

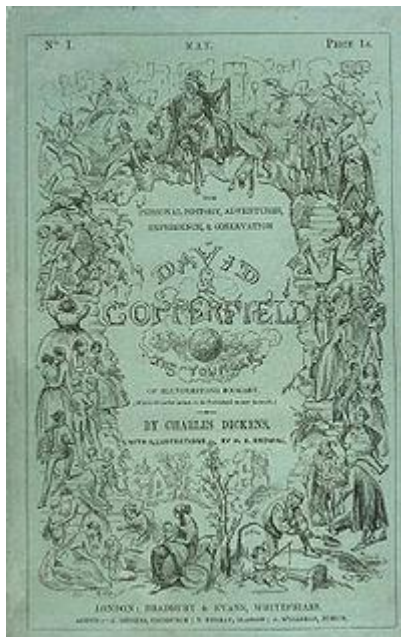
# David Copperfield

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This article is about the novel by Charles Dickens. For the American illusionist, see [David Copperfield \(illusionist\)](#). For other uses, see [David Copperfield \(disambiguation\)](#).

## *David Copperfield*



Cover, first serial edition of 1849

<b>Author(s)</b>	<a href="#">Charles Dickens</a> <i>The Personal History, Adventures, Experience and Observation of David Copperfield the Younger of Blundeston Rookery (which he never meant to publish on any account)</i>
<b>Original title</b>	
<b>Illustrator</b>	<a href="#">Hablot Knight Browne</a> ( <a href="#">Phiz</a> )
<b>Cover artist</b>	<a href="#">Hablot Knight Browne</a> ( <a href="#">Phiz</a> )
<b>Country</b>	United Kingdom
<b>Language</b>	English
<b>Series</b>	Monthly: May 1849 – November 1850
<b>Genre(s)</b>	<a href="#">Fiction</a> <a href="#">Social criticism</a>

<b>Publisher</b>	Bradbury & Evans
<b>Publication date</b>	1850
<b>Media type</b>	Print ( <a href="#">Serial</a> , <a href="#">Hardback</a> , and <a href="#">Paperback</a> )
<b>Pages</b>	936
<b>Preceded by</b>	<a href="#"><i>Dombey and Son</i></a>
<b>Followed by</b>	<a href="#"><i>Bleak House</i></a>

*The Personal History, Adventures, Experience and Observation of David Copperfield the Younger of Blunderstone Rookery (Which He Never Meant to Publish on Any Account)*,<sup>[1]</sup> commonly referred to as *David Copperfield*, is the eighth [novel](#) by [Charles Dickens](#), first published as a novel in 1850. Like most of his works, it originally appeared in [serial form](#) a year earlier. Many elements within the novel follow events in Dickens' own life, and it is probably the most [autobiographical](#) of all of his novels.<sup>[2]</sup> In the preface to the 1867 Charles Dickens edition, he wrote, "... like many fond parents, I have in my heart of hearts a favourite child. And his name is David Copperfield."<sup>[3]</sup>

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## [\[edit\]](#) Plot summary



"The friendly Waiter and I"

The story traces the life of David Copperfield from childhood to maturity. David is born in Blunderston near Gt Yarmouth, Norfolk, England in 1820. David's father had died six months before he was born, and seven years later, his mother re-marries Mr. [Edward Murdstone](#). David is given good reason to dislike his stepfather and has similar feelings for Mr Murdstone's sister Jane, who moves into the house soon afterwards. Mr Murdstone thrashes David for falling behind with his studies. Following one of these thrashings, David bites him and soon afterward is sent away to a boarding school, Salem House, with a ruthless headmaster, Mr. Creakle. Here he befriends [James Steerforth](#) and Tommy Traddles, both of whom become significant later on in the novel.

