

What has the BBC done to *Great Expectations*?

Charles Dickens couldn't stop updating his novel — and Steven Knight's new Sunday-night drama, starring Olivia Colman, is all change too



Olivia Colman as Miss Havisham
PARI DUKOVIC

Robert Douglas-Fairhurst
Sunday March 26 2023, 12.01am, The Sunday Times

‘Ah, Dickens!’ Malcolm McDowell twinkles in an episode of *South Park*. “The imagery of cobblestone streets, craggy London buildings and nutmeg-filled Yorkshire puddings.” Of course it’s a joke, but like most jokes it’s based on a kernel of truth. Whether we are watching the Tardis landing in snowy Victorian London or shopping online for a “Please, sir, I want some more” T-shirt (available in sizes up to XXXL), it’s hard to avoid the feeling that Dickens’s public image has developed a patina of familiarity over the years. The world of his stories is one in which every log fire crackles happily and every urchin is a rosy-cheeked scamp. It’s as cosy and unthreatening as a favourite pair of slippers.

The stylish new six-part BBC adaptation of *Great Expectations*, written by the *Peaky Blinders* creator Steven Knight, is very different. There are explicit scenes of recreational drug use, colour-blind casting and references to child grooming and the evils of empire; it’s easy to see why some have mischievously referred to it as “Woke Expectations”. The Victorian age it depicts is certainly a long way from the stiff collars and clipped accents of traditional television period dramas. Instead this is a world of raw sex and gnawing hunger, where the streets of London are not paved with gold but caked in blood and filth.

The first episode begins with what appears to be a suicide attempt by Pip (Fionn Whitehead), the adult narrator of Dickens's story, then we flash back to his childhood on the chilly Kent marshes. This Pip is not the wide-eyed little boy who appears at the start of the novel but rather a brooding teenager (Tom Sweet) who mixes bookishness ("The boy uses words longer than himself," his sister sneers) with outbursts of swearing ("Shit," he observes when he's late for church on Christmas Day).



From left: Ashley Thomas as Jaggers, Johnny Harris as Magwitch, Owen McDonnell as Joe Gargery, Fionn Whitehead as Pip, Hayley Squires as Sara Gargery, Shalom Brune-Franklin as Estella and Matt Berry as Mr Pumblechook

The other characters are equally full of surprises. In the novel we are told that the lawyer Jaggers uses one hand to push the wheelchair of the eccentric recluse Miss Havisham, "and put the other in his trouser-pocket as if the pocket were full of secrets". In this television adaptation it turns out that almost everyone is also hiding something. A judge allows himself to be blackmailed to avoid being exposed as a "sodomite". Mr Pumblechook (Matt Berry), a grasping local businessman who describes Pip as "an orchid growing wild in the filth of a stable", has his own dirty little secret. And while the wealthy can lose themselves in a fug of opium smoke, the poor must live in a world that is occasionally lit up by love but far more often by flashes of violence.

The novelist GK Chesterton suggested that in some of his stories Dickens worked too hard to make his readers feel at home, as he continued to "pile up the cushions until none of the characters could move". There seems little danger of that happening in the grim atmosphere Knight has created. Although there are a few in-jokes for viewers familiar with Dickens's novel (Pip's sister boasts that she has made a Christmas pie "by hand", which is the same phrase Dickens uses to refer to her habit of beating Pip black and blue), in every other respect the mood is as bleak as the surrounding marshes.

None of this should come as a surprise from the creative team that was also behind *A Christmas Carol* (2019), in which Dickens's plot helped to generate a much darker narrative featuring elements of horror alongside suggestions of child abuse. Nor should Knight's attraction to *Great Expectations*. His own father was a blacksmith, the career that Pip is desperate to escape, and Knight has acknowledged that he "always felt an affinity" for Dickens's restlessly ambitious hero. What's far more interesting is the fact that his reinterpretation of the novel is just the latest in a long line.

