

Fagin

Fagin /ˈfeɪɡɪn/ is a fictional character in Charles Dickens's novel *Oliver Twist*. In the preface to the novel he is described as a "receiver of stolen goods". He is the leader of a group of children (the Artful Dodger and Charley Bates among them) whom he teaches to make their livings by pickpocketing and other criminal activities, in exchange for shelter. A distinguishing trait is his constant—and insincere—use of the phrase "my dear" when addressing others. At the time of the novel, he is said by another character, Monks, to have already made criminals out of "scores" of children. Nancy, who is the lover of Bill Sikes, one of the novel's major villains, is confirmed to be Fagin's former pupil.

Fagin is a self-confessed miser who, despite the wealth he has acquired, does very little to improve the squalid lives of the children he guards, or his own. In the second chapter of his appearance, he is shown (when talking to himself) that he cares less for their welfare, than that they do not "peach" (inform) on him and the other children. Still darker sides to the character's nature are shown when he beats the Artful Dodger for not bringing Oliver back; in his attempted beating of Oliver for trying to escape; and in his own involvement with various plots and schemes throughout the story. He indirectly but intentionally causes the death of Nancy by falsely informing Sikes that she had betrayed him, when in reality she had shielded Sikes from the law; whereupon Sikes kills her. Near the end of the book, Fagin is captured and sentenced to be hanged, in a chapter that portrays him as pitiable in his anguish.

In popular culture, Fagin (or at least his name) is used in comparison with adults who use children for illegal activities.

Contents

- 1 **Historical basis**
- 2 **Allegations of antisemitism**
- 3 **Film, theatre and television**
- 4 **References**
- 5 **Further reading**
- 6 **External links**

Historical basis

Dickens took Fagin's name from a friend he had known in his youth while working in a boot-blackening factory^[1]

Fagin's character might be based on the criminal Ikey Solomon, who was a fence at the centre of a highly publicised arrest, escape, recapture, and trial.^{[2][3]} Some accounts of Solomon also describe him as a London underworld "kidsman" (a kidsman was an adult who recruited children and trained them as pickpockets, exchanging food and shelter for goods the children stole). The popularity of

Fagin



Created by	Charles Dickens
Portrayed by	Lon Chaney, Sr. (1922), Irving Pichel (1933), Alec Guinness (1948), Ron Moody (1968), Dom DeLuise (voice, 1988), Richard Dreyfuss (1997), Gary Farmer (2003), Ben Kingsley (2005), Timothy Spall (2007), Russ Abbott (2010/11), Noah Berry (2011), Rowan Atkinson (2010/11), Neil Morrissey (2011/12), Harry Moore (2012), Anton Lesser (2015)
Information	
Gender	Male
Occupation	Criminal

Dickens's novel caused "fagin" to replace "kidsman" in some crime circles, denoting an adult who teaches minors to steal and keeps a major portion of the loot.

Other sources, such as Howard Mancing in *The Cervantes Encyclopedia*, claim that Fagin is assumed to be modeled on Monipodio, one of the main characters in Miguel de Cervantes' Rinconete y Cortadillo (1613). Monipodio is the leader of a criminal ring in 17th century Seville that features cutpurses and cape stealers.

Allegations of antisemitism

Fagin has been the subject of much debate over antisemitism, during Dickens's lifetime and in modern times. In an introduction to a 1981 Bantam Books reissue of *Oliver Twist*, for example, Irving Howe wrote that Fagin was considered an "archetypical Jewish villain."^[4] The first 38 chapters of the book refer to Fagin by his racial and religious origin 257 times, calling him "the Jew", against 42 uses of "Fagin" or "the old man". In 2005, novelist Norman Lebrecht wrote that "A more vicious stigmatisation of an ethnic community could hardly be imagined and it was not by any means unintended."^[5] Dickens, who had extensive knowledge of London street life, wrote that he had made Fagin Jewish because: "it unfortunately was true, of the time to which the story refers, that the class of criminal almost invariably was a Jew".^[6] It is often argued that Fagin was based on a specific Jewish criminal of the era, Ikey Solomon.^[7] Dickens also claimed that by calling Fagin "the Jew" he had meant no imputation against the Jewish faith: "I have no feeling towards the Jews but a friendly one. I always speak well of them, whether in public or private, and bear my testimony (as I ought to do) to their perfect good faith in such transactions as I have ever had with them..."^[8]