David returns home for the holidays to find out that his mother has had a baby boy. Soon after David goes back to Salem House, his mother and her baby die and David has to return home immediately. Mr Murdstone sends him to work in a factory in London, of which Murdstone is a joint owner. The grim reality of hand-to-mouth factory existence echoes Dickens' own travails in a blacking factory. Copperfield's landlord, Mr [Wilkins Micawber](#), is sent to a [debtor's prison](#) (the [King's Bench Prison](#)) after going bankrupt and remains there for several months before being released and moving to Plymouth. No one remains to care for David in London, so he decides to run away.

He walks all the way from London to [Dover](#), where he finds his only relative, aunt Miss [Betsey Trotwood](#). This eccentric aunt agrees to raise him, despite Mr Murdstone's attempt to regain David's custody. David's aunt renames him 'Trotwood Copperfield', shortened to "Trot", and for the rest of the novel David is called by either name, depending on whether he is communicating with someone he has known for a long time or someone he has only recently met.

The story follows David as he grows to adulthood and is enlivened by the many well-known characters who enter, leave, and re-enter his life. These include [Peggotty](#) – his mother's faithful former housekeeper – and Peggotty's family, including her orphaned niece "Little Em'ly", who moves in with them and charms the young David. David's romantic but self-serving school friend, Steerforth, seduces and dishonors Little Em'ly, precipitating the novel's greatest tragedy, and his landlord's daughter and "angel in the house," Agnes Wickfield, becomes his confidante. The novel's two most familiar characters are David's sometime mentor, the debt-ridden Micawber, and the devious and fraudulent clerk, [Uriah Heep](#), whose misdeeds are eventually revealed with Micawber's assistance. Micawber is painted sympathetically even as the narrator deplores his financial ineptitude. Micawber, like Dickens' own father, is briefly imprisoned for insolvency.

In typical Dickens fashion, the major characters eventually get some measure of what they deserve, and few narrative threads are left hanging. Dan Peggotty safely transports Little Em'ly to a new life in Australia; accompanied by Mrs. Gummidge and the Micawbers. All eventually find security and happiness in their adopted country. First, David marries the beautiful but naïve [Dora Spenlow](#), who dies after failing to recover from a miscarriage early in their marriage. David then searches his soul and marries the sensible Agnes, who had always loved him and with whom he finds true happiness. David and Agnes then have several children, including a daughter named for Betsey Trotwood.

[\[edit\]](#) **Analysis**

The story is told almost entirely from the point of view of the first person narrator, David Copperfield himself, and was the first Dickens novel to be written as such a narration. After finishing the novel, Dickens remarked that he liked it the best of all his books. His fondness for this child of his fancy, as he called it, was partly due to the fact that the novel was reminiscent of his own early life. Not autobiography exactly, the novel rather runs on correspondences between the careers of Charles Dickens and David Copperfield. D. C. is C. D. reversed.<sup>[4]</sup>

Critically, it is considered a *Bildungsroman* – i.e., a novel of self-cultivation – and would be included in the same genre as Dickens's own *Great Expectations* (1861), [Charlotte Brontë's \*Jane Eyre\*](#), [Thomas Hardy's \*Jude the Obscure\*](#), [Samuel Butler's \*The Way of All Flesh\*](#), [H. G. Wells's \*Tono-Bungay\*](#), [D. H. Lawrence's \*Sons and Lovers\*](#), and [James Joyce's \*A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man\*](#).

