



## A Boy Called Dickens

*Deborah Hopkinson , John Hendrix*

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*For years Dickens kept the story of his own childhood a secret. Yet it is a story worth telling. For it helps us remember how much we all might lose when a child's dreams don't come true . . .* As a child, Dickens was forced to live on his own and work long hours in a rat-infested blacking factory. Readers will be drawn into the winding streets of London, where they will learn how Dickens got the inspiration for many of his characters. The 200th anniversary of Dickens's birth was February 7, 2012, and this tale of his little-known boyhood is the perfect way to introduce kids to the great author. This *Booklist* Best Children's Book of the Year is historical fiction at its ingenious best.

## A Boy Called Dickens Details

Date : Published January 10th 2012 by Schwartz & Wade (first published January 1st 2012)

ISBN : 9780375867323

Author : Deborah Hopkinson , John Hendrix

Format : Hardcover 40 pages

Genre : Childrens, Picture Books, Biography, Nonfiction, History, Historical

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## From Reader Review A Boy Called Dickens for online ebook

### Jeremy says

WORLD comments here.

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### Cheri says

5 stars for the illustrations

3 stars for the writing

*"THIS IS OLD LONDON, on a winter morning long ago. Come along, now. We are here to search for a boy called Dickens.*

*"He won't be easy to find. The fog has crept in, silent as a ghost, to fold the city in cold, gray arms.*

*"Maybe the boy is down by the river—the thick, black Thames. There are ragged children here, to be sure, scrambling for bits of copper and wood to sell."*

What makes this worth checking out are the illustrations. This says for pre-school to 3rd grade, but I think the story might not be appreciated by too young of an audience, and potentially frightening to a pre-school aged child.

While the story reads, well, like a poverty-stricken character out of a Dickens novel, the pen and acrylic illustrations are really quite lovely, even when sharing the bleakness and poverty of the location and time.

At the still somewhat tender age of twelve years old, Dickens was working in a blacking factory, wrapping the bottles of blacking for sale. He worked long hours, ten-hour days, and walked to and from work back to a tiny, attic room. Alone. His father was in debtor's prison, and his family, young Charles aside, was there with him, in prison. Food was scarce, and his life was not easy, clearly.

I had been searching my library for some holiday "cheer" and this one came up in my search. There's little about this that is cheery, but if you're looking for a book that describes the impoverished life of the Dickens family, or perhaps how Dickens was inspired with some of his characters by events in his own life, then this is a good book to check out. I would only consider it a holiday book in the sense that it is about a man who wrote a famous novel about Christmas.

I enjoyed the illustrations more than I did the writing, but this is meant to appeal as more of a "picture book," but that being said, I think the writing, overall, sometimes felt a bit detached for me, making it feel a little too "just the facts, ma'am" to me. As a children's book, I would say this might appeal to 2nd, 3rd & 4th graders.

Many thanks, once again, to the Public Library system, and the many Librarians that manage, organize and keep it running, for the loan of this book!

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## Tasha says

Enter the world of Charles Dickens' childhood in this picture book. The fog and cold of London will enfold you, along with the smoking chimneys and the dankness of the Thames. Twelve-year-old Dickens worked in Warren's blacking factory, wrapping bottles of blacking for sale. He entertained the boy next to him with his stories when they could get away with it. Dickens worked ten hour days and when work is finally completed, he headed home to his tiny attic room where he lived alone. His family was in the debtors' prison with only Dickens bringing in any money at all. When his father and family is released from prison, Dickens' life changes and he is finally allowed to go to school. This book celebrates the 200th anniversary of Dickens' birth in a way that will resonate with children.

Read the rest of my review on my blog, [Waking Brain Cells](#).

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## Amanda says

Our family watched the movie "The Man Who Saved Christmas" so reading this with Madam last night really resonated with both of us. We enjoyed the style because we already knew what was going on and we kept nudging each other meaningfully. What really struck both of us was his age; Madam is 12 right now. 12. The exact same age that Dickens was in this book when he was enduring all of this that his own parents put him through, and then tried to re-enslave him again.

I just CANNOT. His own father FINALLY came to his senses and manned up and made things right, BUT THEN, his mother, his OWN MOTHER tried to PUT HIM BACK. WHAT?!!!

No wonder he had issues. Good heavens. Thankfully, he channeled them into such works. Madam was distinctly impressed, and we hugged each other tighter at the end of our reading last night. \*sigh\*

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## RH Walters says

So exciting to come across this at the library with my daughter the other day, because I'm in a feverishly good online read-along of Little Dorritt. Dickens' family actually lived in Marshalsea prison! Illustrations and storytelling are very good, except that it ends rather abruptly with "then Dickens grew up and became a famous writer." The intended audience is a bit of a mystery with this one because it relies on familiarity with Dickens, and could've used more biographical details to tantalize future readers and make the story complete.

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## Krista the Krazy Kataloguer says

I love the way Hopkinson tells this story of Charles Dickens' boyhood. She writes as if the reader is looking back in time, following the boy as he goes about in a typical day. John Hendrix's illustrations, which often look down on the scene from above, further the effect of looking back in time. Anyone who has read Dickens' books will realize that he took his inspiration from incidents in his boyhood and life in London at the time. Imagine being twelve years old and working ten hours a day! Imagine a whole family living in debtor's prison. From such bleak beginnings came the brilliant writer whose works we enjoy today. As Hopkinson says at the end of the story:

"For years Dickens kept the story of his own childhood a secret. Yet it is a story worth telling. For it helps us remember how much we all might lose when a child's dreams don't come true."

