

Kathy George

Searching for Estella

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Great Expectations, Charles Dickens' classic novel, is one of my all-time favourite works of fiction. The opening chapter is set in a graveyard wreathed in fog. Pip, the story's protagonist and a boy whose very name conjures up insignificance, is confronted by a convict, filthy and blue with cold, a man who limps and bleeds because of irons that worry at his ankles. On pain of death the convict demands that Pip bring him food and Pip, who has lost his parents and lives with a harridan of a sister who beats him at her whim, does so, thus setting in motion a chain of events. *Great Expectations* is a Bildungsroman, a coming-of-age story about an orphan boy's rise to riches, his journey to manhood, and his ultimate understanding of what it means to be humble and kind. Estella, a minor character in the novel, is elusive, mysterious, and cold-hearted, but since Pip spends a great deal of time trying to win her heart and failing, she is of relevance. I have read *Great Expectations* many times. Firstly, like many others, at school where sadly I did not appreciate it. Later, I studied it at university in depth and it was then that my love affair with the novel began. I admit to always having been intrigued by Estella. Part of my fascination lies in the fact that the reader is told so little about her. Who, really, is she? Why is she spiteful, mean and cold-hearted, and what does Miss Havisham, her adoptive mother, do to her to make her so? Perhaps, more importantly, why does Estella treat Pip the way she does?

I first thought of writing Estella's story after I'd sent the manuscript of my second book off to my publisher knowing it was not up to scratch. (It is strange how often another, *better* idea occurs to you the moment you press Send.) I immediately emailed my publisher and asked her not to read it. Then I asked if anyone had ever written Estella's story before. I was still sitting in my study at my computer when my phone rang. "Estella from *Great Expectations*?" my publisher asked a little breathlessly although I had naturally clarified this in the email. "Yes," I said. There was a pause. "Oh, my," she said.

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When I began writing Estella's story and shining a light on this little-known Dickens' character, I knew that the questions I raised above must be addressed from the get-go. For if the reader is to warm to Estella and empathise with her, there must be a credible explanation for her callous behaviour. So, in order to understand her I began at the moment when, aged three or thereabouts, she is taken from her mother. She arrives with no apparent history at Miss Havisham's Satis House in the middle of the night and it is from Miss Havisham that she learns – at great cost – to be cold-hearted, spiteful and nasty since these are all traits that she witnesses in her adoptive mother. Estella, however, is a vibrant and strong character, and highly intelligent. She quickly learns not to wither and crumble before Miss Havisham's cruelties. By the novel's close we know the history of her biological parents and we know that strength of character would be one of the genes passed down to her. Plus, this trait is evident from our first introduction to Estella, from the moment she goes to the gate to let Pip in and gives that inflated mouth-breathing fish of a man Mr Pumblechook some lip. When Pip arrives, he and Estella are around seven years of age and Estella's character is well on its way to being formed. In her eyes Pip comes across as weak and ineffectual and it is little wonder that she despises him. He is like the moth that she refers to later: Moths, and all kinds of ugly creatures, she tells Pip, hover about a candle. Can the candle help it? she asks.

The candle is a recurring theme. Estella's name means *star* and, more than once, she picks up a candle and glides along a darkened passage like a star. It is this image, strangely, that haunted me during my research. I sometimes felt that I at last had a definite idea of who she was and why, only to have her deliberately disappear into the shadows behind the candle and be blinded by the light once more.

One of the ugly creatures that hover around the candle is Bentley Drummle, who later becomes Estella's husband and abuses her. Estella, who could have any man she wanted such is her beauty, has been taught by Miss Havisham to despise all men. I couldn't help but think that she comes to believe she is not worthy of true love, that she will receive only the love she deserves.

