Baker Street Readers

Great reads for all ages

‘She? That’s Little Dorrit. She’s nothing. She’s just a whim.’

Poor Little Dorrit. Her future looks as bleak as her past and her present. Born and brought up in a debtors’ prison, she relies on her sewing skills to help support her father. Little does she know that her sewing will soon present an opportunity for change.

When change arrives in the form of Arthur Clennam it is accompanied by secrets and dangers. Who is he? What are his motives for wanting to help Little Dorrit?

Follow Little Dorrit’s tale as it winds its way through London and Italy. Enjoy the rich variety of characters she encounters, and share with her the twists and turns of the road she travels.

Lexile® Level	AR Level	Word Count
800L	5.1	5,998

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“Miniature masterpieces”

- BBC R4, Open Book

LITTLE DORRIT

CHARLES DICKENS

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TEACHER'S COLLECTION ONLY

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THE CHARACTERS



Amy ('Little') Dorrit

Little Dorrit has lived in prison all her life. When somebody tells her fortune he sees change approaching. Will the changes bring joy or sorrow?

Mr Dorrit



He is called 'The Father of the Marshalsea' because he has been imprisoned there so long. What would he do if he gained wealth and freedom?

Fanny and Tip Dorrit



Little Dorrit's brother and sister take her for granted. How will they be affected by the changes ahead?



Arthur Clennam

At the age of forty Arthur thinks he is too old for love. Why then does he want to help Little Dorrit? Will he ever understand his own heart?





Mrs Clennam

Cold-hearted and as hard as granite, Arthur's mother spends her life in a wheelchair. Why does she feel that she has to suffer for her sins? What has she done?



Mr and Mrs Merdle

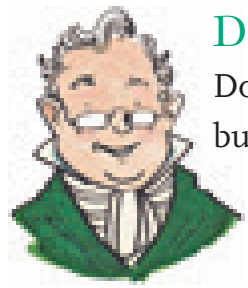
Everybody wants to invest in Mr Merdle's businesses, but are he and his investments all that they seem?



Mr Pancks

Pancks collects rent in Bleeding Heart Yard. Why is he excited when he hears the name Dorrit? Can he help Little Dorrit?





Daniel Doyce

Doyce is an inventor with his own business. Will he regret leaving Arthur in charge of his finances?

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LITTLE DORRIT

The Marshalsea Prison stood within high walls in the London borough of Southwark. These walls encircled squalid houses which contained all manner of people, all of whom shared a common fate – for one reason or another each had the disgrace of being in debt. Rather than being granted the liberty to earn money to repay their creditors, they languished in prison.

Mr Dorrit was one such man. His complex business affairs had failed, and for the past twenty-two years he and his children had lived in one room in one house within the prison walls. His third child, little Amy Dorrit, had been born in prison. For all the twenty-two years of her life, the Marshalsea was the only home Little Dorrit had ever known.

Crushed at first by his imprisonment, Mr Dorrit had slowly slipped into the dull relief it offered from his troubles beyond the walls.

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There he had watched his wife die in prison, and there his children had grown up. The passing years had made this shabby, soft-mannered debtor a respected figure among other prisoners, gradually earning him the title of 'Father of the Marshalsea'. In this grand capacity Mr Dorrit would welcome new prisoners with pomp and gravity, and receive the money it became traditional to pay him upon their departure.



One Sunday evening, beyond the Marshalsea's forbidding walls, a man walked through London after an absence of twenty years. The doleful church bells tolled his mood to the soot-clad streets. Dismal houses frowned down on him as he turned to walk alongside the Thames, that deadly sewer flowing through the city's heart in the place of a fine fresh river. In the twenty years he had been working in China with his father, London hadn't changed.

Arthur Clennam found his family's home veiled in its familiar gloom and darkness. 'As miserable

as ever,' he sighed. The house brought back painful memories. Strict and austere, his parents had weighed, measured and priced everything, balancing their business with the same discipline as they balanced their bargain with heaven. They believed that suffering in life would gain them forgiveness for their sins when they died. The young Arthur Clennam had never received gentleness or love. Now, aged forty, he had almost lost hope of experiencing either.

Mrs Clennam's old servant, Mr Flintwinch, held up a candle to the visitor's face. 'Ah – Mr Arthur,' he said, without emotion. 'Follow me.' Shuffling along the grim, ugly passage, he led Arthur to his mother's room. In the darkness, broken by only one dim candle, Mrs Clennam was barely visible in her black widow's dress. Confined to a wheelchair, she was unable to rise to greet her son. He bowed down to receive her cold kiss.



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himself frequently within the walls. Whilst family members were free to come and go through the gates, the prisoners themselves could not.

As prisoners had to pay for their own rent, food and clothing, they had to send their families out to work. When his father was imprisoned, Charles Dickens himself had to leave school to earn money in a factory to support his family. He remained angry about this throughout his life. Many died in the Marshalsea, of disease or of hunger. The Marshalsea was closed by an Act of Parliament in 1842.

Prisoners would have to remain in prison until their debts were cleared, or until the people to whom they owed money decided that they could be freed. That is why Arthur tries to talk to the Barnacles, who have it within their power to release Mr Dorrit.

Little Dorrit was published between 1855 and 1857. By this time Dickens was a well-known writer, and people queued for the next instalment of *Little Dorrit* in the same way as you might have queued for the latest *Harry Potter* book or film.

Dickens decided to use this opportunity to point out some problems of the English political system. *Little Dorrit* is Dickens at perhaps his

most politically subversive and satirical. Through the Circumlocution Office he shows an impenetrable bureaucracy, much of which still rings true today. Through the 'disease' of investing in Mr Merdle's ventures, Dickens could almost have been predicting the economic crisis of recent years. Human nature's desire to make money quickly and easily hasn't changed and hasn't become any safer. Dickens shows Britain and the British people as powerless to improve their lives in any way other than by hard work.

Interestingly, Dickens allows the Dorrits to experience both extreme wealth and extreme poverty. Neither brings them complete happiness. Little Dorrit eventually chooses a life of hard work and its rewards rather than inherited wealth.

Finding out more

We recommend the following books and websites to gain a greater understanding of Little Dorrit's England:

Books

- Terry Deary, *Loathsome London* (Horrible Histories), Scholastic, 2005.
- Terry Deary, *Vile Victorians* (Horrible Histories), Scholastic, 1994.

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