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Oliver Twist

Charles Dickens

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Oliver Twist, or The Parish Boy's Progress, is the second novel by Charles Dickens, and was first published as a serial 1837–9. The story is of the orphan Oliver Twist, who starts his life in a workhouse and is then apprenticed with an undertaker. He escapes from there and travels to London where he meets the Artful Dodger, a member of a gang of juvenile pickpockets, which is led by the elderly criminal Fagin. Oliver Twist is notable for Dickens's unromantic portrayal of criminals and their sordid lives, as well as exposing the cruel treatment of the many orphans in London in the mid–nineteenth century. The alternate title, The Parish Boy's Progress, alludes to Bunyan's The Pilgrim's Progress, as well as the 18th-century caricature series by William Hogarth, A Rake's Progress and A Harlot's Progress. An early example of the social novel, Dickens satirizes the hypocrisies of his time, including child labour, the recruitment of children as criminals, and the presence of street children. The novel may have been inspired by the story of Robert Blincoe, an orphan whose account of working as a child labourer in a cotton mill was widely read in the 1830s. It is likely that Dickens's own youthful experiences contributed as well. Oliver Twist was born into a life of poverty and misfortune in a workhouse in an unnamed town (although when originally published in Bentley's Miscellany in 1837 the town was called Mudfog and said to be within 70 miles north of London – in reality this is the location of the town of Northampton). Orphaned almost from his first breath by his mother's death in childbirth and his father's unexplained absence, Oliver is meagrely provided for under the terms of the Poor Law and spends the first nine years of his life at a baby farm in the 'care' of a woman named Mrs. Mann. Oliver is brought up with little food and few comforts. Around the time of Oliver's ninth birthday, Mr. Bumble, the parish beadle, removes Oliver from the baby farm and puts him to work picking and weaving oakum at the main workhouse. Oliver, who toils with very little food, remains in the workhouse for six months. One day, the desperately hungry boys decide to draw lots; the loser must ask for another portion of gruel. The task falls to Oliver, who at the next meal tremblingly comes up forward, bowl in hand, and begs Mr. Bumble for gruel with his famous request: "Please, sir, I want some more".

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