As to who was to blame for it, Mr. Plornish didn't know who was to blame for it. He could tell you who suffered, but he couldn't tell you whose fault it was .". Or this comment about the financial magnate Mr. Merdle "All people knew (or thought they knew) that he had made himself immensely rich, and, for that reason alone, prostrated themselves before him more degradingly and less excusably than the darkest savage creeps out of his hole in the ground to propitiate, in some log or reptile, the Deity of his benighted soul".

But then Dickens's innate sense of humour and his incorrigible interest in the infinite variety of the human personality usually come to the fore to put the social critique into a sort of background mode. Witness this description of the dinner of the innocuous-seeming but hardhearted proprietor of the Bleeding Heart Yard tenements: "The last of the Patriarchs had always been a mighty eater, and he disposed of an immense quantity of solid food with the benignity of a good soul who was feeding someone else", and of his rent-collector: "Mr. Planks, who was always in a hurry, and who referred at intervals to a little dirty note-book which he kept beside him (perhaps containing the names of the defaulters he meant to look up by way of dessert), took in his victuals with a good deal of noise, a good deal of dropping about, and a puff and a snort occasionally, as if he were nearly ready to steam away".

The Marshalsea Prison for Debtors, which plays such a prominent role in the book and whose very existence seems so scandalous to the modern reader, is not really the subject of Dickens's ire and satire, as the benign character of the denizen of the Dorrit family and the gentle tone with which life in this island of peace and shelter is portrayed during the first half of the book are quite in contrast to
the harsher environment in the wide and wicked world outside with which the Dorrit family is confronted in the second half of the book. The Marshalsea Prison, where Dickens's own father had been imprisoned for debt when Dickens was twelve years old, had in fact been torn down years before the novel appeared in 1857, and the last debtors prison in England was closed less than a decade later. So Dickens's treatment of this aspect of Victorian England is far less socio-political than his treatment of the lure of lucre, of the arrogance of the elite and of the financial scandals that so rocked and shocked the most developed country in the world at the time (and still do ...). In fact the prison that we can most relate to today is the one in Marseilles that is so vividly described in the opening chapter, which is probably going as strong as ever to this very day.

Like all of Dickens's books (with the exception of the two historical novels Barnaby Rudge and A Tale of Two Cities), Little Dorrit was published in monthly instalments, a mode of publication which seems to have ensured the steady pace and regular changes of scene and turns of plot which make any Dickens novel so readable (the two above-mentioned exceptions were published ... weekly!). Unlike most of his other works - the historical novels again excepted, probably because of the frenetic rhythm of their publication - Little Dorrit keeps up the pace and interest and level of quality right to the very end, in spite of the final melodrama and coincidences and somewhat overstrong sentimentality that are characteristic of so many of his plots.

Certainly one of Dickens's best books (and that is high praise indeed), which I forbid you to read in an edition that does not include the full set of the marvellous original illustrations by Phiz.

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