

OCTOBER 27, 1960: A NIGHT WITH CHARLES DICKENS

Joan Stevens worked a miracle tonight with her bracing talk on the First Editions of Dickens, after the annual meeting of the Friends of the Turnbull Library. Even so, how in the name of thunder could a talk on first editions be bracing? Well, Joan Stevens just made it so. As a lecturer she would meet success in America: She could carry one through a two-hour's lecture on end-papers without a yawn.

The talk was an insight into the commercial mind of Dickens, a social glimpse of the period, its lending libraries, publishers and personalities — people as far apart as Thackeray and old George Moore. The speaker knows how to use her hands(her gestures were all embracing), and has a rare sense of humour. Laughter lightened the glass cases of the books. The many editions of Dickens handled by the speaker entered into the fun and whether in parts or sheets, revealed themselves as neatly as a pack of cards manipulated by a juggler. All were handled with reverence, nothing misplaced; all slipped back into their beautifully fashioned cases in perfect order. Yes, a true book-lover.

Without notes, without a falter, Miss Stevens carried us from the days of the three and four-decker and the stranglehold of money-making perpetrated by the lending libraries of Mudie and Co. Dickens would have no truck with this, and as a counterblast, published his "Pickwick Papers" in periodical parts, a huge success mounting from the early sales of some hundreds to 40,000 per issue and more. Another author who later helped to blast the Mudies was George Moore, surely a redeeming quality in the make-up of the old rascal. Mudie reckoned Moore's 3 vol. "A Modern Lover" was immoral. Moore retaliated with a cheap edition of "A Mummer's Wife".

Miss Stevens played with neat humour on the sales pull of the "to-be-continued-in-our-next" aspect of the Dickens' part publications. She said that with the advent of "The Old Curiosity Shop", the suspense aspect of the death of Little Nell was "worked to a boiling point". There was humour also in her quotations from the advertisements which appeared with each instalment. The later adventures of Dickens with the weekly, "Master Humphrey's Clock" in which appeared "The Old Curiosity Shop" and "Barnaby Rudge" were not so successful. Dickens then tried his periodicals, "All the Year Round" and "Household Words", as vehicles for his novels and was moderately successful.