[Tolstoy](#) regarded Dickens as the best of all English novelists and considered *Copperfield* his finest work, ranking the "Mischief" chapter (chapter 42, the story of David's dreams) the standard by which the world's great fiction should be judged. [Henry James](#) remembered hiding under a small table as a boy to hear its instalments read aloud by his mother. [Dostoyevsky](#) read it enthralled in a [Siberian](#) prison camp. [Franz Kafka](#) called his own first novel *Amerika* "sheer imitation" of *David Copperfield*. James Joyce paid it reverence through parody in *Ulysses*. [G. K. Chesterton](#) considered *Copperfield* "the best of all Dickens' books". [Virginia Woolf](#), who otherwise betrayed little regard for Dickens, confessed the durability of this one novel, for it belongs, she said, to "the memories and myths of life". In a letter written to [Hugh Walpole](#) on 8 February 1936, she notes that "I'm reading *David Copperfield* for the 6th time with almost complete satisfaction. I'd forgotten how magnificent it is [...] So enthusiastic am I that I've got a new life of him [Dickens]: which makes me dislike him as a human being". The book was also [Sigmund Freud](#)'s favourite novel. Somerset Maugham considered it a great novel, although he found David the weakest character in it, unworthy of the real Dickens, praising Mr Mickawber, who "never fails", and considered that Li'l Emily got what she was asking for. [Charlotte Brontë](#) referred to the novel in a letter to William Smith Williams on 13 September 1849, noting that "I have read *David Copperfield*; it seems to me very good—admirable in some parts. You said it had affinity to *Jane Eyre*: it has—now and then—only what an advantage has Dickens in his varied knowledge of men and things!".

## [\[edit\]](#) Characters in *David Copperfield*



David falls for Dora Spenlow.

- **[David Copperfield](#)** – An optimistic, diligent, and persevering character, he is the protagonist. He is later called "Trotwood Copperfield" by some ("David Copperfield" is also the name of the hero's father, who dies before David is born). He has many nicknames: James Steerforth nicknames him "Daisy", Dora calls him "Doady", and his aunt refers to him as "Trot".
- **Clara Copperfield** – David's kind mother, described as being innocently childish, who dies while David is at Salem House. She dies just after the birth of her second child (a son, Edward Murdstone junior), who dies along with her.
- **[Clara Peggotty](#)** – The faithful servant of the Copperfield family and a lifelong companion to David (she is called by her surname Peggotty in David's family, as her given name is Clara, the same as David's mother; she is also referred to at times as Barkis after her marriage to Mr. Barkis). When Mr. Barkis dies, she inherits a substantial portion of his estate, valued at £3,000 – a large sum in the mid-19th century (he also leaves modest annuities for David, Mr. Daniel Peggotty, and Little Emily). After her husband's death, Peggotty helps to put David's rooms in London in order and then returns to Yarmouth to keep house for her nephew, Ham Peggotty. Following Ham's death, she keeps house for David's aunt, Betsey Trotwood.
- **[Betsey Trotwood](#)** – David's eccentric and temperamental yet kindhearted great-aunt; she becomes his guardian after he runs away from *Grinby and Murdstone's warehouse* in [Blackfriars](#) (London). She is present on the night of David's birth but leaves after hearing that Clara Copperfield's child is a boy instead of a girl, and is not seen until David is older and flees to her house in [Dover](#) from [London](#).
- **Mr. Chillip** – A shy, elderly doctor who assists at David's birth and faces the wrath of Betsey Trotwood after he informs her that Clara's baby is a boy instead of a girl.
- **Mr. Barkis** – An aloof carter who declares his intention to marry Peggotty. He says to David: "Tell her, 'Barkis is willin'!" Just so." He is a bit of a miser, and hides his surprisingly vast liquid wealth in a plain box labelled "Old Clothes". He bequeaths to his wife and her family (including David) the then astronomical sum of £3,000 when he dies about ten years later.
- **[Edward Murdstone](#)** – Young David's cruel stepfather (and the novel's main antagonist), who beats him for falling behind in his studies. David reacts by biting Mr

Murdstone, who then sends him to Salem House, the private school owned by his friend Mr. Creakle. After David's mother dies, Mr Murdstone sends him to work in his factory in London, where he has to clean wine bottles. He appears at Betsey Trotwood's house after David runs away. Mr Murdstone appears to show signs of repentance when confronted by Copperfield's aunt about his treatment of Clara and David, but later in the book we hear he has married another young woman and applied his old principles of "firmness".

