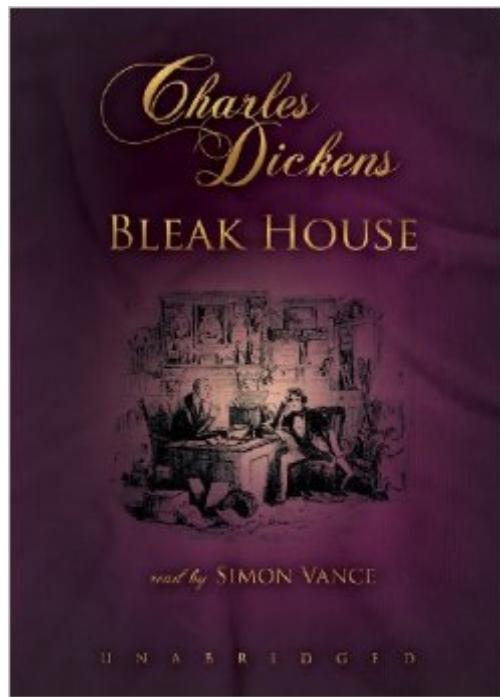


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Bleak House



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.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

It's a monster of a book, and that's not really a reference to the length necessarily (although at 900+ pages, you can't help but be a little daunted). Bleak House has big plans for you, it wants to grab you and shout at you and whisper at you and tell you ten thousand things all at once in dozens of

different accents. It's a book, really it is, with a mission, and an appropriately large dollop of missionary zeal. Dickens was already a household name when he wrote it. He'd already cast his net far and wide over an increasingly eager audience (*Pickwick Papers*, *Oliver Twist*, *David Copperfield* and *Nicholas Nickleby* had all garnered great praise for him, and *Martin Chuzzlewit*'s extensive American episode - after his trip there in 1842 - had helped his popularity no end in the US). He was world famous. He had also just begun editing the weekly journal *Household Words*, a publication he hoped would help highlight the social injustices of the age. *Bleak House* is confident and furiously angry in many respects addressing, as it does, much of the same agenda that *Household Words* railed against week in week out. The plot centres on the interminable case of *Jarndyce v Jarndyce*, a years-old law suit creaking its way through Chancery (a reference to two cases: *Day v Croft*, a suit begun in 1838 and still being heard in 1854; and *Jennings v Jennings*, begun in 1798 and finally settled in, wait for it, 1878, although, as Dickens says in his Preface, 'if I wanted [more]...I could rain them on these pages, to the shame of a parsimonious public'). "Jarndyce vs. Jarndyce drones on. This scarecrow of a suit has, in the course of time, become so complicated, that no man alive knows what it means.

This book is without a doubt as relevant now as it was when Dickens wrote it. In fact, it's probably more so. As G.K. Chesterton said, when Dickens wrote this book, he had grown up. We have the civil courtroom as it really is, a grinding machine that breaks lives underneath it every day. We see the lawyers who feed off of all this human misery, and encourage their clients to wreck their lives while piously portraying themselves as upholders of the law. Of course, this book is about a lot more than just the law. One of the most amusing subplots involves various women involved in charity. As the character Mr. Jarndyce says, there are two kinds of people who do charitable work. Some accomplish a great deal, and make very little noise, and some make a great deal of noise, and accomplish nothing. Of course, most of the ones in this book are of the second category. The most memorable by far is Mrs. Jellybee, who obsesses over a colony in Africa while her own family falls apart around her. It's exactly like people today, who want to save the whales or free Tibet while people in their own neighborhoods starve. The characters in this book are excellent, and far more realistic than in most of Dickens's works. Mr. Jarndyce is the heroic father figure, but he is a real one, who tried to be kind and guide his family but can only watch helplessly while his nephew slowly destroys himself trying to overcome the court, which of course is impossible. Many people have had trouble with the character of Esther Summerson, and her relentless goodness and self-effacement. I think she is a fantastic character, and is Dickens's way of reinforcing the message of the book, that

you need to find happiness in your own life, and things like lawsuits do nothing but destroy happiness and should be avoided.

This is the second book by Dickens I have read so far, but it will not be the last. "Bleak House" is long, tightly plotted, wonderfully descriptive, and full of memorable characters. Dickens has written a vast story centered on the Jarndyce inheritance, and masterly manages the switches between third person omniscient narrator and first person limited narrator. His main character Esther never quite convinces me of her all-around goodness, but the novel is so well-written that I just took Esther as she was described and ran along with the story. In this book a poor boy (Jo) will be literally chased from places of refuge and thus provide Dickens with one of his most powerful ways to indict a system that was particularly cruel to children. Mr. Skimpole, pretending not to be interested in money; Mr. Jarndyce, generous and good; Richard, stupid and blind; the memorable Dedlocks, and My Lady Dedlock's secret being uncovered by the sinister Mr. Tulkinghorn; Mrs. Jellyby and her telescopic philanthropy; the Ironmaster described in Chapter 28, presenting quite a different view of industrialization than that shown by Dickens in his next work, "Hard Times." Here is a veritable cosmos of people, neighbors, friends, enemies, lovers, rivals, sinners, and saints, and Dickens proves himself a true master at describing their lives and the environment they dwell in. There are landmark chapters: Chapter One must be the best description of a dismal city under attack by dismal weather and tightly tied by perfectly dismal laws, where the Lord Chancellor sits eternally in Lincoln's Inn Hall. Chapter 32 has one of the eeriest scenes ever written, with suspicious smoke, greasy and reeking, as a prelude to a grisly discovery. Chapter 47 is when Jo cannot "move along" anymore.

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