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# On Waiters and Writers

## *Views of Authorship in Charles Dickens's "Somebody's Luggage"*

*Michela Miller Dickson*

The occupation of waitering during the late nineteenth century was not just a way to eke out an existence—it was an art. Or at least, that is the image painted by Charles Dickens in his portmanteau story “Somebody’s Luggage.” This collaboratively written tale was released in Dickens’s 1862 *All the Year Round* publication as an annual Christmas number (Simmons 90). “Somebody’s Luggage” involves a frame narrative, or overarching storyline, written by Dickens that makes up the first and last chapters of the story. Aside from the frame story, each chapter within “Somebody’s Luggage” is composed of a different manuscript written by a different author.

One Dickens scholar, Ruth Glancy, points out that Dickens used the frame stories in his portmanteau tales as a conduit for “vital imaginative and moral expressions made possible through the relationship of . . . writer and reader” (72). With this in mind, it is apparent that the frame narrative for “Somebody’s Luggage” serves as a platform for Dickens’s never-ending supply of opinions. Dickens’s frame story is narrated by Christopher, the head waiter at a small hotel, who discovers a mysterious piece of abandoned luggage containing several story manuscripts. Despite Christopher’s

working-class background, his narration paints the life of a waiter as a noble calling that does not come naturally to everyone. In terms of waitering, Christopher declares, “You must be bred to it. You must be born to it” (3). This suggests that one must be born to the exclusive and dignified position of waiter, which is seemingly contrary to the typical Victorian mindset.

Some critics, such as Rodney Edgecombe, have argued that Dickens uses Christopher’s high-minded impressions of waitering to promote positive perceptions of waiters and working class laborers. That may be true, but only on the surface level. Edgecombe asserts that Dickens uses Christopher’s voice and characterization to encourage a change in social perception when he states, “Again and again we get the sense that the persona behind ‘Somebody’s Luggage’ is trying to correct public ‘misprision’ about the craft of waiting” (27). Dickens does suggest that readers have a flawed perception of waitering; however, deeper examination reveals that Dickens is not merely referring to waiters but also to authors.

Existing literature on “Somebody’s Luggage” also addresses the connection between waitering and authorship. Scholar Emily Simmons comments that this story “speaks to Dickens’s singular position as both author and editor that he can bring together amateur, professional, and established authors of varying styles and combine their work within his own in order to turn a very tidy profit” (118). Essentially, this confirms the claim that Dickens uses the character of the waiter to promote his own position as author and editor. To convey the importance of authorship, Dickens uses the scaffold of the waiter’s character to draw parallels between the misunderstood nature of waitering and the misunderstood nature of Dickens’s own occupations, writing and editing. By portraying Christopher’s role as a misunderstood waiter, Dickens criticizes Victorian society’s views of authors and also emphasizes the often unseen but essential roles of both authors and editors in Victorian society. The purpose of this essay is two-fold. First, to establish how the parallels between waiters and writers in “Somebody’s Luggage” initiate a larger conversation about the value of writers in society. Second, to illustrate how Dickens’s contributions to “Somebody’s Luggage” highlight the importance of editors in the Victorian publishing industry.

## Parallels Between Waiters and Writers

The first half of the frame story for “Somebody’s Luggage,” as well as Dickens’s contributions to other chapters, critiques how society views

waitering—and, ultimately, writing. By focusing the narrative on waitering, Dickens is able to set the stage for his argument about the essential role of writers in society. This narrative is enhanced by using his signature first-person narration. First-person narration solidifies a trusting bond between reader and writer, as if the reader has a personal, intimate connection with the narrator. But this perspective also creates a space where the narrator's identity is ambiguous; the story could be interpreted as narrated either by the waiter or Dickens. Edgecombe assents that Dickens's narrator entertains his audience with "solemn earnestness" and also claims that this narration "assures us that we are about to receive the last word on waiters, an inward, privileged view" (26). Furthermore, the first-person point of view "invites readers to imagine themselves being addressed personally by Dickens" (Palmer 29). Overall, the first-person narration adds an element of fluidity to the identity of the narrator and introduces the possibility that Dickens is projecting his own voice and opinions through the character of Christopher.

