

MRS. JELLYBY AND ME

BY LESLIE HAYNSWORTH

I HAVE A PROBLEM. I am being oppressed by Charles Dickens. And the scary thing is that it's been going on for a long time now, and for most of that time I didn't even know it. Looking back, I can see that I've been in a sick, angry, passive-aggressive relationship with Dickens for at least fifteen years. But for a good thirteen of those years, I was in total denial. Only when things got really bad did I finally understand that there really *was* a problem—and that it wasn't all my fault.

It's come to a head over Mrs. Jellyby. The problem tends to manifest itself like this: I'm doing what I often do, juggling work and parenting, sitting in the den with the kids while they play but thinking mostly about what I should tell my students about writer's block in class tomorrow. Dimly, as I'm thinking, I hear background noise: an angry shriek, a couple of thumping sounds, and then a howl of outrage. I look up. One boy is sitting on the other, and they both have a death grip on the same monster truck. The one who's being sat on is trying to strangle the other boy with one hand, while the other rises in preparation for a lethal bodyslam.

I see that I have let things get a little out of hand. Boys are going to fight over monster trucks, and you don't want to intervene every time, or they'll never learn to work these things out for themselves. But you don't want them to kill each other, either. So I jump in, pry the two of them apart, and confiscate said toy.

But then I think, *Wait. There's something familiar about this scenario. Zoned-out mom, screaming kids . . . it definitely reminds me of someone. But who? Oh, yeah, I know . . . Mrs. Jellyby.*

You know, Mrs. Jellyby, the supremely bad mother from Dickens's 1853 masterpiece *Bleak House*, famous for her "telescopic philanthropy." What's really wrong with her—and, by extension, with me—is that her interest in the larger world makes her a terrible mother in ways that have disastrous consequences for her family. Burdened by her mission to save Africa, she neglects her children and her household to the extent that her small son, "one of the dirtiest little unfortunates" ever seen, is, when we first meet him, "hot and frightened, and crying loudly, fixed by the neck between two iron railings" of the staircase banister. Mrs.

Jellyby is oblivious. Meanwhile, her teenage daughter, "jaded and unhealthy-looking," remarks with great vehemence, "I wish Africa was dead!" Dinner in Mrs. Jellyby's household is long, "in consequence of such accidents as the dish of potatoes being mislaid in the coal scuttle, and the handle of the corkscrew coming off"; nevertheless, it would have been "an excellent dinner, if it had had any cooking to speak of." And her sitting room, "which was strewn with papers and nearly filled by a great writing-table covered with similar litter, was . . . not only untidy, but very dirty."

Yes, Mrs. Jellyby is me.

And according to Dickens, that's nothing to be proud of.

So this is my problem: Once Mrs. Jellyby's in the picture, I'm not just myself any more. I have a frame of reference: me, behaving like Mrs. Jellyby. That means it's no longer just I who's having a say in deciding how grave my transgressions against the code of ideal motherhood really are; Dickens is having his say now, too. I've heard him out and have apparently taken his perspective more to heart than I meant to. So much so that whenever I remind myself of Mrs. Jellyby, I fall into a panic of confused self-loathing. I love my children, and I think I try as hard as I can to be a good mother. But according to Dickens, I am a terrible mother, whose transgressions are going to have very drastic consequences. ("Her eyes could see nothing nearer than the midterm on Thursday". . .)

It should be said that Mrs. Jellyby and I do have a number of things in common besides letting our children live perilously close to bodily harm. We're told, for example, that Mrs. Jellyby "had very good hair, but was too much preoccupied with her

African duties to brush it." My own hair is thick and wavy, and I wash it at night, sleep on it wet, brush it out for ten seconds in the morning, and let it go at that. One might very well write of me: "Mrs. Haynsworth had very good hair, but was too much preoccupied with her teaching to brush it."

According to Dickens, it's all Mrs. Jellyby's fault, and it all rings uncomfortably true—maybe not in all the particulars (I don't have a daughter or a coal scuttle), but in terms of what it's centrally saying about her and about me. My house is always a wreck, our dinners are never very good, and at this moment my two-year-old looks like he coated himself in glue and rolled in red dirt. And I could fix it, all of it. I just don't. Mostly because I'm too busy writing, reading, teaching. And I think that's okay: Even if I wish I could keep everything in better order, failing at those things doesn't make me feel like a bad person. Writing and teaching are important, at least as important as cleaning up the house is, and besides, I . . . oh, but wait a minute. That's just what she always said about Africa, too.

