*Charles Dickens’s Great Expectations: A Cultural Life*

Mary Hammond (2015)

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Framed as a cultural history of Charles Dickens’s thirteenth novel, Mary Hammond’s monograph cites Patsy Stoneman’s *Brontë Transformations* as an inspiration (3), and aims to place an emphasis on both artistry and industry as it sets down its tale of the reputational journey of *Great Expectations*. In Hammond’s words, the project in part seeks to reveal ‘the industrial, cultural and socio-political processes through which a widely disseminated novel by a famous Victorian survived a protracted period of unpopularity to emerge as a popular classic, and ended up as a cornerstone of the process through which twenty-first century Western (and particularly English) readers constitute their own cultural DNA’ (151). Thus, Dickens’s 1861 contribution to the sensation novel genre has a sensational history of its own to be related; I found it hard not to think of Dickens’s own words in the preface to the 1841 edition of *Oliver Twist*: ‘I wished to show … the principle of Good surviving through every adverse circumstance, and triumphing at last’ (Dickens 1937: vii). Put another way, Dickens’s initially neglected work emerges in Hammond’s account as the little *Bildungsroman* that could. Its original success as a part publication was far from spectacular (23); furthermore, ‘on some level it disappointed nineteenth-century readers in volume form, and […] it was more misunderstood, and for longer, than almost any other Dickens work apart from *Hard Times*’ (192); yet *Great Expectations* went on to become Dickens’s third most adapted story behind *A Christmas Carol* and *Oliver Twist*. Not that the author sets out to make a case for the novel on aesthetic grounds; Hammond makes it clear that she is avoiding ‘an analysis which would otherwise have had to rely on a set of assumptions based on an unavoidably subjective close analysis of textual “meaning” supported by an at best partial list of publishing statistics’ (192).

*Charles Dickens’s Great Expectations: A Cultural Life* is nothing if not timely. *Great Expectations* has been available for consumption in recent years as a story of contemporary New York (Alfonso Cuarón’s 1998 film), as a zombie mashup novel (179), and, at one point, as a log flume attraction, the Great Expectations Boat Ride, in the first incarnation of Dickens World in Chatham, Kent (I write as a survivor of this latter experience). Although the purview of *A Cultural Life* only extends to 2012, Dickens’s bicentenary year, evidence of the variety and vitality of the cultural afterlife of *Great Expectations* has continued to mount in the meantime. Ronald Frame’s neo-Victorian *Havisham* was published by Faber in 2012; a solo show starring Linda Marlowe, *Miss Havisham’s Expectations*, opened at London’s Trafalgar Studios in 2014; and the West Yorkshire Playhouse was set to stage a new adaptation of the novel in spring 2016. Moreover, Miss Havisham and her devious undoer, Compeyson, were central characters in BBC One’s mashup of Dickens stories, *Dickensian*, screened in January 2016. In the light of this latter series, Hammond’s careful tracing of the idea of a Dickensian essence, and ‘the way in which the concept itself has been historically and culturally formed and utilised’ (114) is particularly useful. *A Cultural Life* also effectively captures the post-war movement of the character of Miss Havisham to a position of central importance in adaptations of the novel (115), and more broadly, the ‘new commitment to the centrality to this story of female performances which have subtly – and sometimes radically – altered its politics’ (135).

Like David Nicholls, the screenwriter of the 2012 *Great Expectations* film adaptation who is quoted in Hammond’s book (164), I first read the novel as a teenager, as a school set text. This early exposure does tend to influence a reader’s later notions of literature, and of *Great Expectations*’ place in the literary canon. Just as in an earlier period that Hammond describes, Dickens was presented to me at a 1980s secondary school as the epitome of Englishness and English humour, with *Great Expectations* one of its outstanding examples; yet the novel was also spoken of as both classic literature and an ‘everyman’s favourite’ (121). The references to *Great Expectations*’ use in educational contexts will therefore hold particular interest to those who studied it as an exam text, with the novel at various times regarded as ‘a dull, forbidding duty-read on school and college curricula’ (120), or as both ‘a stepping stone to better things, and as a latent marker of a sound national consciousness rooted in the vernacular…’ (82). As Hammond notes, the history of radio adaptations of Dickens is a neglected area; the BBC’s early role in promoting *Great Expectations* as a text for schools though its ‘fidelity format’ radio adaptations (141) points to an important piece of the pre-history of the BBC’s Sunday afternoon television adaptations of classic novels in the 1970s.

The book’s structure makes clear the importance of David Lean’s 1946 film adaptation as a turning point in the novel’s reputation; Hammond remarks, memorably, that ‘as a result of global post-war film industry expansion and its distribution by the American firm Universal, it won over new international audiences who knew nothing of the novel’s chequered history and thus, wearing a false aura of entitlement, it took on the status of a time-served global icon’ (120). Yet Lean’s film owes much to actor Alec Guinness’s 1939 stage adaptation of the novel, a fascinating and under-appreciated connection that is well worth the space that Hammond devotes to it. Similarly, W.S. Gilbert’s 1871 adaptation at the Court Theatre, London, is discussed in enlightening detail.

Given the range of material the book has to cover, the material on adaptation theory is sparing, but serves its purposes. Hammond invokes Bolter and Grusin’s model of remediation (10-11), Rachel Malik’s term ‘capsularity’ (7-8) and Sarah Cardwell’s reading of the distinctive features of television adaptation (132-3), and only rarely did I disagree with her assumptions about the purposes of adaptation. It is inevitable that in a book like this – a compendium of information about the novel’s journey through culture – certain aspects will be under-represented. I had hoped for more coverage of recent theatrical adaptations, for example; and at times when *A Cultural Life* hits a particularly interesting seam of activity, it is occasionally a little frustrating that it does not ‘zoom in’ and offer a close reading of these adaptations. This is in the nature of such a project, however, and it could certainly be argued that future close readings and case studies of *Great Expectations* adaptations will have their work made easier by Hammond’s monograph setting out the full context in which individual works appear. Overall, the book achieves the double feat of being a reference work to keep returning to (for example, Appendix D, Contemporary British and American Reviews, is a real treasure trove) and a narrative that draws the reader on. Some of Hammond’s most vivid and incisive judgements occur in the later sections on graphic novel adaptations and pop-culture mashups of *Great Expectations*. Whether planning to research or teach *Great Expectations*, *A Cultural Life* soon begins to feel indispensable as a companion to the novel’s publication and adaptation history. For all these achievements, I think I can forgive the absence of material on the Great Expectations Boat Ride.

**References**

Dickens, Charles (1937), *Oliver Twist*, London: Nonesuch Press.