

A Tale of Two Forms

Peter Takach

Fri, Jan 3, 18:36

1:1: Print was dead: to begin with. There is no doubt whatsoever about that. The register of its burial was signed by the computer, the Internet, the Kindle, and the cellphone novel. Print was as dead as a dial-up modem.

Mourners clung to their codices like life rafts, but still they drowned in the deluge of the digital. The terse eulogy befitted the attention spans of those present. If you were too busy texting, I'm sure you can find it online.

"How did we get here?" moaned the literati as they slit their throats with paper knives.

Sat, Jan 4, 18:59

1:2: It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of Ondaatje, it was the age of Perez Hilton, it was the epoch of bookshops, it was the epoch of Amazon, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to digital, we were all renouncing the disappearance of the human.

It was 2006 when I chanced upon the cellphone novel in the wanton browsing of my youth, when I was still free to wander unchecked through cyberspace. The same year I rediscovered Dickens.

Sun, Jan 5, 18:41

1:3: In the year 2006, there upon the borders of my desk stood *_A Tale of Two Cities_*. Being one of those cursed individuals who cannot imagine a time when he could not read, nor when he wouldn't rather be reading, I had filled hours consuming both *_Oliver Twist_* and "A Christmas Carol." But never before had such a tome been foisted on me by an educator. I, who had singlehandedly contended with Cervantes in the eighth grade and emerged triumphant and yet furious at the finale. I, who rolled my eyes at Dickens' renowned first line.

I read. I loved it.

Mon, Jan 6, 18:53

1:4: London. Fall term lately over, and the student sitting in the British Library. Implacable reams of tomes. Fetishistic lust for reading. Dying for Dickens' scrawl, for the flowing pen of mastery.

Dickens, who drew me here to London, his most enduring character. Who took me to Jacob's Island in search of Sikes only to discover design firms. Who made me wander through warehouses until I was locked out along a quay where the only escape was Folly Ditch. Seventeen and stuck in his restless nocturnal footsteps in search of his golden thread. Sketching in moleskines my sweeping spiels, prolific with melodrama.

Tue, Jan 7, 18:56

1:5: In these times of ours, though concerning the exact year there is no need to be precise, I took up anginnism, that obscure discipline solely devoted to the dissection of opening sentences. For the first line should tempt like succulent bait, thrust a jagged hook into the brain, and remain long after the reel is happily wound up.

Dickens wrote fifteen novels in his lifetime. Fifteen alchemic lures to entrap, month after month. Sixteen, if you include "A Christmas Carol," to haunt your thoughts.

At the heart of anginnism reposes our obsessive thirst for beginnings. Our vain deferment of the finale.

Wed, Jan 8, 18:54

1:6: Now, what I want is feedback. From these boys and girls and their cells. Their output is staggering. If one sends but ten texts an hour, of three words each, that's 86,400 words a year. As those of you with literary pretensions know, that's the length of a novel. Texts average between 70 and 100 words.

Kids in Japan have realized this. And have seen their work put into print. And into movies. A text a day. Suspense. A teen romance with bullies, beefcake, and babes. Brief words. Romans à clef. Subscribers texting their input. Cellphone novels. I dare you to try it.

Thu, Jan 9, 18:40

1:7: Night is generally my time for reading. Flipping through deckled-edged pages and wondering what prompts one to trouble with plodding through classics, when one can browse and surf. And remembering how screens hurt my eyes even more than the flashlight app that illuminates my pages.

My co-worker at the bookstore reads a Dickens novel every Christmas. I pick up a four-dollar *David Copperfield* that night and follow suit. She has at least a forty-year head start on me, but I figure I can read the remaining eleven novels in as many years and be done by my thirty-fourth birthday.

Fri, Jan 10, 18:36

1:8: The first ray of light which illumines the gloom of ignorance and carpal tunnel syndrome is the eReader. Or at least that's how the bookstore I worked at marketed it. Really, these Kindle rip-offs are a decade behind current technology, but they come with one hundred free classics, including five Dickens novels.

I tried it. My five IKEA bookshelves could fit in my backpack, I am told. But with each maddeningly slow flip of the digital page, my heart is pulled deeper into the blackness that fills the screen as it loads.