Fence Ikey Solomon, on whom Fagin has often been said to be based

In later editions of the book, printed during his lifetime, Dickens excised over 180 instances of 'Jew' from the text.^[9] This occurred after Dickens sold his London home in 1860 to a Jewish banker, James Davis, who objected to the emphasis on Fagin's Jewishness in the novel. When he sold the house, Dickens allegedly told a friend: "The purchaser of Tavistock House will be a Jew Money-Lender" before later saying: "I must say that in all things the purchaser has behaved thoroughly well, and that I cannot call to mind any occasion when I have had moneydealings with anyone that has been so satisfactory, considerate and trusting."^[5]

Dickens became friendly with Eliza (Davis' wife), who told him in a letter in 1863 that Jews regarded his portrayal of Fagin a "great wrong" to their people. Dickens then started to revise *Oliver Twist*, removing all mention of "the Jew" from the last 15 chapters; and later wrote in reply: "There is nothing but good will left between me and a People for whom I have a real regard and to whom I would not willfully have given an offence". In one of his final public readings in 1869, a year before his death, Dickens cleansed Fagin of all stereotypical caricature. A contemporary report observed: "There is no nasal intonation; a bent back but no shoulder-shrug: the conventional attributes are omitted."^{[6][8]}

In 1865, in *Our Mutual Friend*, Dickens created a number of Jewish characters, the most important being Mr Riah, an elderly Jew who finds jobs for downcast young women in Jewish-owned factories. One of the two heroines, Lizzie Hexam, defends her Jewish employers: "The gentleman certainly is a Jew, and the lady, his wife, is a Jewess, and I was brought to their notice by a Jew. But I think there cannot be kinder people in the world."^[8]

The comic book creator Will Eisner, disturbed by the antisemitism in the typical depiction of the character, created a graphic novel in 2003 titled *Fagin the Jew*. In this book, the back story of the character and events of *Oliver Twist* are depicted from his point of view

Film, theatre and television

Numerous prominent actors have played the character of Fagin. Alec Guinness portrayed Fagin in David Lean's movie adaptation of *Oliver Twist*, with controversial make-up by Stuart Freeborn which exaggerated stereotypical Jewish facial features. The release of the film in the USA was delayed for three years on charges of being anti-Semitic by the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith and the New York Board of Rabbis. It was finally released in the United States in 1951, with seven minutes of profile shots and other parts of Guinness's performance cut.

Ron Moody's portrayal in the original London production of *Oliver!* and in the 1968 film is recognisably influenced by Guinness' portrayal (although the supposedly "anti-semitic" quality of Guinness's portrayal was considerably toned down in the musical), as was Academy Award winner Ben Kingsley's portrayal of Fagin in Roman Polanski's 2005 screen adaptation.

When *Oliver!* was brought to Broadway in 1964, Fagin was portrayed by Clive Revell, but in a 1984 revival, Moody reprised his performance opposite Tony Award winner Patti LuPone, who played Nancy

Moody's portrayal of Fagin is noticeably different in *Oliver!* While Fagin, as in the novel and other film versions, is a crook, he is actually one of the film's supporting characters and serves as comic-relief, such as dancing with a quill on his head and parasol. He is also more sympathetic towards Oliver and even sticks up for him twice against Bill Sykes. It is implied that Fagin may be a pacifist, as he hates violence and seems to fear Bill, who in a running theme threatens to beat him up. Also, unlike in the book and most film versions, Fagin doesn't die but instead restarts his life of crime with the Artful Dodger. Fagin is also arguably the most popular character in the musical. Reflecting on his Golden Globe-winning and Academy Award-nominated performance, Moody, who was Jewish himself, stated: "Fate destined me to play Fagin. It was the part of a lifetime."¹⁰

In the 1980 ATV series *The Further Adventures of Oliver Twist*, Fagin was played by David Swift. In this 13-episode series, Fagin has escaped his hanging by pretending to have had a stroke, which has left him paralyzed (and therefore unfit to be executed) and is in hiding at The Three Cripples, tended to by Barney

In the 1982 made-for-TV movie version, Fagin is portrayed by George C. Scott. Though the character is generally portrayed as elderly, diminutive and homely Scott's version of the character was markedly younger, stronger, and better looking. Also, this version of the character had him more caring of his orphan charges, feeding them well and treating them with obvious concern.

In the 1985 miniseries, Fagin is portrayed by Eric Porter.

In Disney's animated version, *Oliver & Company* (1988), Fagin is a kind-hearted but poor man living in New York. He lives on a houseboat with his five dogs and is desperately searching for money to repay his debts to the New York Mob. He is voiced by Dom DeLuise.

