

Down in the Hole: The Unwired World of H.B. Ogden

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It's hard to trust a book based on an Internet meme. The idea seems manufactured, the physical book added on as a way to monetize webviews and retweets. Creating a product afterwards seems like putting the horse before the cart. Fortunately, *Down in the Hole* dispels that notion: It's a Dickensian novelization of HBO's *The Wire* series, complete with period illustrations and a false scholarship to support it. Posited as a recently rediscovered masterpiece, the book stays delightfully true to its form.

Down in the Hole finds inspiration in a clever conceit: *The Wire* is often described as novelistic, and even Dickensian, by admirers. The authors take the comparison one step further, though, suggesting that *The Wire* is a Victorian novel and inventing Horatio B. Ogden as the unjustly forgotten author of this nineteenth-century tale of the streets.

The strength of this conceit is the authors' reinterpretation of some of *The Wire*'s most celebrated scenes, recast into Victorian times. Fans will recognize the murder of Stringer Bell, McNulty's manipulation of several corpses to manufacture a serial killer's handiwork, the swaggering Omar Little, and perhaps the series' most famous scene, in which the only dialogue spoken is inventive variations on the word "fuck."

For the most part, the account is a successful parody, and the story of street life transported to Dickensian England, and the invented city of Bodymore, is surprisingly apt: "We are to those truly wretched poor as a hunting dog is to a fox," the fictitious illustrator Baxter Black writes to Ogden, "the fox may take it personally, not knowing the dog is but prey himself to the master he serves."

Some scenes do not bear direct translation, though, such as one of the young drug dealers discussing Chicken McNuggets. The dual authors' handling of pop-culture references by suggesting *Spiderman* and *The Great Gatsby* as other lost classics is puzzling, too.

Their premise, however innovative, is not enough to merit a book, even one at under 150 pages. The authors realize this, and have interspersed chapters of Ogden's own fake biography, essays of faux-literary criticism, and letters from admirers (including several from Charlotte Bronte). These many forms complement each other, creating a nice balance between the shifting story lines.

Fans of *The Wire* often say it is not necessarily about Baltimore, but could represent any city in America. With *Down in the Hole*, we see that the story could also take place in any time period. Down jackets may be refashioned as coattails, Escalades as coaches, and nine-millimeters as muskets, but the universal struggles against poverty and the system that keeps poverty in place have remained unchanged. Although the book will be all but incomprehensible to anyone who has not seen *The Wire*, it is an instant coffee-table classic for true believers.

MICHAEL BEEMAN (Winter 2013)

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