APPENDIX B

Summary of Charles Dickens’s
Oliver Twist

In a parish workhouse, a nameless young woman dies after giving birth. Her son, Oliver Twist—as named by the beadle, Mr. Bumble—is sent to a separate branch of the workhouse with other orphaned infants and raised by the monstrous Mrs. Mann. Oliver miraculously survives the horrors of the “baby farm,” and, on his ninth birthday, is transferred to the central workhouse.

After three months of slow starvation, the boys draw lots to see who will ask for more gruel; Oliver draws the long straw and carries out this unenviable task. Bumble and the board of directors severely punish Oliver and plan to turn him out of the workhouse. After a failed attempt to apprentice him to a brutal chimney sweep, Bumble eventually manages to unload Oliver on Mr. Sowerberry, the undertaker. On top of his depressing new trade, Oliver must deal with the bullying of his fellow apprentice, Noah Claypole. Oliver finally fights back against Noah when his rival taunts him about his deceased mother. This second “rebellion” earns Oliver a stern rebuke from Bumble and a brutal beating from Sowerberry. Consumed by the misery of his life, Oliver decides to run away, though he first returns to the baby farm to bid goodbye to his friend, Dick.

Oliver barely survives the seventy-five mile walk to London. On arriving at Barnett, he encounters a strangely attired cockney boy who introduces himself as Jack Dawkins (though he goes by the name of the Artful Dodger). The Dodger invites Oliver to come and lodge with a respectable old gentleman, and he conducts a wary Oliver through the slums of London to a dilapidated flat. There, Oliver meets Fagin, a hideous and elderly Jewish man. On being introduced to several other children in Fagin’s den, Oliver eats his fill and goes to sleep.

The next morning, as Oliver awakens, he observes Fagin gloating over a box of treasures. A delighted Fagin muses on his “trade” and revels in the fact that none of his associates have ever “peached” on him, even those who were sentenced to the gallows. However, he is immediately in a panic on noticing that Oliver is awake. Fagin begins threatening Oliver but quickly regains his good humor and casually explains
that the items in the box are his personal treasures. As Oliver washes up, the Dodger returns with Charley Bates, another young member of Fagin’s gang. They turn over several pocket books and handkerchiefs to Fagin. Afterward, the Dodger, Bates, and Fagin play a game that involves the boys trying to pick Fagin’s pockets. Oliver finds this very amusing, naïvely unaware of the true nature of Fagin’s trade. Later that day, he meets two young streetwalkers named Nancy and Bet, who are also associates of Fagin.

After several days acclimating to his new companions, Oliver is allowed to accompany the Dodger and Bates when they “go to work.” On witnessing their picking the pocket of an elderly gentleman, a horrified Oliver finally realizes that he has fallen in among thieves. Unfortunately, as the Dodger and Bates run off, Oliver is mistakenly identified as the thief. Pursued by an angry mob, Oliver is eventually knocked out and hauled off to the police court—despite protestations from the elderly gentleman, Mr. Brownlow, who fears for the traumatized child’s health. To make matters worse, the local magistrate, a sadistic judge named Fang, seems ready to sentence Oliver to three months of hard labor. Thankfully, Oliver is exonerated when the bookseller arrives and reveals that two other boys picked Brownlow’s pocket. Brownlow quickly arranges to take Oliver home in his carriage in the hope of nursing him back to health.

Suffering from a severe fever, Oliver is tended to by Mr. Brownlow’s housekeeper, Mrs. Bedwin, and slowly begins to recover his health. While on the mend, Oliver becomes captivated by a portrait of a very pretty young woman. Brownlow is fascinated that Oliver seems to bear a striking resemblance to this woman.

Meanwhile, the Dodger and Bates have reported back to Fagin, who is furious with them for having lost Oliver. His tirade is interrupted by the arrival of Bill Sikes, a fearsome housebreaker and one of Fagin’s main associates. Fagin blackmails Sikes into helping him get Oliver back, and the two convince a reluctant Nancy to go to Fang’s courthouse and find out what has happened.

Now fully recovered, Oliver is given a beautiful new suit of clothes and begins to spend more time with Brownlow, who is eager to hear his story. Before Oliver can recount his adventures, they are interrupted by the arrival of Brownlow’s old friend Mr. Grimwig, a cantankerous lawyer. Grimwig is immediately suspicious of Oliver, warning Brownlow that the orphan cannot be trusted. Brownlow decides to disprove his friend’s assertion by sending Oliver to return several books to the vendor and to pay him a five pound note.