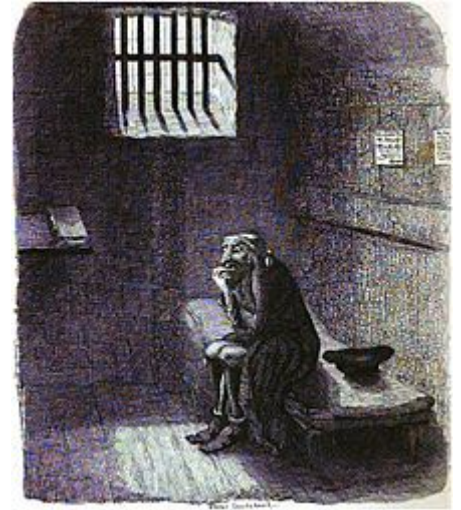
In 1994, *Oliver!* was revived in London. Fagin was played by many noted British actors and comedians, including Jonathan Pryce, George Layton, Jim Dale, Russ Abbot, Barry Humphries (who had played Mr Sowerberry in the original 1960 London production of *Oliver!*) and Robert Lindsay, who won an Olivier Award for his performance. The different actors playing Fagin were distinguished by their different costumes, especially their coats. Pryce used a patched red and brown coat, while Lindsay used the traditional dark green overcoat seen in the 1968 film version.

In Disney's 1997 live action television production *Oliver Twist*, Fagin is played by Richard Dreyfuss

In the 1997 film *Twisted* (a film loosely based on Dickens' *Oliver Twist*) the Fagin character is played by actor William Hickey.

In the 2003 film *Twist* (a film loosely based on Dickens' *Oliver Twist*) Fagin is played by actor Gary Farmer.

In the 2007 BBC television adaptation Fagin is played by Timothy Spall. Contrary to his appearance in the novel, he is beardless and overweight in this version. He is also a more sympathetic character



Fagin waits to be hanged.

In December 2008, *Oliver!* was revived at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, London with Rowan Atkinson playing the character. This role was taken over by Omid Djalili in July 2009. Griff Rhys Jones took over the role from Omid Djalili in December 2009. He was succeeded by Russ Abbot in June 2010.

In 2015-16, BBC2's *Dickensian* Fagin was played by the actor Anton Lesser.

References

1. Ackroyd, Peter (3 September 1990). *Dickens*. Sinclair-Stevenson Ltd pp. 77–78. ISBN 1-85619-000-5
2. Sackville O'Donnell, Judith (2002). *The First Fagin: the True Story of Ikey Solomon*. Acland. ISBN 0-9585576-2-4
3. Montagu, Euan; Tobias, John J (28 March 1974). *The Prince of Fences: Life and Crimes of Ikey Solomons*. Vallentine Mitchell & Co Ltd. ISBN 0-85303-174-6
4. Dickens, Charles (22 January 1982). *Oliver Twist (A Bantam classic)*. Bantam USA. ISBN 0-553-21050-5
5. Lebrecht, Norman (29 September 2005). "How racist is Oliver Twist?" (<http://www.scena.org/columns/lebrecht/0509-NL-twist.html>) La Scena Musicale Retrieved 2009-02-08.
6. Howe, Irving. "Oliver Twist - introduction" (<https://books.google.com/books?id=R63Gk3ntfFkC&lpg=PR19&ots=P4wFGPAXxu&dq=charles%20dickens%20%22the%20class%20of%20criminal%20almost%20invariably%20was%20a%20Jew%22&pg=PR19#v=onepage&q=&f=false>) Retrieved 2009-10-21.
7. Donald Hawes, *Who's Who in Dickens* Routledge, London, 2002, p.75.
8. Johnson, Edgar (1 January 1952). "Intimations of Mortality" *Charles Dickens: His Tagedy and Triumph* (<http://dickens.ucsc.edu/OMF/johnson.html>) Simon & Schuster. Retrieved 8 February 2009.
9. Nunberg, Geoffrey (15 October 2001). *The Way We Talk Now: Commentaries on Language and Culture*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. p. 126. ISBN 0-618-11603-6
10. "Oliver! actor Ron Moody dies aged 91" (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-ats-33094914>). BBC News. 11 June 2015.

Further reading

- Howe, Irving (28 October 1997). *Selected Writings, 1950-1990* Thomson Learning. ISBN 0-15-680636-3

External links

- [Fagin on IMDb](#)

Retrieved from <https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Fagin&oldid=806055670>

This page was last edited on 19 October 2017, at 11:26.

Text is available under the [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike License](#); additional terms may apply. By using this site, you agree to the [Terms of Use](#) and [Privacy Policy](#). Wikipedia® is a registered trademark of the [Wikimedia Foundation, Inc.](#), a non-profit organization.