

Charles Dickens by Michael Slater.
Yale University Press 2009.

Charles Dickens remains one of Britain's most popular novelists, and almost everyone is likely to have read at least one of his books, or seen dramatisations of them on screen, television or the stage. I suspect though that comparatively little is known about the man himself, beyond perhaps his famous latter day stage performances of readings from his works and his scandalous relationship with Ellen Ternan.

In his new biography of Dickens, Professor Michael Slater, probably the world's greatest living authority on the author, has produced a master work of the biographer's art, as well as an exhaustive and at times exhausting (the book weighs in at 700 pages and is very heavy!) survey of Dickens' life.

While reading the book, the first major biography of Dickens for twenty years, I was deeply struck not only by the minute detail with which Professor Slater follows Dickens from birth to death, but the skill with which he presents his material in such a readable way.

Everything is here for the reader of Dickens who seeks to understand the influence the author's life had on his work, down to the names of childhood friends used for characters in stories, some perhaps not wholly to their liking! Slater also explains how Dickens acquired his encyclopaedic knowledge of London, enabling him to create the powerful atmosphere suffusing some of his stories.

Dickens emerges from this superb biography as a driven man of huge energies, at times haunted by the down turn in family fortunes during his youth, proud of his achievements yet prey to the sadness of a marriage that failed to satisfy him and the demands on him of his large family.

Charles Dickens is a fitting biography for a great writer, but it also tells a very human story, as well as giving invaluable information on the background to the writing of Dickens' greatest works.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh