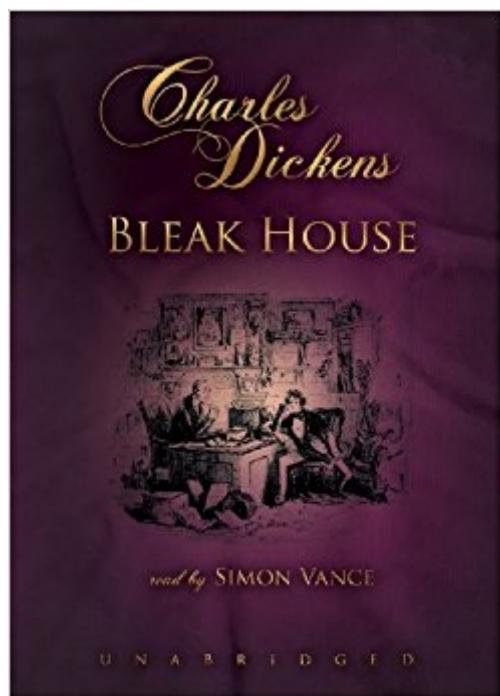


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Bleak House



Synopsis

[Read by Simon Vance (-aka- Robert Whitfield)] Charles Dickens, at the height of his creative powers in this great work, pursues two great themes: the murky institutional fog that darkens and cripples all of England, symbolized by the endless litigation of the Jarndyce vs. Jarndyce case in the High Court of Chancery (which is slowly devouring an inheritance in legal costs), and the familiar Dickensian concern with the capricious treatment and maltreatment of children as exemplified by the pitiful castoff Jo and the overindulged Harold Skimpole. Dickens' rich tapestry of a novel weaves together the fortunes and desires of several characters whose fates are tied to the case: Ada and Richard, two young orphans who stand to inherit and wish to marry when they do; the worthy John Jarndyce, their voluntary guardian while the case is pending; and Esther Summerson, Jarndyce's protegee, whose romance is complicated by torn loyalties and whose heritage is shrouded in mystery and scandal. Bleak House takes the form of a compelling mystery, a romantic tangle of trails followed by three vivid sleuths: the opportunistic Guppy, the sinister Tulkinghorn, and the benevolent Bucket. Only through the skill of Dickens can artfully constructed mystery so intensify and illuminate stringent social commentary. This portrait of London society is often regarded as Dickens' best.

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Customer Reviews

Bleak House is a satirical look at the Byzantine legal system in London as it consumes the minds and talents of the greedy and nearly destroys the lives of innocents--a contemporary tale indeed. Dickens's tale takes us from the foggy dank streets of London and the maze of the Inns of Court to

the peaceful countryside of England. Likewise, the characters run from murderous villains to virtuous girls, from a devoted lover to a "fallen woman," all of whom are affected by a legal suit in which there will, of course, be no winner. The first-person narrative related by the orphan Esther is particularly sweet. The articulate reading by the acclaimed British actor Paul Scofield, whose distinctive broad English accent lends just the right degree of sonority and humor to the text, brings out the color in this classic social commentary disguised as a Victorian drama. However, to abridge Dickens is, well, a Dickensian task, the results of which make for a story in which the author's convoluted plot lines and twists of fate play out in what seems to be a fast-forward format. Listeners must pay close attention in order to keep up with the multiple narratives and cast of curious characters, including the memorable Inspector Bucket and Mr. Guppy. Fortunately, the publisher provides a partial list of characters on the inside jacket. (Running time: 3 hours; 2 cassettes)