- **Jane Murdstone** – Mr. Murdstone's equally cruel spinster sister, who moves into the Copperfield house after Mr. Murdstone marries Clara Copperfield. She is the "Confidential Friend" of David's first wife, Dora Spenlow, and encourages many of the problems that occur between David Copperfield and Dora's father, Mr. Spenlow. Later, she rejoins her brother and his new wife in a relationship very much like the one they had with David's mother.
- **[Daniel Peggotty](#)** – Peggotty's brother; a humble but generous Yarmouth fisherman who takes his nephew Ham and niece Emily into his custody after each of them has been orphaned. After Emily's departure, he travels around the world in search of her. He eventually finds her in London, and after that they emigrate to Australia.
- **Emily (Little Em'ly)** – A niece of Mr. Peggotty. She is a childhood friend of David Copperfield, who loved her in his childhood days. She leaves her cousin and fiancé, Ham, for Steerforth. After Steerforth deserts her, she doesn't go back home because she has disgraced herself & her family. Her uncle, Mr Peggotty, who has been searching for her since she left home, finds her in a London brothel. So that she may have a fresh start away from her now degraded reputation, she and her uncle emigrate to Australia.
- **Ham Peggotty** – A good-natured nephew of Mr. Peggotty and the fiancé of Emily before she leaves him for Steerforth. He later drowns while attempting to rescue Steerforth from a shipwreck. News of his death is withheld from his family to enable them to emigrate without hesitation or remorse.
- **Mrs. Gummidge** – The widow of Daniel Peggotty's partner in a boat who is taken in and supported by Daniel after his partner's death. She is a self-described "lone, lorn creetur" that spends much of her time pining for "the old 'un" (her late husband). After Emily runs away with Steerforth, she becomes caring and motherly. She too emigrates to Australia with Dan and the rest of the surviving family.
- **Martha Endell** – A young woman, once Little Emily's friend, who later gains a bad reputation (we suppose she incurs in some sexually inappropriate behaviour and is thus disgraced), who, in the later chapters of the novel helps Daniel Peggotty find his niece after she returns to London. She has been a [prostitute](#) and considered [suicide](#).
- **Mr. Creakle** – The harsh headmaster of young David's boarding school who is assisted by Tungay. Mr. Creakle is a friend of Mr. Murdstone. He singles out David for extra torment. Later, he becomes a Middlesex magistrate and is considered enlightened for his day.





 Agnes Wickfield, David's second wife.

- **[James Steerforth](#)** – A close friend of David who has known him since his first days at Salem House, he has a romantic and charming disposition. Although well liked by most, he proves to be lacking in character by seducing and later abandoning Little Em'ly. He eventually drowns at Yarmouth with Ham Peggotty, who had been trying to rescue him.
- **Tommy Traddles** – David's friend from Salem House. They meet again later and become eventual lifelong friends. Traddles works hard but faces great obstacles because of his lack of money and connections. He eventually succeeds in making a name and a career for himself.
- **[Wilkins Micawber](#)** – A gentle man who befriends David as a young boy. He suffers from much financial difficulty and even has to spend time in a debtor's prison before moving to [Plymouth](#). As an adult, Copperfield meets him again in London. Micawber eventually emigrates to Australia, where he enjoys a successful career as a sheep farmer and becomes a magistrate. He is based on Dickens' father, [John Dickens](#).
- **Mr. Dick (Richard Babley)** – A slightly deranged, rather childish but amiable man who lives with Betsey Trotwood; they are distant relatives. His madness is amply described; he claims to have the "trouble" of [King Charles I](#) in his head. He befriends David when he arrives at the Trotwood household.
- **Dr. Strong** – The headmaster of David's Canterbury school, whom he visits on various occasions.
- **Anne Strong** – The young wife of Dr. Strong. Although she remains loyal to him, she fears that he suspects that she is involved in an affair with Jack Maldon.
- **Jack Maldon** – A cousin and childhood sweetheart of Anne Strong. He continues to bear affection for her and tries to seduce her into leaving Dr. Strong.
- **Mr. Wickfield** – The widower father of Agnes Wickfield and lawyer to Betsey Trotwood. He is prone to alcoholism.

