



# Billy Budd and Other Tales

*Herman Melville , Joyce Carol Oates (Introduction)*

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**Billy Budd and Other Tales** Herman Melville , Joyce Carol Oates (Introduction)

**A master of the american short story**

Included in this rich collection are: *The Piazza*, *Bartleby the Scrivener*, *Benito Cereno*, *The Lightning-Rod Man*, *The Encantadas*, *The Bell-Tower*, and *The Town-Ho's Story*.

## Billy Budd and Other Tales Details

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# From Reader Review Billy Budd and Other Tales for online ebook

## Albert Meier says

A very interesting mix of short works including themes both nautical and not. All were enjoyable. Melville's prose can be daunting at times. Not easy to get into, yet clear and understandable. I can see why Moby Dick is considered great and yet rarely read.

The scholarly introduction claimed to find themes and tensions in Billy Budd that just weren't there. I hate reading modern ideas into previous eras where they did not exist. It shows an ignorance of and lack of appreciation for the attitudes of those time periods.

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## Mike Jensen says

Judging by the way some respond to Melville's other masterpiece, I think this book does not suit our times. For me this story of a man too good to live makes a book too good to put down. I remain a Billy Budd fan.

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## Linda says

I enjoyed Billy Budd and Bartleby and Benito Cereno of The Piazza Tales. The Town-Ho's Story (Ch 54 of Moby Dick) reminded me why I have started reading Moby Dick several times, yet finishing it remains on my bucket list. If you read only one of the novellas/short stories in this collection, I recommend Benito Cereno.

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## Lobstergirl says

Unbelievably, Melville had a hard time making a living from his writing.

[That was sarcasm.]

His style is overly archaic. I read a fair amount of classic literature, but this is just ridiculous. In the mid to late 19th century, were people still saying "Hark!"? And "Blah, blah, blah, thought I"? Really? You can't convince me.

1. *From that tree-top, what birded chimes of silver throats had rung.*
2. *Dire sight it is to see some silken beast long dally with a golden lizard ere she devour.*
3. *Himself became reserved.*

REALLY? Himself?? Because "he" is just too simple?

I don't care if you are writing in the fourth century, the fifteenth century, the 19th century, or the 55th century; if you write a sentence like "himself became reserved" you deserve every heap of scorn and lack of income that comes your way.

*Billy Budd* and *Benito Cereno*, the two longest stories here, are actually the least offensive and most readable, stylistically. (Least offensive stylistically, I must stress; *Benito Cereno* is quite offensive racially and makes a fascinating study of that issue.) But *The Piazza* is one of the most ridiculous things I've ever read. *The Encantadas* is just barely fiction - it's more of a travelogue. If you can get through its ten sketches, give yourself a pat on the back. *The Lightning-Rod Man* and *The Bell-Tower* made me want to throw myself off a cliff they were so dull.

I did feel like his homoeroticism was a little ahead of its time, though. If *Billy Budd* is not a gay icon, I can't understand why.

"You have but noted his fair cheek. A man-trap may be under his ruddy-tipped daisies."

Now the Handsome Sailor, as a signal figure among the crew, had naturally enough attracted the Captain's attention from the first. Though in general not very demonstrative to his officers, he had congratulated Lieutenant Ratcliffe upon his good fortune in lighting on such a fine specimen of the *genus homo*, who in the nude might have posed for a statue of young Adam before the Fall.

And "The Town-Ho's Story?" Yes....of course I thought that meant the town ho.

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### **Tim Paul says**

A good friend introduced me to an alternative reading of this novel, in which the narrator is obsessed with upholding the heroic myth of *Billy Budd*. Every incident is spun out by the narrator to show Billy in the most positive light possible, and Claggart as his evil opposite. If you look closely at the text for the 'facts' of the story though there's not a shred of evidence to support this romantic view of Billy.[return][return]In fact, reading between the lines, it's possible to read Claggart as a basically decent man stuck in an impossible situation, and Billy as a charismatic psychopath with a tyrannical grip on his shipmates.[return][return]A benefit of this interpretation is that it makes sense of the circumlocutions of the narrator's dialogue, as he turns somersaults trying to maintain the myth of The Handsome Sailor.[return][return]It's also an appropriately cynical response from an author near the end of his life, looking back at the success of his earlier, more romantic, adventure stories.

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### **Paul Mckinley says**

I've read *Moby Dick* three times and consider it great, if a bit odd stylistically. Having read nothing else of Melville's, I was particularly interested in *Bartleby the Scrivener*, and *Billy Budd*, which readers generally consider to be his next best works.

His style didn't work as well for these shorter stories. He mostly shows rather than tells, and often goes far too long without a dialogue. He's also very slow as he waxes poetic and brings in many allusions, but very little action happens altogether.

