**BROADSTAIRS DICKENS FELLOWSHIP**

**NEWSLETTER SEPTEMBER 2020  
Book Review  
Virginia Schwartz  
Author of “Among the Fallen”**

*Review by Chris Ewer*

I ‘met’ Virginia Schwartz virtually when I joined the New York Fellowship zoom  
meeting when she presented her new book to the membership there. Her talk  
concentrated on Urania Cottage, the women’s refuge set up by Dickens and  
Angela Burdett-Coutts. I was at once fascinated by her take on this little known  
philanthropic side of Dickens and wanted to know more. Virginia’s novel, set in  
19th century London depicting one girl’s struggle to rise above injustice, her  
experiences in Tothill Fields prison and her subsequent meeting with Charles  
Dickens offering a different way of life, is a fascinating, enlightening and  
absorbing read.  
The immediacy of the script, the portrayal of Dickens himself and the  
atmosphere of Urania Cottage is all extremely credible and Schwartz leads us  
willingly into this forgotten time with Orpha as our guide. A thoroughly  
enjoyable, enlightening book giving the reader a personal insight into the girls  
and women offered a second chance at a decent life. Thoroughly recommended.

Review by Val Whitehouse

Virginia Schwartz's imaginative novel about a historical place, Urania House in  
London, is a fascinating read. In case you don't know, Urania House was an  
establishment set up in 1847 by the author Charles Dickens and the wealthy  
philanthropist Lady Angela Georgina Burdett-Coutts for the rehabilitation and

vocational training of chosen young women whose poverty-stricken early lives  
had forced them into crime or prostitution. After their re-education, the women  
were given the opportunity to take a passage to Australia so that they could  
begin a new life unencumbered by their pasts.  
The novel's narrator is one such woman, Orpha. We follow her from prison into  
Urania, gradually learning her past story through flashbacks and confessions.  
The dreadful conditions of the poor are well-portrayed, as is the sensitive  
benevolence of Charles Dickens. The fictional interviews between Dickens and  
Orpha are particularly moving. They are instrumental in encouraging Orpha to  
write her story, bringing closure and justice to her. The reader is drawn into  
Victorian London, especially as the book is written from Orpha's viewpoint so  
that we feel her experiences in a personal way. I can recommend this book to  
anyone who is interested in Dickens  
and his world.

*Review by Gloria Underwood*

From the first page Virginia brings  
the women in Urania Cottage to life.  
The harrowing description of the  
conditions in a Victorian prison  
makes one glad not to have lived in  
the 1800s. Virginia successfully  
blends facts with fiction to produce a  
thought-provoking story about  
young women and how defenceless  
they could be with no hope of help  
from society. This book will appeal  
to both fans of Dickens and those  
who know little or nothing of his life  
and works, and I feel sure will  
encourage the beginner to read  
more about Dickens, and life and  
conditions in the 19th century.

We asked Virginia some questions  
about her book:

What drew you to the story of Dickens, Burdett-Coutts and Urania Cottage?

At The Morgan Library’s “Charles Dickens at 200”, a bicentennial exhibit of his  
life and work, the presence of Dickens was palpable: his drafts, quill pens,  
travelling writing kit as a journalist. Several of his letters to Burdett-Coutts about  
Urania, a home for fallen girls were also included. I was stunned by Dickens’s  
domesticity, curriculum for the girls, incidents at the home conveyed with  
passion and humor. Dotted with pet nicknames for the girls and details of dress,  
they brought vivid images of the girls to my mind. I immediately thought: What if  
I was one of those girls?

But there was a deeper instinct embedded in my desire to write this novel. The  
students I had taught all confessed a dislike for reading Dickens later in high  
school. Would a new generation of readers reject Dickens and what would they  
lose? So the novel became a coming of age story written as a crossover for a wide  
audience of adults and young adults.

On arriving in Australia, the women from Urania House would have had the  
opportunity to lead a new and better life. Does this reflect any experiences in  
your own family’s history?

In our family’s history, my grandmother was widowed in a remote Northern  
Ontario mining town after emigrating to Canada. She raised a newborn and two  
young boys in the aftermath of her husband’s tragic death. Uneducated, she  
survived by running a boarding house and also working part time in a laundry.  
Eighteen hard years later, the man who became my step grandfather proposed  
and bought her the beautiful Southern Ontario fruit farm where I was born. Her  
second chance remade her life and mine.

Is Orpha an amalgam of the characters of the real inmates of Urania? How did  
you decide on your main character?

Dickens’s letters about the “virgin charges” of Urania were fascinating. I  
interwove some of these facts to develop the girls together with research on the  
Victorian underclass. Mayhew’s London Labour and London Poor and Dickens’s  
own novels provided composite pictures of the period. During my early research,  
Orpha, who became my main character, appeared in my imagination. Physically  
and emotionally, she resembled a shy childhood friend who disappeared inside  
herself. I had always wondered what kept her in the background, what secrets  
she withheld and why. I never discovered why. But, once Orpha appeared, and I  
connected her to my old friend, she took over the story. I had no choice but to  
follow and finally pry open her secrets along with Dickens.

In chapter 9 the conversation between Orpha and Dickens is friendly, each of  
them sharing their feelings on words, stories and the need to escape into  
literature; is this your own experience as an author?

In order for Orpha to trust Dickens, she needed a route. Common ground. Since  
Orpha was an actress who knew poetry and literature as did Dickens, this  
became the entryway. Dickens’s involvement with reading during his own  
childhood while he was convalescing reminded me of how books gave me refuge  
to “escape” to when I was young. Fortunately, the only library in the whole  
county when I was growing up, was built in a corner of an orchard, a short walk  
away. As the novel progressed and Orpha became more and more real to me, she  
gave voice to my own inclinations.

You obviously researched Charles Dickens extensively as a man and a writer.  
What do you think of him?

I grew up reading Dickens. His strong sense of social justice and sympathy for  
the underdog awakened me. His work also inspired me to be a writer because he  
was such a clever one. Great Expectations is a reader’s and a writer’s dream. In  
the first few pages, there is gloom, drama, mystery, betrayal and a child’s entire  
future is sealed by his actions. The novel opens to revelations, coincidences,

intersecting lives, secrets and romance. His themes of transformation and  
liberation are ones I use over and over in all my novels. Dickens possessed a  
deep understanding of humanity. The realm where ideas constantly stew and  
brew is where I love to dwell. I believe Dickens did too.

Editor: We are grateful to Virginia Schwartz for her frank and open responses.