While running this errand, Oliver is suddenly accosted and abducted by Nancy and Sikes. After being dragged to Fagin’s new hideout, Oliver is mocked by the Dodger and Bates while Fagin and Sikes squabble over the five pound note. When Oliver tries to run away, Fagin begins to beat him, but Nancy intervenes and warns Fagin to stand down or she will betray him to the police. Overwhelmed with guilt for having brought Oliver back to the den, Nancy fears that the boy is now destined for a life of corruption. As Sikes, Fagin, and Nancy argue, Nancy loses control and faints. Meanwhile, Oliver is locked up.

Back at the baby farm, Bumble is visiting Mrs. Mann. After bullying and mistreating Dick, who has been severely ill, the beadle departs for London on a business
errand. While there, he comes across a newspaper ad that Brownlow has placed offering a reward for information on Oliver. Bumble goes to see Brownlow and proceeds to give a completely slanderous account of Oliver’s character. Heartbroken that Grimwig’s predictions were apparently correct, Brownlow informs Mrs. Bedwin that he does not wish to hear Oliver’s name spoken again.

At Fagin’s den, Fagin alternates between threatening and sweet-talking Oliver, while the Dodger and Bates make friendly overtures toward him and encourage him to become a thief. Between Fagin’s bullying and the gang’s peer pressure, Oliver finds it increasingly difficult to resist Fagin. Still, Fagin decides to bring the matter to a quicker conclusion by having Sikes conscript Oliver for a robbery in Chertsey; the housebreaker needs a small boy to slip through the window and open the door.

Sikes and his gang set out with Oliver in tow. In spite of Sikes’s threats against his life, Oliver bravely resolves to try to warn the family on entering the house. However, the robbery and Oliver’s plan are interrupted when two servants arrive to foil the crime. One shoots Oliver in the arm, though Sikes is able to grab the child and make a run for it. The housebreaker abandons the critically wounded Oliver in a field before escaping.

At the workhouse, Mrs. Corney the matron enjoys the material comforts of her position while the paupers beneath her starve. A longtime widow, Mrs. Corney flirts with Bumble, who is intrigued at the thought of marrying her for her substantial property. Their flirtations are interrupted when two paupers mention that Old Sally (an ancient pauper who was present at Oliver’s birth) is dying and wishes to speak to Mrs. Corney. Mrs. Corney grudgingly concedes and learns that the old woman stole a gold locket off Oliver’s mother; the girl had meant for the locket to go to her son, as it was the only key to his identity.

While all of this is taking place, Sikes’s accomplice Toby Crackit reports back to Fagin about the botched robbery and the disappearance of Sikes and Oliver. An infuriated Fagin stalks off to the Three Cripples, a seedy tavern, to set up a meeting with a man named Monks. Fagin next heads off to Sikes’s flat, where he encounters a drunken Nancy, who is terrified that Sikes may be dead; she drunkenly rants that Oliver is better off dead as well. As Fagin bickers with Nancy, he inadvertently reveals that Oliver is worth hundreds of pounds to him, but he quickly drops the matter.

Fagin eventually leaves Nancy behind and returns to his den, where he finds Monks waiting for him. Monks angrily rebukes Fagin for sending Oliver on the robbery, reminding him that their plan was to turn Oliver into a pickpocket. Fagin defensively notes that Oliver seemed inherently resistant to the trade. As Monks and Fagin debate how best to corrupt Oliver (provided he is still alive), they are secretly spied on by Nancy.

Meanwhile, back at the workhouse, Bumble has been awaiting Mrs. Corney’s return. She eventually rejoins him, flustered by what she has learned. Still interested in gaining control of the widow’s property, Bumble proposes marriage and Mrs. Corney accepts. On the way home, Bumble stops by the Sowerberries to order a coffin for Old Sally, but he finds Noah flirting with Charlotte, the Sowerberries’ cook. In spite of his own flirtations with Mrs. Corney, the hypocritical beadle furiously chastises the two for their behavior.
Back near the Chertsey house, Oliver is bleeding to death in a ditch. He manages to rouse himself and reaches the front door before passing out. Though the domestic servants Giles and Brittles deduce that he must be part of the gang that tried to rob the house, the ladies who live in the house, Mrs. Maylie and her ward Rose, take pity on Oliver and care for him with the help of the family physician, Dr. Losberne. Oliver shares his entire history with Losberne, and when two incompetent detectives arrive to investigate the robbery, Losberne covers up the child’s involvement. Oliver eventually begins to regain his health under the care of the Maylies, though he is hopeful that he can return to Brownlow and prove his honesty to the old man. Unfortunately, Brownlow has gone abroad. In spite of this disappointment, Oliver thrives with the Maylies.