Simmons argues that Dickens mobilized this story as "a vehicle for very particular messages about authorship and professionalism" (85), one message being the importance of authors in society. Dickens emphasizes that the life of a waiter, and by extension, an author, is a noble, albeit misunderstood, occupation. In self-effacing and quirky narration—described by one critic as "piquant oddity" (Edgecombe 27)—Christopher's "humble lines" elevate waitering from a mere occupation to that of a "calling" (Dickens 1). Dickens writes, "You cannot lay down those lines of life at your will and pleasure by the half-day or evening, and take up Waiter-ing. You may suppose you can, but you cannot; or you may go so far as to say you do, but you do not" (2). This statement confirms that Dickens is trying to correct flawed social perceptions about this seemingly low-class position.

Dickens further points out that the waitering environment forces waiters to hide their true selves and pretend to be interested in all kinds of things to be successful at their trade. Christopher mourns this tendency in himself, "Look at the Hypocrites we are made, and the lies (white, I hope) that are forced upon us! Why must a sedentary-pursuited Waiter . . . have a most tremendous interest in horse-training and racing? Yet it would be half our little incomes out of our pockets if we didn't" (Dickens 7–8). Again, Dickens shows that waiters must pretend to be interested in all sorts of things because they cannot survive financially any other way, and the same applies to authors. Theoretically, authors have the freedom to write about whatever

they wish, yet in reality, some authors can only make a living within the realm of what people will pay for and find entertaining. These parallels convey that being an author requires a level of self-sacrifice, most of which goes unseen by Victorian society.

Dickens furthers his stance on authorship in the chapter "The Brown-Paper Parcel" using the narration of an unnamed artist. Although the framework of waitering isn't utilized in this tale, the chapter serves a similar purpose in conveying the sense that writers, like artists, often go unrecognized. This story is narrated by an opinionated artist who is frustrated about how artists are perceived and often ignored. Like the chapters narrated by Christopher, this chapter opens with first-person narration from the artist, who claims, "MY works are well known. I am a young man in the Art line. You have seen my works many a time, though it's fifty thousand to one if you have seen me" (Dickens 138). On a very basic level, this passage expresses the difficulties of being in a creative field in which the author's real personality is of little consequence; but at the same time, this passage also describes Dickens, who, as an artist himself, uses this character to echo his earlier point: people do not value the artist as much as they value the art. Dickens's descriptions of both the artist and the waiter point to his own occupation as a writer. He claims that although a writer's work may capture the attention of society, no one seems to really know the writer as a person.

Dickens also suggests, through Christopher's commentary, that the notion that writers easily become rich is a myth. Concerning a waiter's income, Christopher questions, "What is meant by the everlasting fable that Head Waiters is rich? How did that fable get into circulation?" (9). This passage points to Victorian society's naïveté and informs readers that it is unrealistic to view waiters as living a life of plenty. Christopher also claims that even waiters can fall into that viewpoint, which is like falling from a "dizzy precipice of falsehood" (Dickens 10). This misguided impression that waitering leads to wealth could be compared to assumptions that becoming a writer will eventually lead to money and fame.

Outside of the economic struggle of waitering, Dickens points out that waiters and writers frequently hide a "heavy heart" and often have to feign interest in their clients in order to make a living (6). In the first chapter of "Somebody's Luggage," Christopher describes this difficulty:

I am ashamed of myself in my own private bosom for the way in which I make believe to care whether or not the grouse is strong on the wing . . . and whether the pheasants is shy or bold, or anything else you please to mention. Yet you may see me, or any other Waiter of my standing, holding on by the back of the box and leaning over a gentleman with his purse out and his bill before him, discussing these points in a confidential tone of voice, as if my happiness in life entirely depended on 'em. (8–9)

Dickens conveys that just as waiters are governed by the whims and fancies of their customers, he as an author is subject to the desires of publishers and readers. Essentially, Dickens's reference to waiters as a more exclusive branch of society suggests that readers should be privileged to hear from a perspective that is normally not valued.

