

## Dickens in Brooklyn: Essays on Family, Writing, & Madness

**Jay Neugeboren**

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The fascinating, wide-ranging autobiographical essays in writer Jay Neugeboren's *Dickens in Brooklyn* include thoughtful perspectives on civil rights, family, literature, and mental illness.

Neugeboren was raised by a strong but difficult mother and a depressed, half-blind father. In covering this, the book mixes poignant references to Charles Dickens's novels into Neugeboren's complex thoughts about his family and literary musings. In "Martha Foley's Granddaughters," Neugeboren explains his early struggles to publish his work and depicts his friendship with a brilliant, reclusive editor who shaped an era in American literature. In another essay, an imaginary posthumous conversation with Oliver Sacks includes captivating insights on the creative process.

Several essays focus on Neugeboren's brother Robert, who was institutionalized for most of his life after varying diagnoses of mental illness. With nuanced sensitivity, Neugeboren describes Robert as a "mirror" of himself and ponders what his brother taught him about resilience, courage, humor, and anger. "Pawn Sacrifice" examines the parallels between Robert's life and that of chess legend Bobby Fischer.

Social and political topics are also addressed. "My Cousin Manyá" summarizes philosophical discussions with a long-lost relative from Slovakia who survived Birkenau and Bergen-Belsen. "Riding with the Hourlies" is a lively account of Neugeboren's short stint as a management trainee at a Chevrolet plant in Indianapolis—work marked by "mundane insanity" that exposed him to systemic racism in the treatment of hourly workers. "Samaritan at Camp" chronicles his experiences as a Jewish teenager, and "One-on-One" recounts a pickup basketball game with his son, illustrating the challenges of single parenting and his admiration for the sacrifices mothers make. Across this remarkable variety of topics, the prose remains engrossing and animated, marked by insightful candor.

*Dickens in Brooklyn* is a scintillating personal essay collection concerned with pivotal moments and literary and social themes.

KRISTEN RABE (May / June 2026)

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