As the months pass, Oliver’s new happiness suffers a sudden check when Rose unexpectedly takes ill. Mrs. Maylie asks Oliver to go and mail out a letter to her son, Harry; while running this errand, Oliver accidentally bumps into a strange man who throws an epileptic fit on seeing him. It is Monks. Though troubled by this chance encounter, Oliver is more focused on Rose. Thankfully, the crisis passes and she survives. Eventually, Harry arrives and reunites with the family. Rose and Harry are in love, but Rose has been hesitant to pursue the relationship since her mysterious background, and a supposed blot on her family name, might ruin Harry’s prospects of a parliamentary career.

One night, while Oliver is hovering between consciousness and unconsciousness, he looks out the window and is horrified to see Fagin and Monks staring at him. Oliver screams for help, but when Giles and Harry investigate, they find no one there. Everyone assumes Oliver was having a nightmare. Harry eventually makes plans to return to London; before departing, he formally proposes to Rose, but she rejects his proposal for the abovementioned reasons.

Back at the workhouse, Bumble has been promoted from beadle to master, but this has meant the loss of his parochial uniform (which, for a beadle, is central to his self-confidence). Furthermore, he is now married to the shrewish Mrs. Corney, who alternates between browbeating and physically beating him. Bumble drowns out his sorrows at the bar, where he is approached by Monks. Monks begins inquiring about Oliver and quickly involves the Bumbles in his conspiracy. He bribes them to sell him the mysterious locket that Sally stole from Oliver’s mother. Monks pays them handsomely for the locket before throwing it in the river, thereby disposing of the only clue to the mystery of Oliver’s birth.

Back in London, Nancy is caring for the severely ill Sikes, who has developed a bad fever. After a brief visit from Fagin, the Dodger, and Bates, Nancy accompanies the group back to the den to pick up some money. While there, Nancy again eavesdrops on a conversation between Monks and Fagin. On returning home, she drugs Sikes’s drink and takes advantage of the opportunity to track down Rose Maylie in London. Nancy informs Rose of her role in abducting Oliver and explains that Monks and Fagin are conspiring against the boy. Nancy now knows that Monks paid Fagin to corrupt Oliver. She has also learned of Monks’s disposing of the mysterious locket. However, the most shocking revelation is that Monks and Oliver are brothers. A bewildered Rose is unsure how to proceed but promises to seek out help; she also
tries to persuade Nancy to give up Sikes, but Nancy is adamant about returning to her lover. Rose is eager to try to uncover the mystery of Oliver’s past, and also to save Nancy from Sikes and from herself. She decides to seek out help from Brownlow, who has returned from abroad. Brownlow and Grimwig, who were convinced of Oliver’s bad character, are shocked to learn the truth of what happened. Oliver happily reunites with Brownlow and Mrs. Bedwin, but Rose then confers privately with Brownlow about her meeting with Nancy. Brownlow agrees to work with the Maylie family in foiling Monks.

Meanwhile, Noah and Charlotte have run away to London after robbing the Sowerberries. At the Three Cripples, they encounter Fagin, who recruits them for his gang. Fagin is looking for new members of the gang because the Dodger was recently arrested. Bates reveals that the Dodger will be sentenced to transportation, and Fagin sends Noah to observe the proceedings. True to his cheeky personality, the Dodger makes a mockery of the court proceedings and insults the various lawyers and witnesses before being led off.

Nancy plans on meeting Rose and Brownlow on London Bridge, though she knows she must proceed carefully. Unfortunately, she misses her first meeting with them due to Sikes’s interference. Fagin, having grown increasingly suspicious of Nancy’s behavior, sends Noah to tail her, and Noah eavesdrops on a clandestine conversation between Nancy, Brownlow, and Rose the following week. Brownlow is planning on capturing Monks and pressing him for information on Oliver’s roots, but if Monks does not cooperate, they will have to send the police after Fagin. Nancy, fearful that Fagin will take Sikes down with him, is eager to protect the gang. Still, when Brownlow promises that they will not proceed against Fagin without her permission, she gives him the information that he needs in order to find Monks. Brownlow and Rose again offer Nancy protection, but Nancy insists she must return to Sikes.

