

MASTERPIECE

Stay Tuned: The Rise of the Killer Serial

by Howard Cutler

If he were alive today, he would be the king of film writers, with Hollywood at his feet.

— Hesketh Pearson, *Dickens, His Character, Comedy and Career* (Harper, 1949)

...Or would it be “the king of primetime television with the Internet at his feet?” A passing glance at the current TV lineup or the quickest of online searches will tell you that mass media serial entertainment is alive and thriving. From dramas to reality series to online adventures, the situations and personalities we encounter in the modern serial have the power to preoccupy an entire society at work, at home, through the press, on TV, and by any other means available.

Blame it on Charles Dickens. He was the first to transform serial suspense into a large-scale social event. In the mid-1800s, it was the fate of a fictitious legal case—Jarndyce v. Jarndyce in *Bleak House*—that had everyone so engaged. And the reasons may have been much the same. Somehow a leisure-time entertainment had touched a nerve that ran deeper, exposing uncomfortable contradictions in society’s view of itself. The art form of serial fiction provided a safe and fascinating arena to play that conflict out.

Child of Technology

When *Oliver Twist*’s first episode “launched” in January of 1837, Charles Dickens was a very young (age 25) and very hot new talent in the only mass medium that existed: print. The newly-appointed editor of the monthly periodical *Bentley’s Miscellany*, he had complete creative control. He had earned that freedom because he had begun to make his backers very rich. And serial fiction was how he was able to do it.

It wasn’t his invention, of course. Homer knew perfectly well how to sing Odysseus into a tight spot each night to ensure his own place at the next day’s banquet. But Homer’s audience was a small, select elite, distribution depended upon his own two feet, and copy protection was not an issue—his genius was unique—until the advent of the written word. Every new form of mass entertainment is the child of technology in some respect. The birth of the serial blockbuster was no exception.

What Dickens had in common with such successors as David Chase (*The Sopranos*), Alan Ball (*True Blood*), Matthew Weiner (*Mad Men*), and J.J. Abrams, Jeffrey Leiber, and Damon Lindelof (*Lost*), and even MASTERPIECE’S *Downton Abbey* by Julian Fellowes, was a new wave of technology to ride, a huge potential audience to tap, the temperament to exploit the opportunity, and a business model to drive it. For TV serial dramas, advertiser-supported network television would provide the wave. Inspired by the explosive success of Mark Burnett’s *Survivor* and Simon Fuller’s *American Idol*, the rise of reality TV series has also fed the public demand for serialized entertainment.

Increasingly, both serial dramas and reality shows have used the Web and social media to create content, inspire their fan base, excite viewers' interest in and devotion to their show, and as a method of distribution that can reach beyond television. Writers from Stephen King (*The Green Mile*) to Alexander McCall Smith (*Corduroy Mansions*) to a vast array of bloggers and others using online methods to post serialized fiction. Victoria Blake publishes online "wovels," a term coined by programmer Jesse Pollack to describe fiction that allows the reader to choose different plot directions and conclusions. DailyLit.com, which claims hundreds of thousands of subscribers, is just one of many Web sites that offer readers "short, customized installments" of well-known books, sent via email or RSS feed to a computer or other mobile device.

New Stimulus through Print

For Dickens, the breakthroughs were a wave of recent innovations in publishing technology that radically lowered production costs and the price to the end user. Cheaper, faster paper manufacture, steel-plate mass reproduction of illustrations, advances in automated typesetting, and the steam-powered cylindrical printing press were all introduced between 1800 and 1830.

Then there was literacy, or, as we might think of it today, market penetration. We measure the reach of television and the Web by the number of devices in consumers' homes. In the 1830s, reach would have been measured by the percentage of the population that could read, and that number was growing in every stratum of society.

Increase in population and a rise in real wealth, however unequally distributed, were at the back of it. A growing middle class, living in greater comfort with more leisure time, fueled an appetite for new stimulus through print. And much as today's parents strive to foster their children's computer skills, so the public in Dickens' day viewed the necessity to master the technology of reading. Plus, the rapid growth of dense urban population centers meant that new trends and enthusiasms could ripple through society more quickly.

What did this expanding audience really want? They wanted pictures as well as words—that was clear—and they wanted cheap. By the early 1830s, profusely illustrated penny weeklies like Charles Knight's *Penny Magazine* were all the rage. But as print technologies lowered barriers to entry, a surplus of product developed. By the middle of the decade the English publishing industry was in a slump. Did readers of the 1830s also feel there were 500 channels with nothing on? As networks do today, publishers agonized over ways to capture and sustain audience loyalty.