Indeed. Highly recommended.

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### **Heidi says**

A combination of second person, present tense narrative and charming pen and acrylic illustration casts the reader as a witness to Dickens' young life. Illustrations, which range from ethereal, aerial views of London to scratchy, fragile vignettes, expertly portray bleakness and beauty through color. The ink drawings evoke Mercer Mayer's illustrations of Fitzgerald's Great Brain. Although this is a work of fiction, the author's note hints at research, although no sources are cited.

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### **Isabella Santana says**

A Boy Called Dickens is a 5-STAR book. I like this book because it teaches me about a boy who wrote stories named Charles. This book taught me what it was like for him to write new stories. I learned that Charles Dickens has a hard childhood. He lost his home, and his family went to jail because his daddy couldn't pay the bills. Charles Dickens had leave school and get a job at 12 years old! This made Charles sad because all he wanted to do was go to school, read every book, and write his own stories. I learned that Charles Dickens grew up and became a very famous author. His dreams came true. I like this book because I learned not to give up on my dreams -- that's a bad choice. I think kids should read this book because it teaches you to not give up on your goals even when things look bad.

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### **Cecilia says**

There are a lot of clever things in this book, most of them in the illustrations and narration voice. One line that really sticks out to me is the one where it references whores living in old London (which they very much did) because most picture books would have shielded over that piece of knowledge faster than hot on a fire. The book called them, "ladies with shattered hopes." I think that is a really accurate description of them, and I am so glad they were included in the people Dickens passed on the street. It's probably the strongest words in the whole book.

I didn't give this book 5 stars mainly because I find Dickens' stories and life to be boring. This book did an incredible job in narrating his life and putting it together well enough to hold interest, but, I don't think this book will stick with me beyond that one description. If you are a Dickens fan, you should definitely read this. Even if it's just for the illustrations--they are full of details to just get lost into!

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### **Sara says**

This is a really neat biographical tale of Dickens. I am a bit confused, however, as to who the intended audience is. The illustration and writing style was captivating for my six year old, and yet, there is no way that a young child would have any idea of Dickens's writing with the possible exceptions of A Christmas

Carol and The Cricket and the Hearth.

5 stars for storytelling. 3 stars for intended audience.

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### **Amy says**

After having read a disappointing children's book on Emerson, I found this one to be delightful. I love how it brings the setting into view from up above and slowly zooms in with the author asking the reader to find 12-year-old Dickens sitting in a doorway. Young Dickens is sad about the books he's had to sell and tired from a day's work in the factory. He spends the night alone writing. And the moment my child asks where young Dickens' parents are, we turn the page to find that they're in debtor's prison.

This story shows the world of the poor that Dickens gleaned from his life to write into his stories. It also shows the love of his family and the hope that Dickens was able to express in his writing. The illustrations are lovely, and the writing is perfect to tell young Dickens' story. I especially appreciated the 2nd person omniscient narrator taking us into Dickens' world for a small glimpse of some of the parts of his life that inspired David Copperfield and others of his novels.

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### **Tomiko says**

It probably wasn't lost on the publisher that February 2013 marks the 200th anniversary of Charles Dickens birth. However, Deborah Hopkinson's *A Boy Called Dickens* does not read like an opportunistic, dry-as-sawdust, requisite children's biography. Instead, it is a lovingly crafted picture book biography that I think a wide range of readers can enjoy on many different levels. Young pre-readers can find intriguing details in the sometimes Where's Waldo-esque illustrations. Middle grade readers can relate to a rags to riches story. Even high school readers can find value in the book, as a quick entrée into Dickens' real world, to see how it influenced his writing. And for adult readers, it brings you back to your childhood, when might have heard "A Christmas Carol" for the first time.

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### **Andréa says**

I was not a fan of the writing style nor the ambiguity of the text. (It was often difficult to tell which statements were hypothetical, which were assumed/extrapolated, and which were true.)

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### **Laura says**

The illustrations are well done and help drive the story by depicting old London and the difficult childhood Dickens' endured. Many people may be unaware of the financial struggles Dickens' family faced when he was a boy, since the novelist kept this part of his life a secret for many years. While Hopkinson explains in her endnotes that the book is based on actual incidents and pieces that Dickens wrote about his own life, she does emphasize that it is a work of fiction. Readers will enjoy the overall message of the story of a young boy never giving up on his dream despite facing many difficult obstacles.

There are many very positive reviews for this picture book, however the topic and writing style may not resonate with all readers. There are many references to Dickens' books and characters he created throughout this book, which may be unfamiliar to younger children. At times, I also felt the literary device of the narrator directly addressing the reader to be forced.

I would classify this book as an advanced picture book geared toward students in grades 3 to 5.

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### **Medeia Sharif says**

As a fan of Dickens, this was a delight to read. I learned things about his childhood that I wasn't familiar with. After suffering the hardships of child labor and imprisoned parents, Dickens made it in the world as an educated person and talented writer. His love of books and storytelling abilities kept his spirits up during this tough time. The charming illustrations pull us into the time period.

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