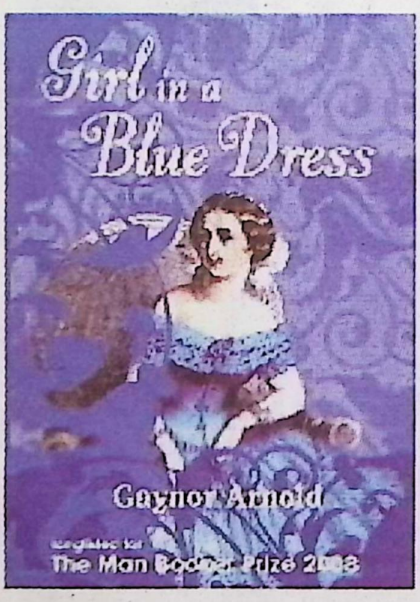
Girl in a Blue Dress

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The idea of Charles Dickens as a fictional figure is a strong one. In recent years, he has popped up in works as diverse as Peter Carey's novel Jack Maggs, the late Simon Gray's play Little Nell and in Doctor Who.

Dickens was a gaudy reflection of the Victorian era: the prodigious work rate, the abiding terror of debt and poverty, the passionate social campaigning, the florid public performances.



But in approaching this monument, Gaynor Arnold has taken an intriguing step sideways. Her Man Booker longlisted novel - in terms of inspiration, at least, if not precise biographical detail - makes an equal claim for Dickens's wife Catherine.

It was Catherine who had to endure Dickens's unknowable side: his obsession with her late sister Mary, and his affair with the actress Ellen Ternan.

Here, the wife is called Dorothea. As the story opens, Alfred Gibson, the greatest novelist of his age, is interred in Westminster Abbey, amid an outpouring of public mourning. Dorothea, who was estranged from her husband, is not asked to the funeral.

At first, this is a clammy story of bitterness; a grieving, seemingly agoraphobic woman is separated not merely from her husband but also her many children, in the knowledge that her old household has been usurped.

The great author's will is under discussion and there is tension over what will be left to the other women in his life.

Added to this, Dorothea's eldest child Kitty is married to a cheroot-smoking jackanapes called Augustus who seems poised to bring the couple to ruin. But then, in a winningly drawn sequence, Dorothea is asked to Buckingham Palace to meet Queen Victoria - Her Majesty wishes that the two widows compare their losses.

The encounter restores a little of Dorothea's sense of position and pride, and she is prompted into thinking back over her life with Gibson. It is here that the story takes on subtler shades.

We are told of Gibson's relentless wooing of the young Dorothea, and Arnold does a splendid job of conjuring the author's energy and his fear of the financial abyss.

There is something of the mesmerist about Gibson, but Dorothea in turn has a profound effect on him. Yes: it's the blue dress of the title.

Throughout all this, Arnold cleverly (and lightly) creates an authentic Dickensian tone, with sweet touches of humour, as well as evoking other novels of the period, with their preoccupations with property and inheritance.

Dorothea's great love turns into a nightmare. After marriage and childbirth, its foundations seem to vanish. Not only does the great novelist become infatuated with Dorothea's sister Alice - her death sparking a trauma in the author that colours his subsequent works - but another sister, Sissy, takes over the household. Gibson, in later years, forms another intense relationship with an actress.

While we are left in no doubt of the devastation that Gibson leaves in his wake, and the extent of Dorothea's wounds, there is something else going on: a note of yearning that invites the reader to look for the good in this insanely driven man.

In re-tracing her memories, Dorothea finds a spirit of conciliation that stretches surprisingly far; not merely to the cautious reforging of bonds with her children, but ultimately, to finding a connection with her late husband that manages both to pastiche Victorian fiction and be moving in its own right.

Straightforward biography is one thing; but this is a fine work of imagination and compassion that offers up other ways for us to understand a popular genius, and those who loved him.

This review first appeared in The Telegraph.