

The Best of Times
2nd Place Stuckey Contest Winner
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Several years ago, when I was about eight years old, my mom read *David Copperfield*, by Charles Dickens, to me and my older brother and twin sister. Mom always loved to read aloud to us; before we could read ourselves, she would read picture books to us every single night, and now that we were old enough to read, she thought that it was high time that she started reading nearly impenetrable, 500-page books.

I must say, I would have preferred it if she had stuck to the picture books.

My uneducated, eight-year-old self turned out to be a remarkable judge of books, because back then I hated Charles Dickens. I still do. *David Copperfield* had a unique way of trying, and utterly failing, to be funny in some parts, even though a depressing air of the worst kind hung over it like a dirty fog. Speaking of which, later on, when I was about ten, Mom read *Bleak House* to us, and I disliked it even more.

“Why?!” I remember demanding after particularly agonizing, immensely depressing characters wherein every one of the originally sparse, lovable characters in the book died, “why do we have to read these horribly depressing, whiny books?”

“Because they are valuable,” Mom would try to argue.

However, despite the fact that I was ten years old and much less smart than my Mom, who is an English professor at a nearby college, my zeal and desire to stop reading drove me to continue my argument. “No they aren’t!” I would practically yell. “They’re not valuable! They’re not even well written! Dickens just made them needlessly depressing in the hopes that someone would mistake his incoherent whines for reasoned social commentary!”

Frankly, I have not yet found an argument which can stand against this tirade of truth. Mom would try a different tactic: “People reference these works all the time. You need to read them in order to understand those references.”

I was ready for this one. We had the same discussion regarding *David Copperfield*, and I had two years to prepare for it, “I seriously don’t care about those references,” I quipped. “Anyone who references a Charles Dickens book is probably not saying anything relevant to me anyway. Additionally, my ten years of experience in distinctive literary circles (here I was exaggerating a bit; I had never been in a literary circle of any kind) had never revealed even a single reference to a Dickens book that I could not have easily figured out without actually reading the book.”

I was impressed with my reasoning. It wasn’t bad for a ten-year old. My mom, however, was not impressed, and we ended up finishing *Bleak House*. It took an entire summer’s worth of sporadic reading aloud, but eventually all of us children managed to hang on until the

ridiculously disappointing ending. Frankly, I had been expecting something along the lines of “Congratulations! I’m sorry that I had to write that awful book for you to read. Please go to this address for your complimentary bag of money...” Instead, the protagonist got a cottage. Seriously. That was the ending of the book. My favorite character-this is true- was the main character’s donkey.

My brother and sister felt approximately the same way, except they both had different favorite main characters, both of whom, I believe, died. My mom did not feel this way at all. She would try to create a rousing family discussion of the material thus:

“What did you think of Dickens’ use of characterization at the end of the text?” she would ask, and actually expect us to answer seriously.

“I thought it was stupid,” my twin sister would mumble sullenly.

“I couldn’t tell; all the characters died too quickly for us to actually know them,” I would respond bitterly.

My older brother, Max, would sometimes respond with a fairly reasonable, though critical answer, if he was there. Being fourteen, he was excused from these reading sessions if he really wanted to be.

Mom would then share her deeply complex views with us all. I thought-and to some extent, I still think- that she was overanalyzing the book. I believe that it’s basically a way to express angst about stuff, or possibly Dickens letting off some steam by killing off a bunch of characters, or maybe even being simply sadistic in letting us actually get to know and admire the characters before he kills them off. This rarely came up in our family discussions, unless I brought it up. Mom just continued posing these questions, trying to get us engaged:

“I always admired his interesting dual-narration technique,” she said. “What did you think of how it helped broaden his scope and supplement the plotline in different ways?”

“I thought it was stupid,” my twin sister would mumble sullenly. She was desperately looking forward to the days when she could, like Max, be excused from these reading sessions.

“Well, it certainly let him introduce and kill off more charming and unnecessary characters,” I would quip. This was mainly referring to an entirely unimportant, very sympathetic pauper named Jo, who, of course, dies. It’s a touching moment. I remember refusing to read the book for weeks afterward.

Mom was very knowledgeable about narrative critiques, having written her dissertation on the subject and, in fact, used *Bleak House* as an example text in her dissertation. In fact, she was very knowledgeable about most things in *Bleak House*. I’m fairly certain she actually enjoyed reading it, which I could not for the life of me understand.

Later, I realized that it was not so much that she enjoyed how bad the book was as she enjoyed reading aloud to us. Even after we had mostly grown out of being read aloud to, when my twin sister, Anne, and I were about thirteen, Max was sixteen, she still tried to rally us all around- you guessed it- yet another Charles Dickens book. Earlier, she had managed to keep our

attention for the duration of the truly awful, but blissfully short Shakespeare play *A Winter's Tale*, which even Mom agreed was horrible, but we couldn't believe that she seriously expected to keep our attention for all 500-plus pages of *Dombey and Son*. Max immediately opted out of the reading. Anne would have opted out, but Mom forced her to stay. Mainly out of sympathy for Mom, I agreed, on the stipulation that, once five separate people had died, I would be excused from reading. Mom agreed, thinking I was joking. I wasn't. Mrs. Dombey died in the first dozen pages. The elder Mr. Dombey was left with a daughter and son. He mistreated the daughter. The son was sick, but as he grew up became increasingly fond of the daughter until he was sent to boarding school, which of course, was badly-run and cruel to its attendees. The son got so sick that I knew he was going to die. What's more, there was a hook-handed man who was both lovable and unimportant, so I knew that he, too, was not long for this world. I decided to opt out before my agreed five people had died. Anne, after a long battle, had managed to win her freedom as well, even before I decided to abandon ship. Mom, though she must have expected this, was still saddened by our lack of appreciation of what she viewed as a great text. She eventually read the whole thing by herself; I admired her resolve. That was the last book that she tried to read aloud to us.

Looking back, a year later, I wish that I had stuck with the book for its entirety. It's not because I've grown to admire Dickens; I still despise everything that he's written aside from *A Christmas Carol*. But I wish that Mom would continue to read aloud to us. To her, and to me, that was a great experience of bonding, her and us three children. I can tell she misses it. She's even tried to get us interested in books that weren't classics, but even that failed. We're just growing apart. There's nothing we can do to change it, but at least we still have those memories of Mom reading picture books to us all together.