

# THE OTHER MAN *in my life*



In the month that marks the bicentenary of Charles Dickens's birth, his biographer Claire Tomalin talks about her relationship with one of our best-loved writers

**CLAIRE TOMALIN, 78**, lives in Richmond with her husband, writer Michael Frayn, who she married after her first husband, journalist Nick Tomalin, was killed in Israel in 1973. Together, they have six children and ten grandchildren.

**I've always been interested in Dickens.** I read his books as a child, starting with *David Copperfield*, and I adored him. Before I wrote this book, I wrote one about his relationship with the actress Nelly Ternan, which started when he was 45 and still married, and she was 18. Nelly was always very lightly mentioned by historians, and I thought how odd that was. She was regarded as a dangerous topic because it made Dickens look flawed and I thought that was a story that ought to be told.

**It's widely known Dickens treated his wife badly.** He had a workman divide their bedroom to signal that he didn't want to sleep with her any more. And he published a public statement suggesting that she was slightly mad, which was not true, and he wrote a terrible letter suggesting she didn't love the children. I think it was important to him to try to prove that he had been in the right.

**As a biographer, you have to see people's lives in a larger context.** Dickens felt that he'd made a terrible mistake in marrying poor Catherine. He was very unhappy in the marriage and

then he fell in love with a young girl. He remains to me a great man and a loveable man who went through a period of being a rotter.

**The difficulty in writing about Dickens and women is that it's not easy to see their personalities.** Catherine was squashed by Dickens. She was docile and pregnant from the first month of the marriage, and they had ten children. Dickens decided everything and had this huge personality, and there was almost no room for her. Nelly's personality was stronger, but the letters between them have never been found.

**Dickens had incredible energy. He wrote 14 and a half novels in his short working life.** He cared about people in need, such as workhouse girls who didn't even know their own age, and he did lots of work to encourage education for poor children. The amount of good work he did was extraordinary.

**I didn't write my first book until I was 40.** It was about Mary Wollstonecraft and came from a piece I'd written about her that had an extraordinary response; various publishers and agents wrote and said I must write a book. I was on maternity leave, then my son Tom was born with spina bifida and I couldn't go back to work. My husband, Nick, encouraged me



to write the book, so I did. Then, just as I finished it, Nick was killed.

**I took a job as literary editor of the *New Statesman* because I thought it would be better for the children if I had a**

**working life.** It was a struggle, but it was the right thing to do. I used to work terribly hard, then bicycle back home to cook the dinner for the children.

**To write a biography, you have to immerse yourself in that person's life.** It makes you a rather bad mother and wife. It helps that Michael's a writer too. He's very good about it.

**I'd known Michael for fifteen years before we got together.** He persuaded me to move to Richmond. He thought I'd like the garden, and he was right.

**Gardening is a big part of my life.** The garden is an emblem of life: there's always something dying and something doing well; tremendous disappointments then surprising joy.

Claire's book *Charles Dickens: A Life* (Viking) is out now. **w&h**

## My favourite character?

Mr Micawber in *David Copperfield* – Dickens was drawing on the good aspects of his own father. Squeers from *Nicholas Nickleby* is quite irresistible: he's horrible but very funny.