

Reflections of a Sawdust-Filled, Six-Foot, Tweeting, Taxidermy Alligator

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When I first heard about the epic tweeting project of *Our Mutual Friend*, I felt a surge of thespian ambition and knew there was one role I was destined to play. I polished my glass eyes, sharpened my teeth, and auditioned for the role of Bella. Unfortunately, I was told that, since I was dead, stuffed, and a reptile, not only was I unsuitable to play the novel's heroine, but that there wasn't a single character that would be appropriate for an alligator of my talents. Except perhaps Mr Veneering, and he had already been cast.

The organizers did mention, however, that their prop alligator, which had been stored in the attic of the Clennam house, had been damaged in that building's collapse, and would I oblige them by taking its place in Mr Venus's shop. I graciously accepted their proposal and tweeted as Alligator Venus (@OMF_DustyGator).

My experiences tweeting from the environs of such an unusual shop were equally unusual. I expected to be a sort of free-floating, omniscient commentator on events as they unfolded. Instead, the shop and its denizens came to influence my experience of the novel in surprising ways.

When I had first read the book, the shop and its contents (and its proprietor) were interesting to read about, but as soon as those chapters were over they were eclipsed by the events, settings, and characters featured in other chapters. As an inhabitant of that single setting for months on end, however, I put surprising amounts of imaginative energy into fleshing out its greasy shelves and dark corners, and I came to think of it, quite strangely, as 'home'. My first tentative conversations were naturally with that building's other inhabitants, Mr Venus's Skeleton (@OMF_Skeleton), Silas Wegg's Leg (@OMF_WeggLeg), and, of course, Mr Venus (@OMF_Venus) himself.

I became quite protective of Mr Venus as a character: our tweeted conversations and impromptu midnight parties having built up a sense of camaraderie with this lonely man and his macabre collection. Is it a surprise that I quickly adopted the character of a baby-eating, terrible-joke-making party animal? I needed to cheer him up! I became impatient to arrive at those chapters that featured the shop as their focal point, and had to resist the urge to bite Mr Wegg every time he stumped in. I now feel a greater connection with a skeletal leg than I do with Lizzie Hexam or Mr Riah.

That Mr Venus finds love and happiness is now more satisfying to me than that Bella and Rokesmith do.

Surely, this is not normal.

One of the strangest effects of this project has been in what I think of as my areas of interest. Ambivalent to the subject before this project, I suddenly found myself paying attention to articles or photographs of taxidermy and other forms of preservation.¹ I felt it incumbent upon myself as a stuffed creature to follow the tweets of Grip, the Raven (@GripTheRaven) in Philadelphia. It would previously never have occurred to me to critique the quality of a stuffed walrus in a museum, nor to research Victorian taxidermy methods (suspecting that Eddie Izzard might not be an accurate source).² And yet, as a result of this project I have done both of those things.

The first time I read the book, the main characters interested me the most. During this project, however, it was the supporting cast that more often held my imagination. Like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern wandering around just beyond the action in Tom Stoppard's play, I often wondered what the offstage cast was doing during a conversation between the Boffins or between Bella and Rokesmith. The fact that, in the world of Twitter, these secondary characters would often converse with each other using modern language, with modern pop culture references, and with hilariously witty hashtags, made every character so much more well rounded and accessible than they were in my initial reading. I had never considered Rokesmith to be 'emo' before this, but now I can't think of him any other way.

The addition of a number of inanimate characters commenting on their owners' actions also added an unusual feeling of magical realism to the novel. I imagined swimming beside the Inspector's rowing boat on the Thames or pictured The Hon Mrs T (@OMF_Doll) picking up scraps of fabric once her mistress had gone to bed. I even wondered what the plethora of camels in the Veneerings' residence got up to once the lights were dimmed. The novel is not known for its small cast of characters, but the list

¹ Chelsea Nichols, 'The Weird and Wonderful World of Walter Potter', <<http://ridiculouslyinteresting.com/2011/08/07/the-weird-and-wonderful-world-of-walter-potter/>> [16 September 2015].

² Allison Meier, 'An Overstuffed Taxidermy Walrus Comes Home', <<http://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/horniman-museum-walrus-comes-home>>. For Victorian taxidermy methods, see 'News', <<http://www.britishhistoricaltaxidermysociety.co.uk/>>. Eddie Izzard is quoted as saying, 'And there's others like taxidermist! You can't just go, "Oh, I was just working at the chip shop, and I just started stuffing animals with sand," you know? You've gotta want to be! "I want to be a taxidermist! I wanna fill animals with sand. (mimes stuffing an animal) I wanna get more sand into an animal than anybody has ever bloody got in one. I wanna fill a rat with the entire Gobi Desert, so it's really quite tight.'" See 'Eddie Izzard Quotes', <http://thinkexist.com/quotation/and_there_s_others_like_taxidermist-you_can-t/346115.html> [all accessed 16 September 2015].

becomes completely unmanageable once you start imagining that every candlestick and doorknob have things to say about the things they witness.

The greatest advantage of being an inanimate character, however, was that I wasn't confined to Mr Venus's shop. I was free to swim into conversations with other characters at my leisure (perhaps not strictly in keeping with the rules, but hey, I'm not a real character). Not wanting to disrupt the plot too much, I generally confined myself to the supporting cast, like Mr Inspector (@OMF_Inspector), with whom I shared a wonderful series of 'gator'-related puns. The added advantage of styling myself an 'American' alligator was that, as a Canadian in reality, I felt less likely to utter a turn of phrase or slang expression that would betray my true identity.

Becoming a character in a novel for over a year has very clearly altered my perceptions of the characters, settings, and entire plot of *Our Mutual Friend*. It's broadened my awareness of the motivations and actions of the host of secondary (and inanimate) characters and given them new depth. It's given me strange new areas of interest. But more than that, it's entirely shifted my allegiances and sympathies from the first time I read the novel. Were you to ask me today what the book is about, my first instinct would be to tell you it's about a lonely taxidermist in a dark London shop, trying to do the right thing and trying to find love, surrounded and supported by his inanimate compatriots.

Including a very fetching, if slightly dusty, alligator.