

# Mr. Bucket

— AN ESSAY BY —

TIM MASON

**I**moved to New York City in 1980, immediately following the unexpected end of a long-term relationship. Suddenly I was on my own, and more than a little lost. What would I do? How would I make a living? How would I make a life?

One afternoon I walked into a bookstore. I searched the shelves for something that might offer comfort, and maybe even some firm ground on which to stand. Nothing contemporary; my day-to-day struggles as a newcomer to New York were all I needed of contemporary life, and then some. I took down a classic: *David Copperfield* by Charles Dickens.

The young woman at the counter took the book from me, smiled, and looked up. “If you’ve got Dickens in your life,” she said, “you never need to be lonely.”

Where had she gotten such wisdom?

Dickens’s novels and characters have been companions for me through thick and thin ever since. This book comes from one of them, in a sense. More specifically, *The Darwin Affair* comes from Mr. Bucket.

Inspector Bucket is the private investigator who darts here and there across the landscape of *Bleak House*. If he has a first name, I’ve never heard it. Perhaps his fictional parents didn’t think one necessary; perhaps he didn’t have parents; perhaps he just appeared. Throughout the book, Bucket doesn’t enter rooms, he materializes in them. He’s the sly, manipulative intelligence who gets people’s cooperation without their knowing it. He is one of the first-ever fictional detectives, and he came to haunt me in the best way.

In the years following my move to New York, I was busy writing plays, and making a modest name for myself as an off-Broadway playwright with the late, great Circle Repertory Company. (I did make non-fictional, non-Dickensian friends and collaborators along the way, I’m happy to say.) But

wouldn't it be fun, I always thought, to write a novel in which Bucket was the main character instead of a member of the supporting cast? However, the story that slowly gathered around him in my mind involved actual historical characters, and that posed difficulties.

My late father was a Lutheran minister, and the most devout person I've ever known. And Dad loved Charles Darwin. He read and reread his works. He wrote and self-published two books himself, in which he argued that religious faith was not necessarily antithetical to a fervent embrace of all that science offers, including evolution. Evolution and cosmology were big topics in my father's universe. It didn't come as a shock to me, then, that the story growing bit by bit around Mr. Bucket should involve Darwin, and a violent attempt to suppress his influence.

To mix historical figures (Darwin, Robert FitzRoy, Thomas Huxley, Bishop Wilberforce) with a fictional one like Bucket wouldn't work. But eventually I discovered that Mr. Bucket had a real-life counterpart. Dickens always denied his fictional character was modeled after a very real London police detective, Charles Frederick Field, but it's almost certain he was. This discovery gave me permission to proceed. I wanted my book to be as historically accurate as possible. I would insert my fiction into the interstices.

If you spend time with Dickens, you find that while he is entertaining, he actually is not comforting. He is profoundly angry. Just beneath his improbable coincidences and exaggerated sentiment is a trembling rage: rage against hypocrisy, self-righteousness, and greed. That Dickens escaped the poverty and delusional cant of his bleak childhood doesn't mean he ever lost sight of the multitudes that did not. Instead, for all his personal faults, he became a nineteenth-century activist, working energetically, almost ubiquitously, to raise issues and funds, to make societal change, and to give a voice to the voiceless. *A Christmas Carol* may be a beloved holiday classic, but it is anger that infuses the story. From the voluminous robes of the Ghost of Christmas Present come two ragged children, a boy and a girl. The boy is named Ignorance; the girl, Want. There's no excuse for either of them existing in such a bountiful society, but there they are. In the present. And the Ghost warns, "Beware them both, and all of their degree, but most of all beware this boy . . ." Dickens might as well have been writing about our own twenty-first-century present.

In *The Darwin Affair*, Inspector Field comes to realize that the attempts to diminish and dismiss the theories of Charles Darwin are vitally important to those in the upper echelons of commerce and society, as a means of clinging to wealth and power. The universal equality that is implied by *On the Origin of Species* is a death knell to dominance and empire. To maintain the upper hand, ignorance and poverty are essential.

Of course, my fictional version of Dickens's fictional version of Inspector Charles Field doesn't think Dickens got it right at all. *It's not a bit like me!* he complains to his wife. But I've grown quite fond of my own Inspector Field in the years it took me to write this novel. He has become very like a friend. As have *his* friends. Thereby proving how right the young woman at the bookstore was, all those years ago.

*If you've got Dickens in your life, you never need to be lonely.* She might have added, *Keep an eye out for two ragged children. They're bound to turn up.*