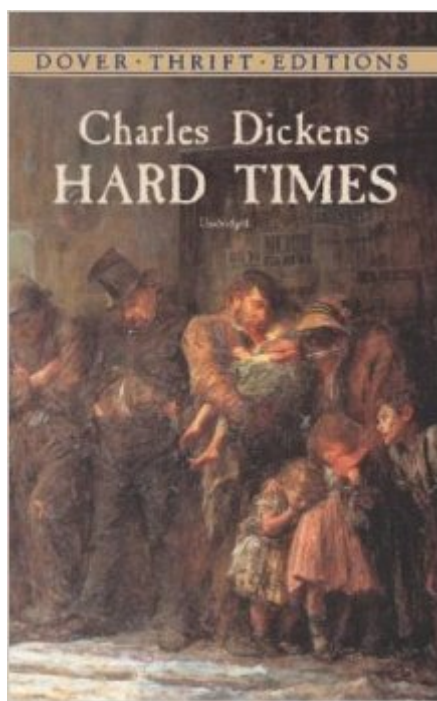


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Hard Times (Dover Thrift Editions)



Synopsis

"My satire is against those who see figures and averages, and nothing else," proclaimed Charles Dickens in explaining the theme of this classic novel. Published in 1854, the story concerns one Thomas Gradgrind, a "fanatic of the demonstrable fact," who raises his children, Tom and Louisa, in a stifling and arid atmosphere of grim practicality. Without a moral compass to guide them, the children sink into lives of desperation and despair, played out against the grim background of Coketown, a wretched community shadowed by an industrial behemoth. Louisa falls into a loveless marriage with Josiah Bounderby, a vulgar banker, while the unscrupulous Tom, totally lacking in principle, becomes a thief who frames an innocent man for his crime. Witnessing the degradation and downfall of his children, Gradgrind realizes that his own misguided principles have ruined their lives. Considered Dickens' harshest indictment of mid-19th-century industrial practices and their dehumanizing effects, this novel offers a fascinating tapestry of Victorian life, filled with the richness of detail, brilliant characterization, and passionate social concern that typify the novelist's finest creations. Of Dickens' work, the eminent Victorian critic John Ruskin had this to say: "He is entirely right in his main drift and purpose in every book he has written; and all of them, but especially *Hard Times*, should be studied with close and earnest care by persons interested in social questions."

Book Information

Lexile Measure: 760 (What's this?)

Series: Dover Thrift Editions

Paperback: 240 pages

Publisher: Dover Publications; 1 edition (August 22, 2001)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0486419207

ISBN-13: 978-0486419206

Product Dimensions: 0.5 x 5.5 x 8.2 inches

Shipping Weight: 7 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

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Age Range: 11 and up

Grade Level: 6 and up

Customer Reviews

Arguably, Dickens could be classified as the greatest of all English speaking novelists...of all times. There are very few writers that can offer his consistency, novel after novel, story after story. Yes, many have written works that perhaps equal any of his given works, but few if any have been able to turn out such a volume of pure quality. Very, very few authors have had such a large portion of their work pass the test of time. Dickens gains new readers year in and year out and there is a reason for this! Over the past 50 or so years I have heard this particular work referred to as "not Dickens' best," and "A minor work by Dickens," and other comments along those lines. I am really not in a position, nor do I have the ability to proclaim or rank this author's work one way or the other. Dickens for me is like any other author...I either like it or I do not like it; it either is a joy to read or it is not. Now I have read this short novel at least five times over the years and listen to several versions on CD and Tape. The best, minor Dickens' work, timeless classic, not pertinent in today's world, a mere political rant? Well I don't know. I do know that it is one of my favorites and do look forward to reading it again down the road. I am one of those horrid and probably misguided individuals who sort of make their own mind up about anything I read, and more or less ignore the pontifications of those that are suppose to know about such things. All that being said though, I cannot look you in the eye and state that I have ever read one story; one word by this author that I did not enjoy right down to the tip of my toes. He delights me. The setting of course is in Victorian England and the Industrial Revolution is in full tilt.

"Hard Times" belongs to the second half of Dickens's writing career, in which his work becomes rather more somber and, by common critical assent, more mature and satisfying. Personally, I prefer his earlier work and his very first novel, "Pickwick Papers", is to my mind his greatest. Surprisingly, "Hard Times", despite its title and reputation, contains some brilliant flashes of Dickens humour, especially in the earlier part. The descriptions of Bounderby and Gradgrind, and the early dialogue with the circus folk, are genuinely hilarious. This is Dickens's shortest novel, about a third of the length of each of his previous four. Themes, subplots and characters are introduced without being fully explored. The author was perhaps feeling the constraints of writing in installments for a periodical, although he was well used to doing that. This relative brevity, together with the youth of some of the central characters, make this book a good introduction to Dickens for young readers. There are the large dollops of Victorian melodrama and the reliance on unlikely coincidences that mar much of Dickens's work. Also the usual tendency for characters to become caricatures and to have names that are a little too apt (a teacher called Mr. McChoakumchild?). The

respected critic F.R. Leavis considered "Hard Times" to be Dickens's masterpiece and "only serious work of art". This seems to me wildly wrong, but such an extreme opinion may prompt you to read the book, just so that you can form your own opinion. I read it because I had just finished "The Jungle" by Upton Sinclair, which deals with the plight of Chicago factory workers, and I wanted to compare the two. Sinclair's book has greater immediacy. It takes you much closer to the suffering of the workers.

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