Dickens and The Serial

Onto this scene arrived the intensely ambitious young Dickens, a driven man who had never known economic stability or respectability and badly wanted both. He craved fame as well. In his teens he had dreamed of stardom on the stage and studied for it as much as his meager purse would allow, but his gift found outlet first through the printed word.

His first successes were mere sketches, published (gratis) under the pen name “Boz,” but they caught the public’s fancy. The next step was more “high concept:” a comic series of continuing misadventures involving the members of the so-called Nimrod Club, to be published monthly at a shilling apiece. Behind this scheme was a pair of start-up publishers, Chapman and Hall, who proposed teaming young Dickens with an established star illustrator, Robert Seymour.

Dickens didn’t think much of the initial idea, but he improved on it. The enterprise got off to a very shaky start nonetheless. The first episode of *The Pickwick Papers* sold only 400 copies, and soon after, Seymour committed suicide following a heated dispute with Dickens over creative issues.

Dickens was tenacious, however, and, more important, he had the common touch, that rarest of gifts which enabled him to be understood and loved by men and women at all stations of life. He brought onboard a new illustrator, “Phiz” (real name: Halbot K. Browne), and somehow, together, they captured the exact national mood of the moment. By the time *The Pickwick Papers* ended its run in November of 1837, circulation had soared to 40,000 per month, a huge number for the day, and Chapman and Hall were rich men.

Pickwick Hats, Coats, Canes, and Cigars

But something else had happened as well, a kind of cultural mania. Its detractors even called it “Boz-o-mania.” We’d have to look to the original release of *Star Wars* or *Harry Potter* to find a comparable moment in our modern media culture. There were Pickwick hats, coats, canes, and cigars—a kind of product-licensing boom, except that there were no licenses to grant and no laws to protect Dickens’s interest in the exploitation of his new “brand.” Some claimed that Pickwick’s name was better known than the prime minister’s. People named their pets after Dickens’s characters, and catch phrases from the series entered common usage.

Looking back, what we see is the power of mass distribution and artistic genius combined. Here are the first symptoms of a mass-media culture at work. If anyone in Victorian England exercised the hold on the public imagination that a George Lucas or Steven Spielberg or J.K. Rowling does today, it was certainly Charles Dickens. At this point the public was ready for anything Dickens had to say, and he was in a position to cash in at last. His backers might have preferred Pickwick II, but instead, he took them—and most of the English reading public—in an entirely new direction.

A Far Less Comfortable Experience

Artist that he was, Dickens delved into the darkest days of his own unhappy childhood to fashion a melodramatic nightmare that would hold his public spellbound. *The Pickwick Papers* had been a comic joyride; *Oliver Twist* would be a far less comfortable experience. This time the plot was tightly tuned to extract every ounce of suspense. Every frustrated theatrical instinct Dickens had ever nurtured he now unleashed through a host of characters only Shakespeare could have equaled. While entertaining his vast audience extravagantly, he also confronted them with their own complacency, with each new monthly installment demanding that they

reexamine their poor laws, their institutions, their orthodox morality, and their assessment of human nature in general. In effect, he held them hostage for two years in the slums of London before “reawakening” them with the obligatory happy ending.

It’s arguable that the serial novel as Dickens practiced it was the first true form of mass media home entertainment. Certainly it played a role in people’s lives—not unlike TV serials do today.

Henry James tells a story of sneaking into the living room as a young child and hiding under a table to listen to Dickens’s *David Copperfield* being read by his father to his mother, older brother, and sister. During the scene in which David is cruelly abused by his stepfather, young Henry broke out in uncontrollable sobs, and he was escorted from the room, deemed too young for such lurid fare. This story gives some idea of the compelling hold these novels had on families in that age.

In fact, there was much debate about the appropriateness of *Oliver Twist* for respectable folk. “There is a sort of radicalish tone about *Oliver Twist* that I don’t altogether like,” wrote one critic. Novelist William Thackeray, a rival of Dickens’s, asserted that men of genius “had no business to make these characters interesting or agreeable, to be feeding their readers’ morbid fancies, or indulging their own, with such monstrous food.”

Amazed or Appalled

But if everyone in your immediate circle were caught up in the story and speculating on its outcome, wouldn’t you spend a shilling to investigate the next episode? And everyone was discussing *Oliver Twist*, from the newly-crowned teenage Queen Victoria (who said she disapproved of the novel for younger readers, but read on herself anyway) to Prime Minister Lord Melbourne (“...all about workhouses and coffin makers and pickpockets... I don’t like that low and debasing view of mankind”) to those who could never afford to buy the novel whole, but who could readily identify with the reality it described. All England found itself caught up in the tale of the lonely and mysterious orphan at the mercy of the parish welfare system. Critics themselves could only stand amazed or appalled, quote at length (to increase their own readership), and speculate about what might happen next.