Noah reports back to Fagin, who is furious with Nancy. Eager to be rid of her, Fagin manipulates Sikes by informing him of Nancy’s meeting with Brownlow and Rose. An enraged Sikes stalks off to kill Nancy, and though she pleads for her life and begs him to join her in her quest for redemption, Sikes beats her to death. However, the murder is so brutal and horrific that it leaves him haunted. Broken and paranoid, Sikes attempts to flee the city but cannot escape the memory of Nancy’s eyes. Eventually, he decides to return to London in the hope of getting money from Fagin so as to escape abroad.

The next morning, Brownlow, Harry, and Losberne confront Monks, threatening to have him arrested if he does not come quietly. Brownlow reveals that he knows who Monks really is; his true name is Edward Leeford, and his father, Edwin, was an old friend of Brownlow’s. Apparently, Edwin was forced into an unhappy marriage with a villainous older woman. They had one child together—Monks—but eventually separated. Afterwards, Edwin fell in love with a young woman and the two began an affair that resulted in her becoming pregnant with Oliver. Though Edwin hoped to flee abroad with his lover, he died in Rome while settling the affairs of a recently dead relation. Having supposedly left no will, all of his money and property went to Monks, while his lover was left pregnant and disgraced. Eventually, Monks’s mother also died, but it was revealed that she had destroyed Edwin’s will, much as Monks has been trying to destroy any evidence of Oliver’s true parentage. Though Monks tries
to deny that Oliver is his half-brother, Brownlow threatens him, reminding him that his conspiring led to Nancy’s murder. Terrified, Monks agrees to sign a confession about Oliver’s inheritance (during the conversation, Brownlow reveals that the portrait that captivated Oliver is a portrait Edwin himself painted of his beloved: Oliver’s mother).

Meanwhile, the police have already arrested Fagin and are closing in on Sikes. At a secret hideout, a few remaining members of Fagin’s gang are trying to elude capture. Sikes shows up seeking sanctuary, but the gang is terrified by his presence. When Bates, who managed to escape Fagin’s den, arrives, he furiously attacks the murderer. Suddenly, the police arrive. Sikes attempts to flee via the rooftop, but he is still haunted by the memory of Nancy’s eyes, and he slips while preparing to lower himself down the side of the building. The rope coils around his neck, hanging him.

Following Sikes’s death, Oliver, the Maylies, Grimwig, and Brownlow journey to Oliver’s hometown to meet with Monks. Brownlow informs the shocked Oliver that his parents were Edwin Leeford and Agnes Fleming; he likewise explains that Edwin’s will had specified that Agnes and her unborn child were meant to inherit the bulk of the estate. There was a stipulation, however, that the child would only inherit the money if he did not get involved in any sort of public act of dishonor or crime. This is the primary reason Monks was so determined to see Oliver corrupted, though he was likewise seeking revenge on behalf of his mother for Agnes’s having usurped her place. During the confession, the Bumbles are implicated in Monks’s plot and Brownlow vows to ruin them. The conversation reveals another hidden connection, as Agnes was Rose’s elder sister, making Rose Oliver’s aunt. Harry proposes again, having given up his ambitions of a political career, and Rose accepts. Though Oliver is overjoyed to have discovered his family, his joy is mitigated by the discovery that his friend Dick has died.

Not long after, Fagin is brought to trial and sentenced to death. As the date of his execution draws closer, Fagin begins to lose his mind. On his last night alive, he is visited by Oliver and Brownlow, who are seeking information about papers that Fagin was holding for Monks. Fagin reveals the location of these documents while pathetically trying to convince Oliver to help him escape. The next day, a huge crowd assembles to watch as the old man is led to the gallows. The narrator concludes the story by recounting the fates of the remaining characters:

- Rose and Harry married in the village church, where Harry became a clergyman.
- Monks’s inheritance was turned over to Oliver, who graciously gave half the estate to his half-brother, though Monks squandered it and died in prison abroad.
- Brownlow adopted Oliver, and they moved into a residence near the Maylies’ house.
- Noah was pardoned after testifying against Fagin. He became an informant.
- The Bumbles were fired from their parochial jobs and reduced to poverty and misery; they soon became paupers in the very same workhouse they once tyrannized.
- Bates reformed and became a grazier in Northamptonshire.
The narrator ends the story by focusing on the image of Oliver and Rose at the church where they have put up a monument in memory of Agnes.

NOTE

1. This plot twist is a “retcon” by Dickens. In the opening chapter, Old Sally is referred to simply as Mrs. Thingummy. Furthermore, there is no mention of the locket, and the sudden death of Oliver’s mother precludes her having conversed with the old woman about the necklace. This plot-hole is a result of the publication’s awkward transition from a miscellany (in the spirit of the early parish sketches by Boz) to a novel.