

Being John Rokesmith

Pete Orford

Good day to you, ladies and gentlemen. My name is John Rokesmith, the eponymous hero, if you will, of *Our Mutual Friend*; a man described as ‘Thirty, at the utmost. An expressive, one might say handsome face. A very bad manner.’¹ So much for the book; in the Twitterverse I have been described, and I quote dear Mr Boffin here, as an ‘emo stalker’:² hardly Dickensian in its description, but one thing we have all of us learned in our elopement to the Internet is that, however Dickensian our beginnings, our ends are varied and open.

Mind, we all started reverently enough, limiting ourselves where we could to the text before us, but as conversations opened up and provocations gave way to reactions I think it fair to say that all of us, in our ways, have evolved beyond the limitations of our origins. In my very first tweet I announced my imminent arrival in London and wondered what I might do there; no sooner did I send it than I was responded to not by other characters, but by tourist boards and Londoners freely giving advice on the best sights to see. I had not the heart to tell them the intrinsic difficulties involved in an imagined person of the nineteenth century physically visiting the capital in the twenty-first century.

Goodness knows what Charley would think of this — I call him Charley, you may call him Mr Dickens. One advantage at least of being a fictional character is freedom from the reverence others feel expected to proffer to the Inimitable, and in truth it is hard to be entirely respectful to the man when he ceases to be merely an author and instead becomes the despot persistently plotting your mishaps and misfortunes on a monthly basis; being almost murdered and left for dead in the Thames may sound like a thrilling read but it rather loses its edge when said victim is yours truly (thanks very much for that one, Charley).

The Mutual Friend of Twitter is certainly not the Mutual Friend of the book; rather a distant cousin. That early response from tourist boards

¹ Charles Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend*, ed. by Joel J. Brattin (London: Dent, 2000), p. 40.

² ‘So this emo stalker @OMF_Rokesmith wants to be me secretary. And he lodges with family of @OMF_Bella. So many mutual friends here #omftweets.’ Mr Boffin (@OMF_Boffin), 1 July 2014.

was just the beginning of a fusion of Victorian and modern sensibilities and references. I like to think I have, on the whole, remained true to my origins, though granted I am perhaps more prone to breaking into song than the Rokesmith in the text (but, really, I ask you, after Bella's cruel dismissal of me, does anything summarize the scenario half so well as 'I Know Him So Well'?). And yes, perhaps I have been prone to being a little snarky at times, mischievous even, tending towards comedy rather than tragedy, but such are the expectations of the medium: Twitter, in its brevity, encourages humour and one-liners over pathos and extended description. Charley would never have managed it.

On a wider note, character significance has also varied greatly from the text, as the prominence of each person is determined by the number of tweets more so than their importance to the plot. I, for one, shall never read the book again without mourning the reduced role of the stuffed crocodile in Mr Venus's shop, given the continued excellence of tweets sent by Alligator Venus (@OMF_DustyGator) throughout the past nineteen months. Equally, characters in large group scenes become more involved in tweeting, such as those at the Veneering parties who had a number of extended dialogues and parties online expanding far beyond the occasional chapter which prompted the gathering; in contrast, one-to-one dialogues, though more intrinsic to the plot, could often be dealt with more swiftly in tweets and thus belie the importance of the moment.

Reading the book as a refresher each month before the tweets began, I confess that my interest became a little Rokesmith-centric. Entire chapters in which I did not appear would be sped through at a rapid pace, providing a very distorted view of the tale. And nothing could prove so mortifying as those months in which I did not appear at all — I ask you, what is a disgruntled secretary in disguise to do with no plot to report? But then Charley, bless him, did not write the book with an entire cast of tweeters in mind and could not predict how the experiment in translating from print to online would result in lacunas of enforced silence from time to time.

However, I will say this for Charley — he knew what he was doing writing the book in the third person. I have seen it written by some that a first-person narrative works best for mystery, where the reader is denied the omniscience of the third person, but I tell you it is a task of considerable difficulty to report on events with full knowledge of secret identities and plots in such a way so as not to spoil the plot for first-time readers. The purpose of setting us free on Twitter was to allow access to the inner thoughts of characters, but I could hardly blurt out I was John Harmon from the start now, could I? Thus, for the entire first half of the book I had to simultaneously uphold the masquerade of *not* being John Harmon without openly contradicting my true identity. And then when dear old Boffin pretended to

dismiss me, again I had to tweet in such a way that could be read the first time as genuine mortification but reread with hindsight as calm acceptance of an agreed plan under way: if this entanglement with first-person revelations (or lack of them) has taught me anything, it is that I shall read *David Copperfield* with renewed respect after this ordeal, I assure you.

But aside from such occasional difficulties, the experience has been rather a joyful one, made more so by the interaction with my fellow characters. I only wish Charley's plot allowed me to have more dialogues with others — Jenny Wren, Podsnap, and the Veneerings all remain strangers to me, alas. But I shall cherish the tête-à-têtes I did have, whether that be the intrepid Inspector's continued suspicions of me, or Silas Wegg's unconcealed rage at my person, or my duets with dear Bella, to whom I return now for a much-needed happily-ever-after at the end of this strange journey into the Twittersphere.

I remain, kind sirs and madams,

Your mutual friend,
John Rokesmith
Alias John Harmon
Alias Julius Handford
Alias Pete Orford