The Dickens Universe is unusual. It was most aptly summed up by John Jordan, director of the project, when he said that the Universe is part conference, part summer camp, part festival.

The basic premise for the Universe is that for one week at the end of July every year, faculty members, graduate students, undergraduates and members of the public sequester themselves away amongst the redwoods of the University of California, Santa Cruz, and spend that week going to lecturers, taking classes, giving classes, eating and drinking, all in the name of a single Dickens novel - this year the novel was the much underappreciated *Dombey and Son* - a novel I didn’t know existed until the call for applicants was sent out.

Laying my own academic card(s) on the table, my PhD research is concerned with the representation of trade unions in contemporary poetry. For all intents and purposes, I don't seem like the most suitable candidate to have been selected to attend - I have a suspicion that I might have been the only person that applied, although the rationale for my selection does not trouble me at all. My Dickens knowledge extended to reading *David Copperfield* and *Great Expectations*, and watching *The Muppet Christmas Carol*.

In terms of a snapshot that may paint a fuller picture of the week: on the first day a flatmate and fellow PhD student, who had attended the Universe before, turned up with a bottle of whiskey and a industrial sized pot of chocolate covered espresso beans. Both of these things would be gone by day 4 of the conference.

Each day began with breakfast at 7.45am and finished officially at 9pm with a keynote lecture. For me a typical day consisted of breakfast, morning lecture, leading a seminar group, lunch, graduate student seminar - really miss going to seminars as a PhD student - break, lecture (some days), dinner, after dinner drinks - given the portentous title of 'Post-Prandial Potations' - evening lecture. After the schedule there was then a party every night for graduate students and faculty which regularly went on into the early hours of the morning.

Sleep is minimal, taking naps turned out to be important.

The days were long, but I have honestly never gotten so much out of an academic endeavour before. Spending a week with a single novel is a way of thinking about a text that I had never experienced in academia before, yet, by the end of the week, you still felt like you had barely scratched the surface of what could be done.

The lectures were given by academics of properly international repute, even for someone outside of the Victorian field, and spanned a range academic interests and theoretical frameworks including: Digital Humanities, Disability Studies, Animal Studies and Narratology.

In terms of leading seminars, students were a mixture of undergraduate students and members of the public - all of whom who had read way more Dickens than I had and had been coming to the Universe for years, one woman had attended for 36 years straight. Every student wanted to
contribute and after the first day most planning went out of the window and our ‘job’ - I co-taught with a PhD student from Rutgers University, another poetry person - was to facilitate discussion and focus the students’ attention on the text and away from too much speculation. My limited Dickens background was of no issue, students were always prepared to listen to ideas (and disagree) so that the hour and a half disappeared and many seminars spilled over into the lunch hall.

For all of the Universe sanctioned activities, the most worthwhile thing for me was meeting 60 or so other graduate students and members of faculty from institutions in the UK, the USA and Israel. This part could slide into saccharinity. Nearly everyone there was fantastic, smart, informed and passionate graduate students, all in Santa Cruz because they actively enjoy what they do. Even at its most cynical, if you research Victorian literature, attending the Dickens Universe means you are surrounded by leaders in your field and future academics with whom you already have a shared network and point of discussion. For me, the Universe ignited an appreciation of Dickens and Victorian fiction that I forgot existed and helped me solve a number of issues I was having with my own work, and it was loads of fun.

Quite simple, it is brilliant.

Next year’s book, for the first time in the 36 years of the Dickens Universe, will not be Dickens, but George Eliot’s *Middlemarch*.

Regardless of your area of interest, this conference will benefit you in some way. Also, why wouldn’t you apply to spend a week in Santa Cruz? But, also, I want to go back next year, so, please, don’t apply.

I was exhausted when I got back to the UK.