

Ian Keable. *Charles Dickens Magician: Conjuring in Life, Letters and Literature*. Ian Keable: iankeable.co.uk, 2014. Pp. xviii + 268.

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As Ian Keable may not be entirely familiar to literary scholars, some introduction may be necessary. Keable is a professional magician, Member of the Inner Magic Circle, and winner of the Magic Circle Comedy Award. He has published several books and been a presenter on BBC Radio 4 and is an accredited lecturer for the British Arts Society, specializing in Dickensian conjuring and eighteenth-century hoaxes. He writes a meticulous regular and informative monthly blog.

As to why a review of his book should appear in a journal of this nature, the title should provide something more than a hint. To this can be added Keable's participation in the conference held in Pécs celebrating the 200th anniversary of Charles Dickens's birth, at which he not only presented a paper providing a unique perspective into the author's association with magic tricks (which Dickens performed primarily for his children), but in the evening gave his own public performance of those tricks. Dickens paid close attention to the professional conjurers of his day, visiting their performances and including them among the characters in his novels and the other publications that he edited. Keable's attention to detail in his book is at least as close.

Conjuring blossomed as an entertainment form in the early nineteenth century, prior to which it had been of low quality, and the magician himself viewed as "not much higher than that of the vagrant." The performance of magic came more or less into its own at the same time as Dickens was embarking upon his career—at one time, he had seriously considered becoming an actor, visiting theatres regularly from 1827. It was in this decade that "a new style of magic performing emerged that attracted theatre-goers," rather than trying to gain street-goers' attention. "These were conjurers who performed predominantly with apparatus, exhibiting on stage a dazzling display of paraphernalia to intrigue their audience." Later, in 1842, Dickens would witness the show of a conjuror and be inspired to take up conjuring himself (3).

Charles Dickens Magician is quite original in its layout. The 236 pages are divided into six chapters, preceded by an Introduction, a "Cast of Characters," and a timeline of Dickens's Life and Conjuring. The chapters are divided into the "chapter proper," each with an informative title (The Observer, The Conjuror, The Showman, The Fan, The Man and The Writer), but these are followed by a hefty "supplement" strangely reminiscent of an Arden Shakespeare, for in pages these far outweigh the chapters themselves. The chapters, then, can be seen as the bare bones of the considerable research involved, while the informatively subtitled supplements are the meat. As the

book evolves, we meet Dickens as an observer of the magician's art, from the street to the theatre; here, too, the author points us to a popular street trick of the day, "thimble-rigging," and where it appears in *Sketches by Boz* and *Nicholas Nickleby*. Chapter Two looks at the various magic sets and books available, and the first time Dickens himself performed a magic trick, most likely on January 6, 1843, after he had purchased the complete stock-in-trade of a magician (63-65); Keable discusses the claims of various authors on the subject, convincingly dismissing the more tenuous claims. Indeed, throughout the book one receives the impression that Keable's approach is one of pragmatic, commonsense, based upon a thorough knowledge of his subject, or, I should say, subjects, for the author appears equally at home with the literary as with the magical elements of his research.

The third chapter introduces us to Dickens, the showman—any Dickens scholar will know that the author was a consummate performer; this is indicated by his early flirtation with the acting profession, but throughout his life, the pleasure he took in "performing" his books to large public audiences. The audiences at his magic shows were smaller, more intimate—but in some ways, that is a greater challenge to the magician, part of whose skill is legerdemain. We are given a rare glimpse into the patter that accompanied one of his (and others') tricks, the Bonus Genius or, as he himself called it, the "Travelling Doll Wonder" (95-99), a favorite trick that relied heavily upon his abilities in acting and mimicry. We are extremely fortunate to have extant patter, subsequently printed in *The Boys Holyday Book, for All Seasons*, published in around 1844. The rarity of such a scripted patter is not attached to Dickens: understandably, very little of what magicians said in accompaniment to their tricks has been set down.