Older generations seek the eReader. What do we seek? ►

Sat, Jan 11, 18:06

1:9: My first attempt at a cellphone novel was in 2006, and I could make nothing longer or more explicit than a forty-word semi-autobiography. I sent it to a friend, who thought it reeked personal ad, and in a way it did.

When read concurrently, it can be hard to pinpoint whether a detail stems from a Dickens novel or a Dickens biography. Likely the former is finer wrought. Similarly, cellphone novels are the maelstrom adolescence of their authors spewed into hyperlinked lucidity.

Perhaps every novel is an aborted personal ad.

Sun, Jan 12, 18:37

1:10: Among narratives in any form, which for many reasons it will be prudent to refrain from mentioning, there is one anciently common to most people, great or small: the serial. The soap operas my Baba used to watch every Wednesday. The plodding pace of construction on my street.

What draws us back day after day, month after month, vignette after vignette? I love the maddening seduction and those forced stops that spawned the word cliffhanger and the lustful shrieks of More! More! More!

Dickens knew. Cellphone novelists must know. I need to know.

Please, sir, I want some more.

Mon, Jan 13, 18:38

1:11: There once lived, in a sequestered part of the history of literature, a man named Charles Dickens, who released his character-choked opus in monthly installments. Who wrote in sharp, fluid script and popularized the expression "Merry Christmas" and spoke up for the poor and killed at least one character based on audience response. Whose words were read at street corners and made the most saccharine and naïve of heroes meet the worst of humanity. Dickens, who restores your faith in the inferno that is other people.

Dickens, who got paid by the word and who would have written the best blog ever.

Tue, Jan 14, 18:55

1:12: Seven years ago, Canada lay burning in the sun as my family van sped toward Toronto or oblivion. Seven years ago, my parents gave my sister and I our first cell phones, which were greatly desired by one and dreaded by the other. My sister delved into texting, while I devoured *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* and stumbled upon its surprise ending. From which no amount of texting or Tetris on my new phone could console me.

No matter how much you lament, you cannot alter an installment once it has been released to the masses. Else surely whoever penned Dickens' story would have restored him to life so he could finish *Drood*.

Wed, Jan 15, 18:46

1:13 Today *Great Expectations* sits in the corner of my darkened room by the bedside, it's title mirroring my own anticipation. Do I love Dickens because others say I should? Do I read him because others say I should?

I think one should do and read whatever the hell one wants. Perhaps if I'd had a cellphone before I was eighteen or my parents had left less books in the bathroom, I would be quicker on the text and have greater screen endurance. Perhaps I would have been content with the musical *Oliver* and *The Muppet's Christmas Carol*.

Doubtful.

Thu, Jan 16, 18:43

1:14 "What is exaggeration to one class of minds and perceptions, is plain truth to another." I don't believe in classes, scholarly or otherwise, but I do believe that Dickens is enjoyable to read while cellphone novels are not.

Perhaps it is because my phone is not advanced enough to subscribe to cellphone novels and I must read them online. Maybe I am not thirteen years old, or never was.

Likely if you printed and bound your novel I would love it. I am a slave to print media. Immersed in the tactile experience of destroying every book I touch.

Fri, Jan 17, 18:07

1:15 An ancient lover of English literature? The fashionable backlash of print for print's sake. Pre-modernist, I do not trust the retentiveness of data not carved in clay tablets. And yet why should our sacred trust be placed in any scrawls or carvings that wear and fade to dust?

Did not the Luddites greet the printing press with fear and trembling? I embrace the new with arms long accustomed to the labour of typing and eyes adjusted to screens. I text my words to posterity or oblivion and dismiss autocorrect with contempt.

Sat, Jan 18, 18:49

1:16 Whether cellphone novels shall turn out to be the next great form, or whether that station will be held by something else, these text messages might show.

I believe that it has done me good and will do you good to sore the thumbs for a bit. The best writing advice I ever got was to never hope to mimic the epics of other times, and to instead write for your own.

But read your Dickens. I implore you. Read him because someone told you to. Read him every winter or every day, in print or on your cellphone.

He could teach you a thing or two in any form. 🐻