

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

David Copperfield

Elisa Leonelli · Wednesday, August 19th, 2020

A few weeks ago I watched an online press screener of the movie *The Personal History of David Copperfield*, directed by [Armando Iannucci](#) from the 1850 novel by [Charles Dickens](#), and found it tremendously exciting. I pulled out of one of my bookshelves the paperback of the thick novel with the original illustrations by H.K. Browne, and started reading it. I interviewed the director and [Dev Patel](#), who plays Copperfield as a young man. I did some research that I now share with you, encouraging you to delve into your own exploration of this amazing writer, his life and his work.

David Copperfield is Dickens' most autobiographical novel, as the story a boy who becomes a writer despite a grim childhood of poverty and abuse, however it's not his real life story. For example it was his father John who ended up in debtors prison, joined by his wife and the younger children, while his 12-year-old son had to leave school to go work in a [shoe polish factory](#). In the novel, as it often happens in fairy tales with wicked stepmothers, we see this father figure represented by two characters, the wicked stepfather Mr. Murdstone and the kindly Mr. Micawber.

I remembered seeing Dickens' resentment toward his father explored in the movie *The Man Who Invented Christmas* (2017) with Dan Stevens and Jonathan Pryce.



Dev Patel (c) HFPA

[Dev Patel](#), an actor I always loved and profiled in 2016, says: “Our movie is a beautiful coming of age journey for this young man, who is learning to embrace who he is and his past, his trials and tribulations, and honing those in order to achieve success in his life. He came from a loving environment that was stripped away from him, his stepfather was incredibly abusive, and there are elements of child labor in the bottling factory. But what’s incredible is that David Copperfield can turn that trauma into triumph, like Charles Dickens took this pain and didn’t let it consume him, but instead he decided to share it through his writing.”



David Copperfield © Dean Rogers-Searchlight

Iannucci had long loved Dickens, in 2012 he had directed the documentary *Armando's Tale of Charles Dickens*, where he said: "Dickens was a spectacularly popular, critically applauded writer. He has such a distinctive tone, a recognizable unique style, as he tackled the big issues: crime, death, poverty, riches, guilt, fear. He secured his reputation as a champion of social justice, with his vivid and angry portrait of the condition of Britain."

Iannucci, born in Glasgow, Scotland to an Italian father, wanted his color-blind movie version of *David Copperfield* to be true to the period, Britain in 1840, but feel contemporary, not reverential, because, he says, "the book was about the imagination and the comedy, the language and the power of words." He adds, "The general impression of Dickens is that he is a verbose Victorian novelist who writes about mud and fog, death and poverty, and he is that, but he's also very funny. What I find inspiring is that he had this massive audience and he used it to talk about issues that directly affected peoples' lives, like industrialization, child labor, bad schooling, brutality, so he was a real thorn in the side of the establishment."

I had read *David Copperfield* and *Oliver Twist* as a child, growing up in Italy, but in abridged illustrated editions, so I ask him if the novels by Charles Dickens are appropriate for children. He replies: "I made a movie for children that people of all ages can get something from, they can go see it with their parents and grandparents, and if it inspires people to go pick up the original novel, to read about Dickens and its time, that will be marvelous."



Elisa Leonelli with Dev Patel (c) HFPA 2016

Well, that is exactly the reaction this movie provoked in me, and hopefully in you too. As to when you might be able to see it, that remains uncertain. *The Personal History of David Copperfield* premiered at the Toronto Film Festival in September 2019, it was released in UK theaters in January 2020, but US release was postponed from May 8 to August 28, because theaters are closed due to the coronavirus pandemic. We hope Searchlight will make it available via streaming.

In the meantime you could watch the 1935 Hollywood version of *David Copperfield* directed by George Cukor, if you can find it. TCM (Turner Classic Movies) has [4 clips](#) and [the trailer](#), introduced by Lionel Barrymore. W.C. Fields plays Micawber, Basil Rathbone is Murdstone. I wish TCM allowed us die-hard cinephiles to view on demand any of the movies in their extensive library, without being limited to their programming choices.

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