Dickens's interest in magic clearly began in the role of fan. He was intrigued in how the tricks worked, and in the lengthy supplement to Chapter Five we find analyses of various tricks that could be witnessed at the time: tricks by a particular magician (for instance, de Caston) but also of specific tricks: the Slate Trick, the Blindfold Act, the Sphinx Illusion and others. While this may not be of direct interest to the literary scholar, it is nonetheless most pertinent as it provides us with insight into the novelist, the world around him, and one part of that world that intrigued and attracted him. While, as is stated at the outset, the conjuror was gravitating from the street to the theatre, performed magic was practiced in the open thoroughfare, and therefore was as omnipresent in Dickens's day as the busker is to the modern world.

Dickens was a Victorian, and the Victorians were as obsessed with spiritualism as they were with phrenology. The fifth chapter looks at the personality of Dickens and his relationship with Spiritualism. This is a short chapter, and though it, too, has its supplements, one feels it is more for the sake of form, to give the Contents page some unity. It is a necessary chapter, and it has the feeling of being so.

Chapter Six takes us to Dickens, the Writer. Following the opening section (ten pages), it provides the reader in turn with a list of quotations from Dickens's novels (eight novels in all) about conjuring, the magic tricks that appear in the novels, and articles on the subject in his magazines *Household Words* and *All the Year Round*. After setting out the author's aims, the *Conclusion* ends in an overly modest self-appraisal of the author's (Keable's) efforts:

It is always dangerous to make any predictions for a book; and especially dangerous for a decidedly non-scholarly academic, both in the world of conjuring and Dickensian research, to expect any return outside the sheer reward and enjoyment of writing about two such fascinating topics. Nevertheless, I do hope that future biographers of Dickens will pay a little more attention to his conjuring in assessing, if not the works, at least the man; and I similarly hope that magic historians will appreciate that Dickens deserves greater respect both as a reporter on, and as a barometer of, mid-Victorian conjuring. (213-14)

Keable does not have to be self-effacing; this has been a most enlightening—and lavishly illustrated—book.

Two things remain. It is always a different experience to read a book written by a person one has met. At the Dickens 200 Conference held in Pécs, to which Keable was an invited speaker, we ourselves were a dual audience, attending his academic (!) paper in the day and his public performance of Dickens's tricks in the evening at the new Bóbita Puppet Theatre in the Zsolnay Cultural Quarter completely renovated for Pécs's year as Cultural Capital of Europe in 2010. Thus, while I would not have the temerity to give a review of the magic show (for which there is no written or visual record!), the author in a space of hours emulated the double function of the book now surveyed.

Secondly, this is an author-published book. Dickens, too, played publisher and editor, and in the modern world, it is a genre of publishing that is enjoying a resurgence due to the global nature of readerships and interests in specific topics, as well as the unwillingness by some commercial publishers to take even small risks for niche publications. Some topics will attract such a—from the commercially viable aspect—small and uncertain readership that self-promotion is the only way. Whether it be doorstop-sized volume on transportation to Australia, the culmination of long years of research by Hugh Anderson and published by his own Red Rooster Press in numbered copies, or Colin Bargery's oversely slim book on songs of the railway by the navvies who worked them, or the authoritative, impressive and weighty hardback volume on the history of the pipe, written by the Hungarian art historian Ferenc Levárdy but in the absence of a commercial publisher printed and published posthumously by the grateful collector Irnák Oskó with whom he roamed the world to amass and preserve some 10,000 items in a private collection second only to that of the great Alfred Dunhill himself, there will always be books that will never see the light of day that they deserve unless those mostly concerned in their creation at once take the bull by the horns and a deep breath and do the job themselves. Ian Keable's book in that respect, too, stands amid a long historical line of authors who have performe promoted themselves.

We must be grateful that he did. Both the devotee of magic and the Dickensian will appreciate this excellent submergence into a lesser-known facet of the great Victorian novelist's life. Being self-promoted comes with other advantages: whether in its impressive hardback form, or more economical paperback, this comes at a fraction of what the major publishers would demand. Judging from the reviews and the longevity of the show, should you find yourself anywhere nearby, it might not be a bad idea to watch that as well, to complement the written word.