Despite the negative aspects of waitering, Dickens's distinguished interpretation of waiters' roles also insinuates that being a waiter actually gives waiters power over their clients, even clients above their social status. Dickens writes, "The good old-fashioned style is, that whatever you want, down to a wafer, you must be 'olely and solely dependent on the Head Waiter for. You must put yourself a new-born Child into his hands" (13). This excerpt illustrates a fascinating juxtaposition between the lower social status of a waiter and the status of their clients. Although the clients most likely have a higher social standing than the waiter, they are temporarily reliant upon the waiter for their needs, which is a complete switch in the normal social hierarchy. And while a waiter's hard work should merit an expectation of appropriate recognition, that does not always happen (Simmons 100). Overall, Christopher's observations about this power dynamic illustrate the irony in this situation: those who look down upon waiters are actually reliant on them.

A similar relationship based on mutual dependence also develops between writers and readers; the author is dependent on his readers for financial support while the readers, in purchasing and consuming a piece of writing, submit themselves to the writer's words. Supposedly, Dickens enjoyed writing frame stories because they exhibited the narrator's power over his audience. The interdependence between reader and author is also mirrored between authors and publisher. Publishers during the nineteenth century relied on authors to make a profit, yet authors did not always get an equal share of that profit despite being the instigator of that financial success (Nayder 16). Overall, the power dynamics between waiter and customer

are similar to those of authors and readers. Dickens shows that although customers are beholden to authors for their entertainment, authors do not receive adequate compensation, recognition, or appreciation for their work.

## Parallels between Waiters and Editors

Parallels between waiters and writers certainly convey the importance of authorship, but Dickens does not stop there. He also uses other chapters in “Somebody’s Luggage” to make a statement about the role of editors in the publishing industry, and this claim is supported by Simmons as well (85). Dickens both criticizes and promotes elements of the publishing industry to convey that editors are the unseen key to success in the publishing process.

Dickens alludes to the risks of being an editor and writer in the chapter “The Brown-Paper Parcel.” The unnamed artist bemoans the burdens of holding a creative occupation in Victorian society, and the way the artist describes society’s treatment of artists is also representative of how the publishing industry treated writers. One aspect of the publishing industry that Dickens touches on repeatedly is the lack of copyright laws. Dickens’s personal letters express his disappointment that there were not laws in place to protect copyright. In one letter written to Henry Austin in 1842, Dickens bemoans, “Is it not a horrible thing that scoundrel booksellers should grow rich here from publishing books, the authors of which do not reap one farthing? . . . Is it tolerable that [an author] . . . should have no choice of his audience, no control over his own distorted text? . . . my blood so boils at these enormities.” This letter underscores the injustice of having no copyright protection, a frustration which surfaces in “Somebody’s Luggage.”

Dickens’s passion for copyright law is manifested through the character of the unnamed artist in the chapter “The Brown-Paper Parcel.” The artist complains that even if he were to become a famous artist, there were no copyright laws to protect his work. Dickens’s opinionated views surface when the narrating artist muses about his popularity and says, “But suppose I AM popular? . . . Then no doubt they [an artist’s works] are preserved in some Collection? No, they are not . . . Copyright? No, nor yet copyright” (Dickens 140). This fiery declaration reveals that creators, whether artists or authors, often got the raw end of the deal and were inhibited by the lack of copyright laws. It also suggests that there is a need for an editor-type figure to protect the work of other writers and artists.

Dickens continues to highlight the work of editors in “The Brown-Paper Parcel” in the commentary of the artist narrator. At one point, the artist states that people are not interested in artists themselves, but only in what they produce. He cries, “You say you don’t want to see me? You say your interest is in my works and not in me? Don’t be too sure about that” (Dickens 138). The artist claims that he is invisible and perhaps only acknowledged because of the services he provides. This claim can be applied to the work of editors, who are necessary to the publishing industry but perhaps overlooked. In Simmons’s analysis of this chapter, she implies that artists need the professional skills of others to succeed in their industry. Simmons states that “knowing how to create is only part of the artist’s occupation, and that, without attendant effort of a more professional nature, the artist cannot expect (or may not want) to receive credit and recognition for his or her work” (100). Dickens’s strong admonition, “Don’t be too sure about that,” shows that editors play a significant role in helping the work of artists, or writers, to come to fruition.

