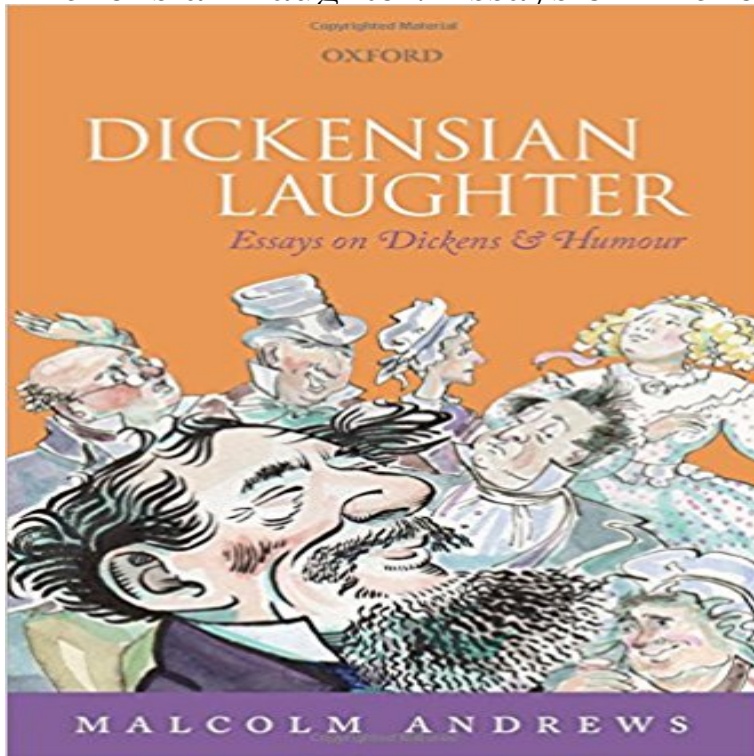


Dickensian Laughter: Essays on Dickens and Humour



How does Dickens make his readers laugh? What is the distinctive character of Dickensian humor? These are the questions explored in this book on a topic that has been strangely neglected in critical studies over the last half century. Dickens's friend and biographer John Forster declared that [Dickens's] leading quality was Humor. At the end of Dickens's career he was acclaimed as the greatest English Humorist since Shakespeare's time. In 1971 the critic Philip Collins surveyed recent decades of Dickens criticism and asked from how many discussions of Dickens in the learned journals would one ever guess that (as Dickens himself thought) humor was his leading quality, his highest faculty? Forty years later, that rhetorical question has lost none of its force. Why? Perhaps Dickens's genius as a humorist is simply taken for granted, and critics prefer to turn to his other achievements; or perhaps humor is too hard to analyze without spoiling the fun? Whatever the reason, there has been very little by way of sustained critical investigation into what for most people has constituted Dickens's special claim to greatness. This book is framed as a series of essays examining and reflecting on Dickens's techniques for making us laugh. How is it that some written incident, or speech, or narrative aside can fire off the page into the reader's consciousness and jolt him or her into a smile, a giggle, or a hearty laugh? That is the core question here. His first novel, *Pickwick Papers*, was acclaimed at the time as having opened a fresh vein of humor in English literature: what was the social nature of the humor that established this trademark Dickensian method of making people laugh? And how many kinds of laughter are there in Dickens? What made Dickens himself laugh? Victorian and contemporary theories of laughter can provide useful insights into these processes--incongruity theory or the relief theory of laughter,

laughters contagiousness (laughter as a social glue), the art of comic timing, the neuroscience of laughter. These and other ideas are brought into play in this short book, which considers not only Dickens novels but also his letters and journalism. And to that end there are copious quotations. The aim of the book is to make readers laugh and also to prompt them to reflect their laughter. It should have an interest not only for Dickensians but for anyone curious about the nature of laughter and how it is triggered.

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