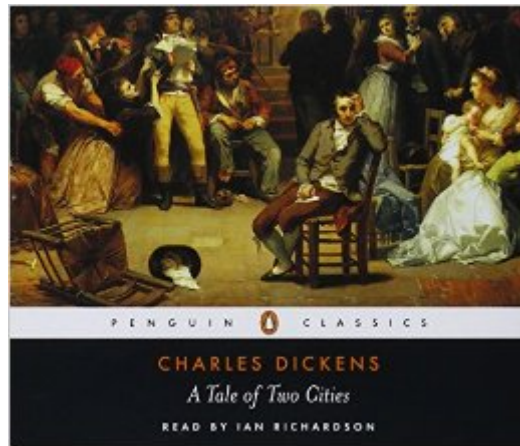


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Tale Of Two Cities



Synopsis

After 18 years as a political prisoner in the Bastille the aging Dr Manette is finally released and reunited with his daughter in England. There two very different men, Charles Darnay, an exiled French aristocrat, and Sydney Carton, a disreputable but brilliant English lawyer, become enmeshed through their love for Lucie Manette. From the tranquil lanes of London, they are all drawn against their will to the vengeful, bloodstained streets of Paris at the height of the Reign of Terror and soon fall under the lethal shadow of La Guillotine.

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Customer Reviews

The more Dickens I read, the more impressed I become at his skill as a writer. No matter the form, be it short, long, or a monolith like some of his best works, Dickens excels at changing his style of characterization and plot to fit whatever mode he writes in. "A Tale of Two Cities" is one of his shorter novels, and he manages to make the most of out of the allotted space. The compression of the narrative sacrifices Dickens's accustomed character development for plot and overall effect, but what we get is still phenomenal. "A Tale of Two Cities" begins in 1775, with Mr. Lorry, a respectable London banker, meeting Lucie Manette in Paris, where they recover Lucie's father, a doctor, and mentally enfeebled by an unjust and prolonged imprisonment in the Bastille. This assemblage, on their journey back to England, meets Charles Darnay, an immigrant to England from France who makes frequent trips between London and Paris. Upon their return to England, Darnay finds himself on trial for spying for France and in league with American revolutionaries. His attorney, Stryver, and Stryver's obviously intelligent, if morally corrupt and debauched, assistant, Sydney Carton, manage

to get Darnay exonerated of the charges against him. Darnay, a self-exiled former French aristocrat, finds himself compelled to return to France in the wake of the French Revolution, drawing all those around him into a dangerous scene. Dickens portrays the French Revolution simplistically, but powerfully, as a case of downtrodden peasants exacting a harsh revenge against an uncaring aristocratic, even feudal, system. The Defarge's, a wine merchant and his wife, represent the interests of the lower classes, clouded by hatred after generations of misuse.

I was first introduced to this book when I was 14 years old in my 8th grade English class. I found it utterly overwhelming; in its cast, its plotlines, its settings, its themes and most of all, in the intricate web the various relationships create. I only understood three things about this book. First, the two cities are London and Paris. Second, France was convulsing itself with the French Revolution while England was undergoing changes that would prepare it to enter the Industrial Revolution. Third, English in Dickens' time did not resemble English at the end of the 20th century, but somehow seemed similar to the English used in Hollywood epic movies from the 1950s and 1960s like *Spartacus*, *Ben-hur*, *the Ten Commandments*, *Cleopatra*, etc... Years later, I picked up this book and reread it. I considered this a labor, not of love, but of duty. This book is so famous and used so often in English literature classes that I felt I had to read it again for a deeper understanding. What I got from this book a 2nd time around is a profoundly subtle yet accurate sociological and psychological study of what happens to a society and a community that is built on shaky foundations. Specifically, France was an aristocracy where a tiny minority owned all the land. The rest of society was organized into tiers that varied in their opportunities of becoming landowners. Because of this pyramid structure, most of the people hewed to the social order knowing that yes they get crapped on by those above them, but there's always somebody below them to take advantage of. Eventually this social Ponzi scheme comes to a screeching halt with the French Revolution. Enough people have had enough that they decide to start over.

The period from 1775 - the outbreak of the American Revolution - to 1789 - the storming of the Bastille - is the turbulent setting of this uncharacteristic Dickens novel. It is his only novel that lacks comic relief, is one of only two that are not set in nineteenth-century England and is also unusual in lacking a primary central character. London and Paris are the real protagonists in this tale, much as the cathedral was the 'hero' of Hugo's *Notre Dame de Paris*. Dickens was writing at a time of great turmoil in his personal life, having just separated from his wife, and no doubt the revolutionary theme was in tune with his mental state. The result is a complex, involving plot with some of the best

narrative writing to be found anywhere, and the recreation of revolutionary Paris is very convincing. The device of having two characters that look identical may seem hackneyed to modern readers, but it is here employed with greater plausibility than in Twain's Pudd'nhead Wilson or Collins's The Woman in White. Dickens was inspired to write this story by reading Carlyle's newly published history of the French Revolution. Those events and their aftermath stood in relation to their time much as World Wars I and II do to ours, that is, fading from living memory into history, yet their legacy still very much with us. In many nineteenth-century novels, especially Russian and British works, you get a sense of unease among the aristocracy that the revolution will spread to their own back yard. In the case of Russia, of course, it eventually did. I have often recommended A Tale of Two Cities as a good introduction to Dickens for younger readers.

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