The closing half of the frame story in the chapter “His Wonderful End” illustrates the essential nature of editorial work. In this chapter, Christopher sells the mysterious manuscripts he found in the abandoned luggage for publication, but shortly afterward, he meets the original author of the abandoned manuscripts. When he reveals that the stories were published, Christopher is surprised by the author’s positive, exuberant response (Dickens 208–17). The author confesses, “I have unremittingly and unavailingly endeavoured to get into print. Know, Christopher, that all the Booksellers alive—and several dead—have refused to put me into print . . . but they shall be read to you, my friend and brother” (Dickens 218). This passage implies that Christopher’s role as an editor and compiler of the manuscripts was essential. The writer of the manuscript depended on Christopher, the editor; without Christopher’s assistance, the writer’s work would never have been published. This scenario suggests that without Dickens’s role as an editor, his authors—particularly those who worked with him on collaborative tales—would have had little chance of making their way into print. By exaggerating the toil the original writer experienced (whose corrections only seemed to make the manuscript worse), Dickens conveys that editors are crucial and can even save authors from themselves.

The ending of “Somebody’s Luggage” also describes a publishing industry that is supported by a social hierarchy in which authors must

subject themselves to editors in order to publish. While Dickens seems to condemn the injustices faced by the lower classes that stem from hierarchical Victorian society, he clearly relies on a similar system in his own profession, particularly in maintaining control over his collaborative works. According to scholar Anthea Trodd, Dickens saw collaboration “imagined in hierarchical terms,” which implies that Dickens had the most power in the process (203). In collaborative pieces, Dickens insisted on revisions so drastic that sometimes the collaborator’s work was only a “mosaic rather than retouched compositions” (Stone 48). And despite Dickens’s heavy-handed control over the editing process, he allowed no one other than himself to revise his own work.

While his insistence on having control and power over collaborative publications may seem slightly hypocritical, it does demonstrate that Dickens was an expert in his field and was actually devoted to helping his fellow authors publish and be recompensed for their work. John Feather points out one possible reason for Dickens’s interference. Feather explains that it was easier for famous writers to manipulate copyright and profits in the competitive publishing world than for less prestigious writers who lacked experience and connections (94). In “His Wonderful End,” the author of the manuscripts is overjoyed that his work has been published because he could not publish it himself, and he did not seem to mind that his name was not associated with his writing (218–19). The writer surrenders his identity for the sake of publication, which plays into Dickens’s own argument that budding authors should agree to work collaboratively with him. Dickens’s reputation would sell their writing, and the arrangement would guarantee them a solid profit. Although it required authors to “place [themselves] in the hands of One,” relying on Dickens to publish their work would prove more beneficial than attempting to attempt it on their own (Dickens 208). While a hierarchical structure seems to be contradictory, his commentary in “Somebody’s Luggage” reveals that, without the mediating influence of editors, many writers would be like the writer in the frame story—rejected by publishers and unable to succeed by themselves.

Dickens’s dual identity is solidified at the conclusion of the frame narrative, “His Wonderful End.” The original author of the manuscript edits Christopher’s proofs and asks Christopher to send them back to the editor of the magazine. Here, Dickens’s fictional scenario begins to resemble reality because the magazine is none other than Dickens’s own *All the Year Round*

(perhaps a bit of self-promotion!). The final scene describes the editor of the magazine (who readers at the time would have recognized to be Dickens himself) looking through the edited proofs. Unable to decipher the smeared edits, the editor throws the proofs into the fire and opts to print the original version. The editor of the magazine prefers to accept only the works that were edited by Christopher, not the work of the original author. The magazine editor emphasizes the essential nature of an editor in the writing process by choosing Christopher's manuscript over the original author's work. This scenario underscores that Dickens's own role as editor has a large hand in the success of collaboratively written works and their writers.

The symbolism of Dickens's dual identity as waiter and editor in "Somebody's Luggage" reinforces the importance of each role individually and collectively. Christopher's commentary on waitering serves as a platform for Dickens to demonstrate how social inequality permeates the publishing industry and robs authors of appropriate recognition. However, Christopher's actions also support the Victorian editorial hierarchy by showing that editors play key roles in getting an author published. Ultimately, Dickens uses the memorable character of Christopher to articulate that a cooperative relationship between writer and editor guarantees success for both parties.

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