In recent years *Great Expectations* has been rewritten as a postcolonial fable by Peter Carey (*Jack Maggs*) and Lloyd Jones (*Mister Pip*) **and relocated to modern America as a slice of Southern gothic in Joseph Allen Boone's *Furnace Creek*, a novel that opens with the young hero happily "whacking off" on top of an overgrown Civil War mound.**

Television shows from *The Twilight Zone* to *Happy Days* have echoed Dickens's story in ways that have ranged from loving homage to finger-poking satire. Even the title has taken on new forms, inspiring dating agencies such as Great Expectations Services for Singles and shops including Grape Expectations (wine).

This process began early, because not even Dickens was willing to leave his creation alone. In fact, modern reworkings of this novel are really just extensions of Dickens's own realisation that changing expectations from his audience would also require changes to *Great Expectations*. At times it was like a creative itch he just couldn't stop scratching. In the original conclusion Pip and Estella (the haughty ward of Miss Havisham) went their separate ways, but after being told that this was too downbeat he revised it, offering a glimpse of a happy ending. He also produced a shortened version of it for his highly successful series of public readings, although he never delivered it — possibly as he realised how hard it would be in person to capture a narrative voice that on the page is both innocent and streaked with knowing irony.

Far stranger is an 1861 stage adaptation that he authorised and may even have co-authored. This introduces a whole new element of melodrama to the story, as Pip responds to the discovery of where his fortune has come from by declaring: "And is it thus my secret's told? Shame, misery, death!" It ends with him escaping alongside Magwitch across the marshes.

Why all these changes? Maybe partly because the novel itself was a reworking of ideas that had long haunted Dickens's imagination. Magwitch's reappearance in London at the end of the second volume replays *The Story of the Convict's Return* from *The Pickwick Papers*. Dickens's childhood shame at being watched as he worked in the window of a blacking warehouse lingers in Pip's dread that he might "lift up my eyes and see Estella looking in at one of the wooden windows of the forge". Even the phrase "great expectations" had already been used by Dickens to expose a character's pretensions. "I have always been bred up from childhood with great expectations," the hero of *Martin Chuzzlewit* serenely explains, "and have always been taught to believe that I should be, one day, very rich." Like the traces of blood that Pip discovers outside Satis House, in this novel the literary past also has a habit of "starting out like a stain that was faded but not gone".

Since Dickens's death in 1870 his novel has behaved in a similar way, repeatedly returning in unexpected new forms. Cinema adaptations have been popular, starting with a silent film in 1917, and in many cases they have told audiences as much about their own time as they have about Dickens's. Most famously, David Lean's *Great Expectations* ends with Pip (John Mills) ripping down the dusty blackout curtains in Satis House, crying: "I have come back to

let in the sunlight!” In the story he sounds like a young man desperate to reveal the truth. In 1946, the year this film was released, he would have sounded more like a demobbed soldier returning home from the front.

The latest TV version follows a similar pattern and adds an extra twist. Inevitably there are some echoes of contemporary concerns: here a hint of Black Lives Matter, there a glint of #MeToo. What’s different is its uncomfortable reminders that such ideas involve some particularly stubborn stains on the historical record. While Pip daydreams about sailing to the colonies to make his fortune, we are confronted with the human cost of such dreams. Prisoners are shackled before being transported to Australia, and the blacksmith Joe Gargery (Owen McDonnell) is quietly asked if he can manufacture some more chains for the slaves still being shipped from Africa to America. Meanwhile the rich can apparently behave as they like and, according to Miss Havisham (Olivia Colman), “those below are for using”. The uncomfortable question that confronts Pip, and also the viewer of this compelling TV drama, is how far anyone is willing to go when it comes to using — or being used.

*Robert Douglas-Fairhurst is the author of *The Turning Point: A Year That Changed Dickens and the World* (Vintage). *Great Expectations* begins on BBC1 tonight at 9pm*