

∞ READING ROUND ∞

The Classic Book I'd Like to Rewrite and Why

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I AM IN THE ENVIABLE POSITION of writing a stage radaptation of *Great Expectations*.

I coined the term *radaptation* while researching my PhD. It's a portmanteau that basically means radically adapting a text, and in the case of my PhD research foregrounding working-class women in mythic narrative. And whilst my *Great Expectations* is a radical adaptation, I haven't (on this occasion) chosen to change Pip's gender. Instead, my focus is on care experience.

In the novel, Pip's in a kinship-care arrangement with his sister and her man — the lovely Joe. Bad woman, good man. This is Dickens after all.

For me, Pip has always been an unlikeable character, a snob, so the challenge is to make the stage version of Pip likeable. Of course, characters don't have to be 'nice' to be liked. I love Miss Haversham, a woman with a grudge against the world – well, with men really – a grudge that ultimately destroys her. She's been kicked in the gut by life, by love. But I'll come to love later.

Creating a contemporary care-experienced Pip comes with responsibility. I've been working as a writer in residence with South Ayrshire Champions Board on various projects over the past four years. Shaping and changing narratives and reframing care experience is a hot topic, one that needs careful consideration, especially as I'm not care-experienced myself.

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Young people with care experience will be watching this play, and I want them to enjoy it, to laugh, to see themselves, to think about their futures.

Having said this, darkness and violence permeate the novel, so need addressing too. Pip as a child is beaten by his sister wielding her 'tickler,' something often omitted from the screen versions of this great novel. I watched the film versions long before I ever read the book.

I remember my heart breaking for Joe when he goes to visit Pip in London, and Pip's embarrassment at Joe's starched collar and ill-fitting suit. Joe's hurt resonated with me instinctively. I knew that good man. I would later recall this scene when my dad came to see my play at South Shields Customs House; he turned up in a suit, thinking that's how people dressed for theatre.

Joe wants a better life for Pip, but Joe's idea of better a life ultimately takes Pip away and excludes Joe from Pip's life. This leads us to *Great Expectations's* unanswerable question: *What is a Better Life?* It's a question as vital today as it was when Dickens put pen to paper. It forces us to think of big issues, of class, of education, of culture. I used to think *Great Expectations* was about money, about how money changes people, but actually it's about love, and the complex relationship between the two. The tension between love and money is at the heart of care experience. How do we monetise care? Can we pay people to love? Can we buy a better life? Big, serious questions for this funny care-experienced radaptation of *Great Expectations*.