If Charles Dickens knew me, he would hate me.

And then, in the throes of wrestling with my Mrs. Jellyby problem, it hit me that I actually, subconsciously, hated Charles Dickens too, and that I had done so for quite some time.

This revelation arrived during a conversation with my friend Chandlee about her own unhealthy relationship with a literary character. Chandlee's problem wasn't quite the same as mine: It wasn't a case of using literature to castigate herself for her perceived failings, but rather of identifying so strongly with a literary character that she couldn't

stop interpreting her life through that character's story. Her literary doppelgänger was Anne of Green Gables, and what would happen, she said, was that every time she saw any kind of parallel between the course of Anne's life and the course of her own, she'd expect her life to follow the path of Anne's life in that respect.

Eventually, though, Chandlee came to understand that this over-identification with Anne of Green Gables was actually harmful. If she freed herself from Anne's influence, she realized, maybe she'd get further in life. So she decided to exorcise Anne, and she came up with a sound strategy for doing so: She presented a paper on Anne of Green Gables at a literary conference. She pulled her relationship with Anne out of the realm of instinctive, emotional cathexis and applied an intellectual approach. It had the effect of putting Chandlee in a position of authority over Anne instead of the other way around. And that ended Anne's hold on Chandlee.

It was only when I heard this story that I realized I'd been trying to do the same thing to Dickens for years. During graduate school, I wrote a dissertation chapter on Dickens, and wrote both a scholarly article and a conference paper on *Bleak House*. I also wrote a paper on Evelyn Waugh in which I laid out in great detail all the things Waugh found wrong with Dickens. That paper called particular attention to the ending of Waugh's novel *A Handful of Dust*, which is surely one of the bleakest in all of literature: It leaves the novel's protagonist trapped in a South American jungle, the prisoner of a wicked, illiterate old man to whom he is compelled to read and reread all the novels of Dickens, ad infinitum. (Despite his illiteracy, the wicked old man nevertheless readily grasps the

point about Mrs. Jellyby: He castigates her for "not tak[ing] enough care of her children.")

Toward the end of graduate school, when I was feeling oppressed by literature in general, I came up with the idea for a collection of stories, to be titled *The Death of the Author*. Each story would parody the style of a noted author, and in each story, the author himself would be killed off by one of his characters. Readers would then have to guess whodunit—that is, which character was most likely to murder the author, and what that character's motive was. My literary agent thought the idea had potential but said I'd need to find some better-known writers to sign on. So I wrote a proposal and three sample stories, in which I killed off Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, David Foster Wallace, and, of course, Charles Dickens.

When none of the fiction writers I knew were enthusiastic about killing other writers in their prose, I shelved *The Death of the Author*. Last summer, though, I came across the proposal and looked at my stories for the first time in years. The parodies of Conan Doyle and Wallace were affectionately funny: Sherlock Holmes kills Conan Doyle for saying in his memoirs that facts matter less than imagination, and then runs off with Watson's eighth wife; David Foster Wallace falls into his footnotes and can't get out. But the Dickens one, seen afresh, shocked me. It was downright nasty—mean-spirited in its mockery of Dickens, and giddily gleeful about his death:

Oh, it was dreadful! Worse even than the death of my mother, cold and alone on her lover's grave! Worse than the death of little Jo the beggar child who gave me the smallpox which left me so disfigured, or the death of Krook by spontaneous combustion, or any

of the other horrible deaths it has been my misfortune to encounter—for mine has indeed been a life marked by many remarkably horrible deaths. But this was the worst of them all! For it was the death of Charles Dickens, the most beloved and edifying novelist this age has ever known.

So overcome by sorrow was I that I was quite insensible to my surroundings—until suddenly a voice intruded upon my wretched thoughts. "Excuse me," it said, "but d'you mind if I share your table?"

Looking up, I saw that the voice belonged to a young girl, quite thin and pale, as if she had endured much illness and suffering. Deeply moved by the piteous sight of her, I nodded my assent to her request—for I was still too overcome by grief to speak. Taking her seat, she smiled most joyfully and said, "I really ought not to be spending money in a coffee shop, for I am quite poor. But I couldn't resist it. I am celebrating, you see. This is the most glorious day of my life!"