Perhaps what worked so well in *Moby Dick* is the way he would change the style between chapter, with some being narration, some being dialogue, some being Shakespearian in style, and some being reference material (all the encyclopedic chapters about cetations). Without that, these stories didn't have much of a chance for you to get settled in and appreciate his story-telling style.

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## Jay says

"that peculiar glance which evidences that the man from whom it comes has been some way tampered with and to the prejudice of him upon whom the glance lights"

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## Frankie says

Having never read Melville beyond *Moby Dick* and *Billy Budd*, and with a mild distaste for "seafaring tales," I was pleasantly surprised to read several quite good, non-seafaring stories in this collection.

Bad news first. *Billy Budd* to me has, and always will, represent that stark allegory of fable or parable, without the blessed brevity of a fable or parable. I don't enjoy reading constant reminders that Billy's character represents pre-fall Adam. Without the agony of the details, this story boils down to a very interesting paragraph. If Melville's verbose and choppy style is meant to simulate tossing waves, he succeeds. For example, his use of reverse negatives ("not unabashed" or "seldom unheeded") make reading slow. The story *Benito Cereno* exhibits similar problems, though with a more interesting twist. Unfortunately, Melville grinds out 10 extra pages explaining the twist at the end, just in case the reader hasn't understood. The intro to this story, however, deserves mention for its uncommonly poetic and lovely opening description– "The sky seemed a gray surtout [19th century word for overcoat]. Flights of troubled gray fowl, kith and kin with flights of troubled gray vapors among which they were mixed, skimmed low and fitfully over the waters, as swallows over meadows before storms. Shadows present, foreshadowing deeper shadows to come."

Melville proves himself capable of natural description most in *The Piazza*, a subtle allegory of the experienced writer withdrawing from the world. The story *Bartleby* is my favorite. The setting is more modern and apt than any other. It's a dark, middle class office-worker tale about a man that loses his reason. The mystery of the tale balances with the pathos of his effect on those around him.

*The Encantadas* is a group of journalism/collected folklore about the Galapagos Islands. Fairly good and easy in style. Finally *The Bell-Tower* is an interesting story, told in a gothic style. It seems to be an indictment of industrialism, and feels upon reading like an H.G. Wells. It may be the very first appearance of a robot in literature.

\*Added August 2012\*

The story "The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids" (not in this edition, in Penguin's *Billy Budd and Other Stories*) is a sort of binary parallel. The style is very jovial, especially in the warm, sumptuous

first half, but by the second half Melville's elemental nature returns. Gender difference is a major theme, with industrialism and class pictured as well. I was surprised by the narrator's affected voice. Was Melville just playing his character emphatically, or was he being sarcastic? His delight at low ceilings, hushed conversations, taking snuff... I'm not sure I understood...

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### **May Ling says**

Hard to ever criticize a great like Herman Melville. The story itself, to me was a little weird, but I think that the way he goes intensely into characterizing people, the nuanced emotion, the little details that give you a very deep perspective of what is going on. It's crazy. I mean it reminds me of my mother when she goes into a restaurant (her place of extreme expertise) and notices stuff I would not even begin to pick up on. It's amazing.

This and all the stories in the book are classically what made this guy a great writer. You will def get Billy Bud, all his depth as a character and then the nuance of those that had to do what they had to do.

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### **Ginger says**

Eh. Not my favorite book. At all.

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### **Sanjay Varma says**

I read the 3 novellas in this collection: "Benito Cereno", "Billy Budd", and "Bartleby". I heartily recommend all three. Melville is extremely gifted at foreshadowing, symbolism, and moral ambiguity. His characters are allegorical and fatally flawed like greek heroes, but with detailed psychologies like you would expect from a Dostoevsky novel. However, Melville is mediocre at depicting action sequences, and quite terrible at endings.

"Benito Cereno" is a novella about a ghost ship, in which the easy assumptions we bring with us to interpret new situations are shown to be inadequate to explain the crew's behavior on a ship in distress. The story is narrated from the point of view of Captain Delano, of a whaler ship. When captain Delano comes aboard, he constantly tries to see reality through his expectations of how a crew will behave on a ship at sea. But he is baffled by the odd behavior of Captain Benito Cereno, and the sensation that nothing is quite what it seems to be.

"Billy Budd" is a slow developing character study. The captain, Billy, and the master-at-arms are all portrayed with a fatal depth. Then they proceed to act out their respective fates. Billy, an innocent young sailor, earns the enmity of a minor officer, the master-at-arms, who then contrives to frame Billy Budd for mutiny. When Billy is called before the captain and accused of this crime, it sets off a chain of events that lead to tragedy.

