

Librarian's Shelf by Mimi Ernst

Dickens isn't just for Christmas

Visits to the United States by British super stars are the catalyst for extravagant celebrations equal to the energy and expenses we Americans sacrifice to celebrate our national holidays.

Just recently the 50-year anniversary of the Beatles' appearance on the Ed Sullivan Show was the inspiration for many commemorative events. Looking back at US history, one can find similarities between the Beatles' 1963 American tour and the visits by Charles Dickens in 1842, and 1867. Both drew large hysterical crowds. Both were artistic events, hyped by media coverage. Both events were so significant, their impact is rekindled during benchmark calendar years.

One difference, however, is the Dickens visits were much more prestigious. By the time he came to America, Dickens was a household name among the public. His novels were popular with Americans, even though they had been pirated as no international copyright laws had been passed nor would be for the next 50 years. He performed for crowds of 1000 or more. The Beatles, on the other hand, were not very well known by Americans age 30 and older, but their appearance on the Ed Sullivan Show gave them instant national recognition.

The passing of 150 years has quieted the significance of Dickens' literary tours in America, but not the joy of reading or listening to his stories. The shelves of the Columbus Library have 17 of his novels, 5 on CD, and 4 on DVD. You can also find his novels among the 6600 e-books and 4200 audiobooks, on the Library's subscription to Overdrive. All free! Get assistance using Overdrive at a Tech Tuesday session, the 2nd Tuesday of the month. Better yet, follow the Overdrive instructions printed in a pamphlet available at the information desk to download Dickens right from your home computer.

Personally I like listening Dickens rather than reading him. His audio versions are narrated by native speakers whose British accents make the text pop. Figurative language, such as metaphors and similes, as well as humorous hyperboles and lyrical alliterations, make this poetic style very entertaining when read aloud and flavored with pauses and vocal emotion. The drudgery of a long drive, say to Denver and back, is pleasantly reduced when you can listen to a Dickens audiobook. You can't get much cheaper entertainment, and your trip will have an added dimension.

Prior to becoming a Dickens fan, my only exposure to his talent was reading or watching "The Christmas Carol". Not until I read an article in the February 2012, issue of "Smithsonian" entitled "Mad for Dickens" was my interest sparked. This article and the 2011 biography, "Charles Dickens: A Life" by Claire Tomalin, which I read and reviewed for the Two Twenty-two Book Club, were part of the 200th anniversary celebration of Dickens' birth (1812-1870).

After these two reads, I could not get enough of his poetic descriptions, loose plots, and colorful characters, whose trials and triumphs made the condition of living in large cities in England during the Industrial Revolution believable. Dickens had firsthand knowledge of poor, homeless Londoners who had flocked to the city in search of work, but were forced into prostitution, thievery, and even debtors' prisons.

One other event that brought Dickens to life for me was the Omaha venue of a literary, theatrical tour by Gerald Charles Dickens, the great-great grandson of the famous Charles Dickens. For the past three years, Gerald has made Omaha one of his few Midwest bookings. Last November the tour included three performances by Gerald based on excerpts from Dickens novels. The performance I attended was held at the General Crook House Museum, located at Historical Fort Omaha and sponsored by the Douglas County Historical Society.

No need to wait for the next anniversary celebration to enjoy the writing of Charles Dickens. Take him on your next road trip and let him entertain you. The miles will melt way.