As *Great Expectations* proceeds, both Pip and Estella grow and change into better people although of course we, the readers, are only privy to Pip's journey. From the time

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that he learns Estella is to marry Drummle, she falls away from the novel and is referred to infrequently and obliquely at that. But from what we are told we must surmise that Estella, too, is a changed character by the novel's end. Her marriage is loveless and a failure; Drummle gambles and drinks and mistreats her. We must therefore conclude that Estella is left to very much to her own devices, that her life is perhaps filled with regret. Being a strong character, however, I am convinced Estella would have risen above her circumstances and made what she could of her situation. It was also this about Estella that captured my imagination from the start of my research. I felt enormous sympathy for her for there is no doubt that she is treated appallingly as a child, as many of Dickens' children in his novels are, but I grew to respect her and admire her for her spirit and strength. By the time I had finished my research I was more than a little in love with her. However, she was like that dear friend we all have that we can never quite fathom. She kept eluding me, her light fading like a star at dawn, as if there was a part of her that she desired to keep private, to withhold. Some part of her that continues, even now, to mystify me.

In my research, I found that many of Dickens' female characters are treated with contempt by their creator. Agnes from *David Copperfield* breaks my heart. She is kind and sweet, generous and loving, and yet Dickens abandons her for much of the novel to the company of that most foul of vile men, Uriah Heep. It is barely credible that Agnes manages to function at all after such an ordeal, let alone go on to survive and – but wait, let there be no spoilers. In *Great Expectations* all the female characters – Biddy being the exception – are treated atrociously. What happened in Dickens' own life to make him view women with such loathing? In *The Mystery of Charles Dickens*, A.N. Wilson writes that Dickens' mother and father sent him to the workhouse. The family was in dire straits at the time but in the eyes of the young Dickens this was an unforgiveable act. Was this where his scorn and derision of women began? Later, Dickens married Kate, the daughter of his publisher, and subsequently dumped her, treating her with cruelty, and acquired a mistress, Nelly Ternan. Dickens, I discovered, was also a philanthropist who, together with Miss Burdett-Coutts, set up an establishment to help rescue "fallen women". *Oliver Twist* features a fallen woman, but it is also one of Dickens' few works where women shine and shine radiantly. Rose Maylie and her

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adoptive mother are both saint-like and the heroine of the novel is Nancy, a prostitute who sacrifices her own life to save Oliver's.

Dickens seems to have been a man filled with contradictions. A man who admired and respected some women, Miss Burdett-Coutts, for instance, and yet despised and loathed others, his wife and almost certainly his mother. It is said that he never forgave her for putting him in the workhouse. Dickens was a restless spirit. According to his biographers, he thought nothing of walking ten miles every evening before bed. Was this restlessness caused by unhappiness, I wonder?

During my research I found myself wondering whether Dickens originally intended to make more of Estella – after all, why name her *star*? – but decided against it by the close of the book. Speculation about whether Estella was modelled after Nelly Ternan, his mistress, has been rife, and there's been much discussion regarding the ending of *Great Expectations*, which Dickens rewrote numerous times. It is a mediocre kind of ending, neither particularly happy nor hopeful, and it is said that he did not believe Pip and Estella deserved anything better. *Great Expectations* was written near the end of Dickens' life; it is his third-last novel. Which makes me wonder: are Pip and Estella intended to represent Dickens and Ternan? And was Dickens so bitterly unhappy by this point that he withheld happiness from these two characters because he could not find it in his own life?

The last chapter of *Great Expectations* has always been a point of contention for me. Now, having written Estella's story, I disagree with Dickens' conclusion even more. In my opinion, both Pip and Estella's journeys to adulthood are filled with suffering and sadness and they deserve a worthier ending, an ending that reflects the humbler, kinder people they have become. Dear reader, I am here to reassure you I have given them one.

"Why Estella?" Many readers have asked me this. Why elect to write about a character who is already in existence? I don't know how similar writers respond: Lauren Chater, for instance, with *Gulliver's Wife*, or Mirandi Riwoe with *The Fish Girl*, a retelling of Somerset Maugham's short story, *The Four Dutchmen*. For my part, I try to explain that Estella Havisham is someone who drew the short straw, who's never been given an opportunity to explain herself, who has gone down in history as being capricious, arrogant, and cold-hearted. I'm a writer. I spend my working days holed up in my study surrounded by

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research books, all too often staring at a blank page. I don't save anyone from anything or plant forests of trees or explore space. But in rescuing Estella from the shadows and bringing her and her candle out into the light, I have managed to give someone life.