

Dickens turns 200, but is vivid to scholar

Akron woman focuses
on writer while seeking
a doctorate at Oxford

By Jim Carney

Beacon Journal staff writer

When Ruth Schuldiner reads Charles Dickens, she is transported back in time.

Schuldiner, 27, of Akron, is working on her doctorate in English literature at the University of Oxford in England. She is focusing on Dickens, the author of such classics as *David Copperfield*, *Great Expectations* and *A Tale of Two*



Photo courtesy Ruth Schuldiner

Ruth Schuldiner, 27, of Akron, who is pursuing her doctorate at the University of Oxford, is focusing on Charles Dickens.

Cities, whose 200th birthday is today.

Her doctoral dissertation is looking at a Dickens linguistic technique called "implicature" that requires readers to understand the context in which something is said rather

than the explicit or figurative meaning of what is said.

In a series of email exchanges, Schuldiner discussed her interest in Dickens with the Beacon Journal.

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Dickens

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Q: What was the first Dickens book you read, and when? What was its impact on you?

A: I read *The Pickwick Papers* when I was 12. I'd picked it up because it's mentioned in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* and I was curious. It took me forever to read — it's very long, and at 12 I wasn't very fluent in Victorian lingo — but it was hilarious and I couldn't stop laughing.

Q: What is it about his writing that has allowed him to still speak to readers 200 years after his birth?

A: For quite a few reasons. Although hardly any Victorian critic would call him the great writer of their time, he was probably the most popular author of his lifetime. He was basically an A-list celebrity for several decades and one that everyone regardless of class loved. ... Essentially, he was a definitive cultural phenomenon of the early to mid-Victorian era, and any description of the era would be incomplete without his mention. ... The drama in his novels almost always touches on a larger Victorian issue, and I think this made people feel that they were reading about something as well as being entertained. And his sketches of characters are wonderful.

Q: Which of his works is your favorite and why?

A: Honestly, whichever work I happen to be reading is usually my favorite. *Great Expectations* and *David Copperfield* are usually considered his best works, but even then people will only say that if they're hard pressed to pick a novel. Probably because I work so closely with it, *Our Mutual Friend* is my current favorite — but then whenever I pick up *Little Dorrit* again, my mind changes.

Q: Was Dickens one of the first "rock star"-like writers because of his popularity?

A: Dickens was one of the first

About Ruth Schuldiner

Ruth Schuldiner was born and raised in Fairbanks, Alaska, and moved to Akron with her parents at the age of 24. She majored in English literature at Dartmouth College, where she graduated in 2006.

Her master's degree in English is from the University of Exeter in England and she began work on her doctorate at the University of Oxford in 2008.

Schuldiner is the daughter of Michael and Lea Schuldiner of Akron. Her father is a professor of English and head of the English department at the University of Akron.

Charles Dickens was born Feb. 7, 1812; he died in 1870.

"rock star"-like writers because of his popularity, but he wasn't the first, although the extent of his popularity might have been greater than anyone before him. ... And unlike authors before him, Dickens was popular with "everybody." So when the literary snobs slighted him, they had to take notice simply because his readership was so large. Academics initially dismissed him, but because he was so popular in his day, he's become a rock star of our time as well.

Q: What is the best film adaptation of a Dickens novel?

A: That is a tough question, mainly because I happen to dislike most of the adaptations of Dickens I see. ... They never seem to get it right and often they end up being boring. I think this is probably due to the numerous, complicated and overlapping plots as well as lengthy roster of characters in Dickens' novels. When you read the novels, these characteristics add to the complexity of the reading experience. But when you're expected to invest only a few hours or even 10 in the narrative, it becomes confused and boring. My absolute favorite Dickens adaptation is *Scrooged*, the 1998 film starring Bill Murray. It is very funny, and I enjoy it at 27 as much as I did at 8.

Q: What have you learned about Dickens since you have been in England that you did

not know before?

A: So much. I'd studied Dickens before, but not as thoroughly as I have now. But more importantly, I've experienced many of the things he describes in his books that I'd only been able to read about previously. I've walked through streets his characters have, I've eaten the same food and I've even gotten to try on the same kind of clothing some of his characters would have worn. Generally, I've learned more ... about the context Dickens was writing in, and it has changed my interpretation of his novels. Specifically, I've had grog, treacle, toad in a hole and a whole slew of other staples of British cuisine.

Q: When you read Dickens, do you feel that you are living in the 1840s and 1850s?

A: Yes! Everyone has different experiences when they read fiction, but a few lucky people become so immersed in whatever they're reading that it's like a movie going on in their head, and they lose track of what's happening around them. That's what happens to me, so that whenever I read Dickens I'm transported back to 1850s London, or the version in my head, anyway. However, because I concentrate on his later novels, it's usually like living in 1860s London.

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