"As it is the most sorrowful of mine," rejoined I softly.

"Indeed?" replied she. "I am sorry to hear it. But I have news that will banish all your sorrows, news that has made me, Little Nell, the happiest girl alive! Look!" Snatching the paper from my hands, she pointed at it eagerly. "He is dead!" she exclaimed. "The tyrant is dead! Charles Dickens is dead—and we are all free at last!" With that, to my astonishment and horror, she proceeded to laugh with frank and undisguised glee.

"Why," cried I, "it is no laughing matter that Charles Dickens is dead! It is the most terrible tragedy of the age!"

"Oh, come now," she replied. "He—or she, for that matter—who does not laugh at the death of Charles Dickens must have a heart of stone."

At the time I wrote it, I was not aware of my bitterness. Had you asked me then what I thought of

Dickens, I would have said that he was rightly considered one of the greatest Victorian novelists. I may have added that he seemed a little smug, and that there was a misogynistic strain in his work that irked me. But, all things considered, I thought pretty highly of Charles Dickens. It wasn't until I began to develop the Mrs. Jellyby hypothesis that I tapped into my subconscious motives: I'd been trying to beat Dickens into submission for years.

The venerable critic Harold Bloom says many writers enact a kind of Oedipal psychodrama with their literary forebears: They seek to figuratively kill off the authors they most admire so as to free themselves from the anxiety of influence. That might explain Evelyn Waugh's treatment of Dickens. But it doesn't explain mine. I have no intention of becoming the Dickens of my generation. If I had wanted to kill off my revered forebears, I would have gone after Jane Austen, Virginia Woolf, and Toni Morrison.

My animus against Dickens stems from a different kind of anxiety: Recognizing his greatness, it becomes all the more difficult and frustrating to challenge his authority. I recall a discussion I had in grad school about James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. We were debating whether or not the novel could be considered "postcolonial," and I found myself arguing in the negative; it seemed to me that Joyce's condescending descriptions of the Irish in *Portrait* did more to replicate British imperialist rhetoric than to resist it. One classmate in particular was upset that I would undermine Joyce in this way; he did not want to think of Joyce as anything less than a great writer. This is precisely the danger: On one hand, Joyce's portrayal of the Irish was unjust and

unfair. On the other hand, Joyce was a conspicuously clever and undeniably brilliant writer—and because of this fact alone, challenging Joyce is necessarily an uphill battle.

What's true of Joyce is also true of Dickens. Dickens, in my opinion, has never been particularly fair



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to his female characters, but until my Jellyby problem, my anger was kept at bay. I've been trapped in a sublimated schizophrenic frenzy about him all these years—deeply admiring his work, yet resenting his treatment of my sex. As a result, my subconscious mind periodically plots to kill him.

Hardly fair to the great man, I know. I still believe he merits most of the accolades that have been heaped upon him these last 170-odd years. But he was only human, and, as such, had the same blind spots and prejudices to which we're all susceptible.

So in the end neither Dickens nor

I deserve what we've put each other through. I don't deserve to feel so helplessly impotent in the face of his gender politics, and he certainly doesn't deserve to be the object of my murderous rages. My Mrs. Jellyby problem is simply the outcome of what happens in the space between text and reader—the space between Dickens' particular set of ideas, assumptions, and perspectives, and my own.

One of my initial assumptions as a reader, I now see, was that great writers like Dickens have much more cultural authority than I do. Whether or not this is true, what I need to remember is that, while it behooves to be a more forgiving reader, it is perhaps equally important to be a more empowered one. Dead white male that he is, Dickens can't do much to help his smug iterations of patriarchal values. And PhD-wielding English professor that I am, I ought to have more respect for myself as a (relatively) equal participant in determining the meaning, at least to me, of any novel I read.

In that respect, I'm grateful to Dickens. By unleashing Mrs. Jellyby on me, he's forced me to develop what will ultimately become a healthier approach to reading, regardless of the text or the author.

The only problem is, Mrs. Jellyby herself still hasn't gone away. She's still embedded in my psyche, still haunting me whenever the circumstances of my life call her to mind. So I'm starting to think that instead of trying to kill Charles Dickens, what I really ought to do is write a novel about *her*—one in which she, too, is freed at last from the weight of mid-Victorian male prejudice, and finally allowed to tell us about motherhood and Africa from her point of view. I'm eager to hear what she has to say. •