Bleak House is such a natural for audio that it comes as no surprise to read in Peter Ackroyd's biography of Dickens that he himself read it aloud to Wilkie Collins and his own family. No matter how good he was as a readerAand he did go on to present public readings regularly after thisADickens could not have performed better than Robert Whitfield does here. With a motley cast of characters to challenge the skill of any narrator, his brilliant dramatizations range from a homeless street urchin to an arrogant barrister, from a canny old windbag to a high-minded heroine who deserves the happy ending Dickens affords her. Whitfield is also as persuasive as the indignant voice of the author himself, attacking both the injustice of the law and the cruel indifference of society. This may be one of the most Dickensian novels Dickens ever wrote. Highly recommended.
AJo Carr, Sarasota, FL Copyright 1999 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Classic Dickens. I missed out on reading this in high school, so better late than never 40 years hence. Typical Dickens gets wordy in places, but I just use larger font on the kindle and can skim through the long-winded parts. It is refreshing to read a good book that isn't polluted with graphic gore and gratuitous f-bombs every chapter. The wit is subtle, and so Dickens will have a pull on your leg here and there, for the fun of it! A great text for sociology students, as well. I find it fascinating to see where we have been as a society (especially being British by birth), an where we have gone since then. It was a bit long, but necessary for the many character developments.

I devoted a graduate thesis to Dickens and have long loved his "favorite child" David Copperfield,"so I came to this audio version expecting a pleasant but status quo presentation. I

could not have been more wrong! Richard Armitage delivers so a masterful reading I, who already know the book forwards and backwards and can easily quote generous portions of it, was left in tears more times than I care to say. It makes a case for pondering whether Dickens should be read or heard. Amazing performance of a masterpiece. Listen with a box of Kleenex.

Honestly, I think the only Charles Dickens I've actually read cover-to-cover is A Christmas Carol, and after reading Bleak House, I regret that I haven't read more but am resolved that I will. The immediacy of the social commentary - especially as regards the Chancery system (but also on the plight of the epoch, etc.) - is probably lost on modern readers, although the "bloodsucking lawyer aspect" certainly is not...so much more the references to the politicians "Coodle, Doodle, Foodle, etc..." may be lost...indeed, it's unfortunate that we don't have politicians (at least here in the States) that we can all lampoon and despise...in this extremely partisan age it seems it's only the opposing side's leaders that need be skewered. The contrast between people like Mrs. Jellyby and the people like Mr. Woodcourt - that is, the difference between those who "talk the talk" and those who "walk the walk" - is timeless. But the language and the long sentences are SO lovely, from beginning to end...the description of fog at the beginning of the book took me away from my chair, chilled me, and plopped me amidst the alleyways and buildings. For me the beauty of this book isn't (just) in the plot but in its characters and that language...and not the main characters but the "minor" characters (is there *really* a minor character in Bleak House) and the universe of other "satellites" that Dickens created...What would Mr. George be without the Bagnets? What would Mr. Guppy be without his friends Jobling and "Small"? And so much more. Sure, there are some depressing moments and dark characters, but there are also laugh-out-loud moments and endearing characters. And, again, the language! Beginning with the fog and then closing with this amazing characterization of Mr. Vholes, who had used up poor Richard: "he gave one gasp as if he had swallowed the last morsel of his client" - brilliant! If only Dickens had let Mr. Vhole's grow physically fatter over the course of his using Richard could the characterization been more complete. Is it long? Yes it's long. But don't look at it as a 900 page book...look at it the way it was originally delivered to its audience - in 20 monthly installments...indeed, read it that way! It's a serial...it's 20 episodes of "Friday Night Lights"...it's 20 episodes of whatever show it is you like...there's room for Dickens to develop, to stall, to misdirect...and yet he ties it up so well...in the last few pages no character - including some you may have fallen in love with (Caddy, Phil, Mr Guppy, Mr Turveydrop, and more) - is left undone or hanging. I read Bleak House because I enjoyed Lynn Shepherd's recent "The Solitary House" so much...I also enjoyed the most recent BBC adaptation of Bleak House very much (I've watched it

three times straight through in just the past year!)...and by all means watch it...and then be amazed at how much more there is to the book! After I was done reading, I browsed some vintage newspapers, and I think this paragraph from the "New York Daily Times" of September 28, 1853, characterizes my own opinion and makes a lovely allusion to Mr. Jarndyce's "east wind": "Bleak House is...complete. Again, for twenty months, Mr. DICKENS has carried the public along with him, through a story replete with faults, and still more embellished with beauties, as no other author writing the English tongue can carry them. Less broad in its humor, less marked in its exaggerations of character, and in some respects more carefully finished than any of its predecessors, Bleak House has, Mr. Dickens himself assures us, gathered around him a more extensive audience than he has ever yet commanded. The wind may sometimes blow a little from the east on some portions of the book, but it is the first time that that breeze has contradicted the old adage, when it wafted us a contribution so pleasant as Bleak House."

