

Literature is Great Part 1

Poets, playwrights and novelists, Britain is famous for its literary talent. From Chaucer's '*Tales*' to J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter... so much of the world's greatest literature has come from Britain.

And the greatest British writer of them all is the Bard himself: William Shakespeare, and this is Shakespeare's Globe in London, on the banks of the River Thames.

William Shakespeare wrote some of the most famous plays in the world. *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* are among his best known works. Many of his plays were performed at the original Globe Theatre, a short distance from here. It burnt down in 1613, during a performance of *Henry VIII*.

Shakespeare's Globe opened to the public fifteen years ago. It's an idea or 'best guess' at what the Globe might have looked like. It's a theatre, exhibition space and place of international education. It aims to bring an appreciation of Shakespeare to a wider audience.

Dominic Dromgoole is the Globe's artistic director.

Richard: Dominic, tell me about the Globe.

Dominic: The Globe is a recreation of Shakespeare's theatre which was originally built in 1599 by Shakespeare's own company to house his own work and the work of many other playwrights. It's an extraordinary theatre. It has no roof, as you can see, which makes it extraordinary within itself. It has a curved auditorium and a beautiful *frons scenae*, and it's probably one of the most exciting theatres to watch a play in or to act in in the world.

Richard: So what happens here?

Dominic: We do about 300 performances every year, about 1,500 people attend every performance. We do a variety of plays by Shakespeare, by other contemporaries of Shakespeare, by... new plays as well, and an extraordinary audience comes from all over the world.

Richard: Do you think Shakespeare is still relevant today?

Dominic: More than ever. Shakespeare speaks to us about our own personal feelings, about love, about grief, about jealousy, about joy, about bereavement, about any of a huge number of things. I can hardly think of a contemporary writer who is as relevant as Shakespeare is.

Do you know what? I've got a real feeling of what a theatre would have been like hundreds of years ago. It's inspirational...

To be or not to be? That's the question, isn't it?

The British landscape has had a huge influence on generations of writers and has inspired them to produce some of their greatest works.

The beauty of the Dorset countryside shines through Thomas Hardy's novels, and Wordsworth's poetry is clearly affected by his love of the Lake District.

The landscape of the city has also influenced authors. The plight of the urban poor inspired one of the giants of English literature, Charles Dickens.

Charles Dickens was a great British novelist. He lived here, at 48 Doughty Street in London and his old home has now been turned into a museum. I'm going to step back in time to see how Dickens might have lived.

The Charles Dickens Museum has over a hundred thousand rare books, works of art and many personal items owned by Dickens himself. Some of his best-loved works, like *Oliver Twist* and *Nicholas Nickleby*, were written here. Dickens was popular in his day, but his work has never gone out of print.

Julia Ziemer works at the museum.

Richard: Julia, tell me about the museum.

Julia: So, the museum is based at 48 Doughty Street in London. It's where Dickens lived for 2 years with his young family and where he wrote *Oliver Twist*, *The Pickwick Papers* and *Nicholas Nickleby*.

Richard: What are your most important pieces?

Julia: We have original manuscript material from *Oliver Twist* and *Nicholas Nickleby*. We have the desk that Dickens wrote on for his final novel and the painting by R.W. Buss called Dickens's Dream.

Richard: Dickens led a very hard life. Do you think that influenced his writing?

Julia: Absolutely. Dickens was sent to work in a factory when he was just 10 years old, and that experience stayed with him for the rest of his life. If you look at his novels, lots of characters are young children working in horrible conditions.

Richard: Why was he such an important figure?

Julia: Dickens was a unique writer in his time in that he was very popular with the working classes but also respected by the literature community and read by the higher classes.

Richard: He was born 200 years ago. Do you think he's still relevant today?

Julia: Definitely. 200 years on, the things that Dickens was writing about - social inequality, poverty - are still very relevant today.

This is the last desk that Dickens ever wrote at and I can't wait to have a read of these. Dickens' work seems to be able to cross the centuries, but he's not alone. Other British novelists from the past are still popular today.