And so, surely, did Dickens, who, unlike his predecessors, wrote his serialized novels on the fly, beginning their publication before the outcome was clear in his mind. “I am quite satisfied that no one can have heard what I mean to do with the different characters in the end,” he wrote about *Oliver Twist* in the middle of its run. “At present, I don’t quite know myself.” He planned *Great Expectations* originally to run for 20 monthly installments, but had to switch to weekly chapters to boost flagging sales of *All the Way Round*. And, when a writer friend criticized the rather unhappy ending of *Great Expectations*, Dickens promptly rewrote it.

In this approach, he was the true ancestor of today’s writers of prime-time television. The pressures he experienced must have been much the same as theirs. He monitored the public’s reaction to the story as it unfolded and adjusted the balance of the tale accordingly. He also

knew the anxiety of writing to deadline, relying on inspiration and momentum to carry him through to a satisfactory conclusion. “I can never write with effect, especially in a serious way, until I have got my steam up, or in other words until I have become so excited with my subject that I cannot leave off.”

A Truly Viable Profession

Oliver Twist changed the entire structure of the Victorian publishing business. The first episode of Dickens’ next serial novel, *Nicholas Nickleby*, launched before *Oliver Twist* even finished, sold 50,000 copies on its first day of publication— probably as startling a number to Victorians as the idea of tens of millions of viewers tuning in for the final episode of any popular TV serial is to us today. Henceforth all of Dickens’ novels and many of the century’s other literary masterpieces by William Thackeray, George Eliot, Anthony Trollope, Joseph Conrad, Thomas Hardy, and even Leo Tolstoy, were serialized.

The change was both good and bad. On the one hand, many who might never have read did read, and the audience for substantial literature grew. On the business side, writing fiction became a truly viable profession because profits increased. Not only did novels sold on the installment plan net more income during their run, but the episodic presale acted as a powerful promotion for the purchase (and rental) of the complete, bound version when it was eventually published. The cycle worked much the way film distribution does today, where theatrical release drives home DVD sales, online streaming, and rentals. Dickens may well have established fiction writing as a respectable profession, not so much by his artistry as by proving that it was possible to get rich at it—as rich as any doctor or lawyer.

Creatively, however, the enormous success of the serialized novel may have been a mixed blessing. Many critics and authors thought so. The very devices that made them so compelling— cliffhanging chapter stops and melodramatic crises—tended to distort overall dramatic structure. In addition, the creative control that had been so necessary for the genesis of *Oliver Twist* ebbed away as publishers adopted the role that studio executives do today. Since they were absorbing the financial risk and controlling distribution, they felt fully entitled to help shape the initial concept with less established authors and intervene mid-course if sales began to sag or the public took offense.

Technology Offers New Ways to Create

Who can say what Dickens would have made of today’s mass-media entertainment business? He would certainly recognize and know how to deal with much of it. The legal wrangles over copy protection would be no surprise; he faced plenty of outright piracy in his day, and there was no effective legal recourse. Now we rage about copyright violation in China. In Dickens’s day the chief villain was America.

He would no doubt be enthusiastic about technologies that offered him new ways to create exciting entertainment, and he would likely use those forms to make social statements as well as


to entertain. We can also be pretty sure he would find a way to work the system to his financial advantage. He was a sharp negotiator who knew how to leverage his own value. It's also a safe bet that today's multinational media conglomerates would find ways to make zillions from the exploitation of his unique gifts. The Dickens "brand" would be as sure-fire as John Grisham, Walt Disney, or Oprah Winfrey is today. The ultimate beneficiaries would be us, of course, still waiting to see just how the whole thing finally turns out.

Adapted from an earlier essay, "Stay Tuned for Our Next Episode: the Rise of the Killer Serial," by Howard Cutler, originally available at pbs.org/wgbh/masterpiece/olivertwist/ei_staytuned.html. © 2000, © 2012 WGBH Educational Foundation. All Rights Reserved. MASTERPIECE, MASTERPIECE THEATRE, and MYSTERY! are trademarks or registered trademarks of WGBH Educational Foundation. MASTERPIECE is funded by Viking River Cruises, with additional support from public television viewers, and contributors to The MASTERPIECE Trust, created to help ensure the series' future.



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