- **Agnes Wickfield** – Mr. Wickfield's mature and lovely daughter and close friend of David since childhood. She later becomes David's second wife and mother of their children.
- **Uriah Heep** – A wicked young man who serves first as secretary, and then as partner to Mr. Wickfield. He is finally discovered - by [Wilkins Micawber](#) - to have stolen money, and cheated Mr. Wickfield, while Mr. Wickfield was intoxicated. Uriah Heep is forced to return the money, but is not prosecuted by the Wickfields. He is later imprisoned for an (unrelated) attempted fraud on the Bank of England. He always talks of being "umble" (humble) and nurtures a deep hatred of David Copperfield and many others.
- **Mrs. Steerforth** – The wealthy widowed mother of James Steerforth. She herself is very like her son.
- **Miss Dartle** – A strange, vitriolic, spinster woman who lives with Mrs. Steerforth. She has a secret love for Steerforth and blames others such as Emily and even Steerforth's own mother for corrupting him. She is described as being extremely skinny and displays a visible scar on her lip caused by Steerforth in one of his violent rages as a child. She is also Steerforth's cousin.
- **Mr. Spenlow** – A lawyer, employer of David as a [proctor](#) and the father of Dora Spenlow. He dies suddenly of a heart attack while driving his [phaeton](#) home.
- **Dora Spenlow** – The adorable but foolish daughter of Mr. Spenlow who becomes David's first wife. She is described as being impractical and has many similarities to David's mother. She dies after a long illness on the same day as her ageing dog, Jip.
- **Mr. Sharp** – He was the chief teacher of Salem House and had more authority than Mr. Mell. He looked weak, both in health and character; his head seemed to be very heavy for him: He walked on one side. He had a big nose.
- **Mr. Mell** – The "poor pinched usher" of Salem House. Near the end of the novel, Copperfield discovers in an Australian newspaper that Mell has emigrated and is now Doctor Mell of Colonial Salem-House Grammar School, Port Middlebay.
- **Mr Jorkins** — The unseen partner of Mr Spenlow, who blames Jorkins for any unwelcome decisions.

## **[[edit](#)] Film, TV and theatrical adaptations**

*David Copperfield* has been filmed on several occasions:

- [1911](#), directed by [Theodore Marston](#)
- [1913](#), directed by [Thomas Bentley](#)
- [1922](#), directed by [Gerhard Berger](#)
- [1935](#), directed by [George Cukor](#)
- [1966](#), a 13 part TV serial that aired in 1966.
- [1969](#), directed by [Delbert Mann](#), featuring numerous English classical actors.
- [1974](#), directed by [Joan Craft](#)
- [1986](#), directed by [Barry Letts](#), shown on BBC 1986/87
- [1999](#), shown on BBC [Top Gear](#) – 25/26 December 1999
- [2000](#), directed by [Peter Medak](#)

The numerous television adaptations of the novel include a 1966 version with [Ian McKellen](#) as David and a 1999 version with [Daniel Radcliffe](#) (of the [Harry Potter film series](#)) playing the younger David and [Ciaran McMenamin](#) as the older David. In this latter version, McKellen returns, this time playing the horrendous schoolmaster Creakle. There was a



[musical animated version](#) in 1993, where the cast was anthropomorphic animals (similar to Disney's Robin Hood) and starred [Julian Lennon](#) as the voice of David (a cat). A 2000 American TV film version featured [Sally Field](#), [Anthony Andrews](#), [Paul Bettany](#), [Edward Hardwicke](#), [Michael Richards](#) and [Nigel Davenport](#) with [Hugh Dancy](#) and Max Dolbey as the adult and boy Copperfield, respectively.

A play adaptation by [Andrew Halliday](#) was warmly approved by Dickens himself, and enjoyed a long run at [Drury Lane](#).<sup>[[citation needed](#)]</sup> The novel was adapted for the unsuccessful musical *Copperfield* in 1981. Other versions were played in the early-twentieth century by the [actor-managers Evelyn Millard](#) and [Bransby Williams](#) (1923).