The Result: Success! David Copperfield (by my standards) took me a while to read, but I enjoyed this Dickens novel. Though I still like Jane Austen much better. "David Copperfield is the story of a young man's adventures on his journey from an unhappy and impoverished childhood to the discovery of his vocation as a successful novelist. Among the gloriously vivid cast of characters he encounters are his tyrannical stepfather, Mr. Murdstone; his formidable aunt, Betsey Trotwood; the eternally humble yet treacherous Uriah Heep; frivolous, enchanting Dora; and the magnificently impecunious Micawber, one of literature's great comic creations. In David Copperfield--the novel he described as his "favorite child"--Dickens drew revealingly on his own experiences to create one of his most exuberant and enduringly popular works, filled with tragedy and comedy in equal measure." David Copperfield is definitely filled with tragedy and comedy in equal measure. Dickens can be so slyly funny in a verbose sort of way; but of course, so many really sad things happen to poor David. I wasn't in tears, but close to it. He's a bright boy, and he doesn't deserve all the misfortunes that befall him. I'm not going to reveal anything, but it's pretty easy to guess what happens to him. Dickens is renowned for his character portraits, and I have to say, they were really good. I particularly liked the portrayal of the horrible Mr. Murdstone, David's stepfather. He's so amazingly drawn, and I hated him fiercely, which is obviously what the reader is supposed to do. Here's a passage that I liked from pretty early on: "In short, I was not a favorite there with anybody, not even with myself; for those who did like me could not show it, and those who did not, showed it so plainly that I had a sensitive consciousness of always appearing constrained, boorish, and dull." (pg. 129). Overwritten? Yes. Clever? Also a yes. I realize that passage didn't pertain particularly to

Mr. Murdstone, but it kind of illustrates David's conditions at home. One cannot write a review of any Dickens novel without commenting on his excessively over-written writing. Yes, it's off-putting at first, but I found myself getting absorbed in David's story about 100 pages in. You can't blame the poor guy really; he was paid by the word, so he squeezed as many of them as he could into his novels (at least, that's the story). Still, in a less over-written fashion, David Copperfield probably could have been told in about 400 or 500 pages. Of course, that would kind of destroy the whole "style" of the book. Charles Dickens is nowhere near as great as Jane Austen in my opinion, but I still find myself enjoying him. The first Dickens novel I ever read was Oliver Twist...in third grade. And no, it was not abridged. I probably absorbed about 1% of it, but I remember liking it. I'll have to reread it sometime. I enjoyed Great Expectations and The Old Curiosity Shop, and loved A Tale of Two Cities (seeing the movie may have helped). David Copperfield was not my favorite Dickens, and it was very long-winded, but I did enjoy it, actually more than I thought I would. Sometimes Dickens's sly writing can be so great. Like when David falls in love with the flighty Dora. I loved the descriptions of how he loses all reason when she's around. It was so well written and humorous. I would recommend David Copperfield, but try one of his shorter novels first. Like A Tale of Two Cities.. So this round of Big, Big, Big, Big Book was a success! Next possible reads for it: War and Peace (a big book if I ever saw one), Don Quixote, Tom Jones, The Count of Monte Cristo, Jerusalem (not a classic), The Brothers Karamazov, Middlemarch, Tom Jones, Vanity Fair, The Origin of Species and Bleak House. Any suggestions? I know I'm going to read Don Quixote next, but after that? Check out my blog, Cleo's Literary Reviews.

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