## [[edit](#)] Publication

Like most of Charles Dickens' novels, *David Copperfield* was published in 19 monthly one-shilling installments, containing 32 pages of text and two illustrations by [Hablot Knight Browne](#) ("Phiz"), with the last being a double-number:<sup>[[citation needed](#)]</sup>

- I – May 1849 (chapters 1–3);
- II – June 1849 (chapters 4–6);
- III – July 1849 (chapters 7–9);
- IV – August 1849 (chapters 10–12);
- V – September 1849 (chapters 13–15);
- VI – October 1849 (chapters 16–18);
- VII – November 1849 (chapters 19–21);
- VIII – December 1849 (chapters 22–24);
- IX – January 1850 (chapters 25–27);
- X – February 1850 (chapters 28–31);
- XI – March 1850 (chapters 32–34);
- XII – April 1850 (chapters 35–37);
- XIII – May 1850 (chapters 38–40);
- XIV – June 1850 (chapters 41–43);
- XV – July 1850 (chapters 44–46);
- XVI – August 1850 (chapters 47–50);
- XVII – September 1850 (chapters 51–53);
- XVIII – October 1850 (chapters 54–57);
- XIX-XX – November 1850 (chapters 58–64).


## [[edit](#)] Release details

- 1850, UK, Bradbury & Evans ?, Pub date 1 May 1849 and 1 November 1850, Serial (first publication as serial)
- 1850, UK, Bradbury & Evans ?, Pub date ? ? 1850, Hardback (first book edition)
- 1981 (Reprinted 2003) UK, [Oxford University Press](#) [ISBN 0-19-812492-9](#) Hardback, Edited by Nina Burgis, The Clarendon Dickens (considered the definitive editions of Dickens' works) 781 pages
- 1990, USA, W W Norton & Co Ltd [ISBN 0-393-95828-0](#), Pub date 31 January 1990, Hardback (Jerome H. Buckley (Editor), Norton Critical Edition – contains annotations, introduction, critical essays, bibliography and other material.)

- 1994, UK, Penguin Books Ltd [ISBN 0-14-062026-5](#), Pub date 24 February 1994, Paperback
- 1999, UK, Oxford Paperbacks [ISBN 0-19-283578-5](#), Pub date 11 February 1999, Paperback

and many others

## **[[edit](#)] Notes**

1. <sup>^</sup> Dickens invented over 14 variations of the title for this work, see "[Titles, Titling, and Entitlement to](#)", by Hazard Adams in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 46, No. 1 (Autumn, 1987), pp. 7–21
2. <sup>^</sup> "[Autobiographical Elements in Charles Dickens' David Copperfield](#)". By *The Book*. The Knowledge Network. Retrieved 2009-06-28. <sup>[[dead link](#)]</sup>
3. <sup>^</sup> [Preface to the 1867 Charles Dickens edition](#)
4. <sup>^</sup>  This article incorporates text from a publication now in the [public domain](#): [Wilbur L. Cross](#) (1920). "[David Copperfield](#)". *[Encyclopedia Americana](#)*.

The University Society, Inc., New York (no date). Seven volume set, "The Works of Charles Dickens," illus. by Barnard, Cruikshank and many others. Includes David Copperfield; The Old Curiosity Shop; Pickwick Papers; A Child's History of England + American Notes + Pictures from Italy + Hunted Down + Holiday Romance + George Silverman's Explanation; Oliver Twist + Sketches by Box; Bleak House; Nicholas Nickleby.

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## **[[edit](#)] External links**

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- [\*David Copperfield\*](#) at [Project Gutenberg](#).
- [\*David Copperfield\*](#) - The original manuscript of the novel, held by the [Victoria and Albert Museum](#) (requires [Adobe Flash](#)).
- [\*David Copperfield\*](#), at [Bartleby.com](#) (HTML w/ additional commentary)
- [\*David Copperfield\*](#), at [Librivox](#) (audiobook)

## Other

- [Information and analysis, Illustrations, Forums, and Select Resources on the novel](#)
- [Analysis of the theme of David Copperfield and its characters.](#)
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