"Bartleby" is an unbelievably prescient story, as relevant today when the plight of the 99% is debated by politicians as it was in the 19th century. Bartleby is a clerk who arbitrarily stops complying with some of his boss's orders, but will only say "I'd rather not." The boss does not know how to deal with this unresponsive

employee! He tries reasoning, authoritative force, pleading, and bribery. Melville has found a spooky way to depict his social commentary on the economics and the class system.

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## **E. says**

I read *Billy Budd* in 2006 and read *Bartleby the Scrivener* sometime later. This time I read all the remaining tales in this volume, most of them from the *Piazza Tales*.

I wrote the other day on my blog about *The Lightning-Rod Man*. That was my favourite of the bunch. Some of the stories aren't as strong or engaging, but even they express Melville's command of the language and the sense of dread and the exotic which overhangs everything. Plus, they keep your interest.

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## **Nathan "N.R." Gaddis says**

*Piazza Tales* plus *Billy Budd* ; because I could no longer wait/shop for the correct edition. Which would be the Northwestern-Newberry from Hayford and Parker, ie, *Piazza Tales and Other Prose Pieces*, 1839-1860. But I'll still be looking for it.

Here's the clever One=Liner Review, piece by piece ::

*Billy Budd* : A lesson in the objective nature of The Law, or, Why one might prefer the capricious judgment of The Wise.

"The Piazza" : An important piece for the thesis that all fiction is (nothing but) autobiography.

"Bartleby" : Prerequisite for the study of Žižek's strategies of resistance.

"Benito Cereno" : Another lesson ; this one either for The Reactionary in how to put down the movement of freedom ;; or for The Freedom=Mover in how to bore within [we may need this one in coming years].

"The Lightning-Rod Man" : Originally about the silly guy selling salvation from hell ; now a story about atheists saving us from The Poison of Religion.

"The Encantadas, or Enchanted Islands" : Some cool shit in those islands.

"The Bell-Tower" ; < spoiler > Is this one habitually counted among 19th cent. proto=Sci-Fi? < /spoiler > or, maybe an unrecognized genre, the Renaissance=Man Fiction, because it's distinct from the Rocket=Man variety, science being what it was at that time....

"The *Town-Ho's* Story from *Moby-Dick* ; Did not (re)read. As the only chapter of The Big Dick to be magazine pub'd, this would be an early instantiation of what would become (near) habitual for the encyclopedic novel, it's work-in-progress'ing.

*Pierre* is definitely on the menu (still looking for that correct edition) ; and probably *Clarel* ;; but I'm undecided about Melville's First Five. Aren't they little more than Verne-esque adventure stories? ...other hand, didn't Schmidt dig Verne?

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## **Jee Koh says**

This Signet Classics edition collects together "Billy Budd," "The Piazza Tales," and "The Town-Ho's Story" from Moby Dick. "Billy Budd" is based on the Harvard edition. There is a helpful "Afterword" by Willard Thorpe that explains Melville's turn to writing short stories for the magazines, after the commercial and critical failures of Moby Dick and *Pierre*. The "Afterword" (1961) also points to the critical controversies over the meanings of the more ambiguous stories, such as "Billy Budd" and "Benito Cereno."

I did not enjoy "Billy Budd" as much as I thought I would. The eponymous character is too much a symbol of Adamic innocence, and too little a human being. The interest in the first part of the story lies in the narrator's homo-erotic attraction to Billy, an attraction displaced on to Billy's admiring companions. But since Billy is as blandly exciting as a porn star, the displaced attraction lacks the kind of self-examination that might make for interest. Reading the first part of the story was a little like watching a porn producer getting off while watching his own product. The interest in the second part of the story lies in Captain Vere, the commander of the British warship, the *Indomitable*. He had to decide on Billy's fate after the latter accidentally killed his false accuser, the satanic Claggart. Captain Vere is too sure, however, of what he should do, and so he suffers no real anguish though the narrator assures us of the captain's better feelings.

"Benito Cereno," from "The Piazza Tales," is many things, one of which is a mystery story. Captain Amasa Delano tries to aid a distressed ship, the *San Dominick*, commanded by one Benito Cereno, who is strangely dependent on his black slave Babo for help. The story traces the confusion in Delano's mind as he tries to puzzle out what is actually happening on board the troubled ship. The shifting meanings of signs is a theme here; the difficulty of finding out the truth disturbs the other tales too. I did find my own mind wandering as Delano's mind wonders. The confusion goes on for too long, perhaps, or my patience is too short.

Melville writes like a post-Christian. He does not accept Christian dogma but cannot let go Christian symbols. More than symbols, he cannot let go a Christian view of the world, a dualistic view of innate good and intrinsic evil. Claggart in "Billy Budd," for instance, is described as naturally evil. Sometimes that view is complicated by his sense that the world comes to us in multiple, and often conflicting versions. So he ends "Billy Budd" by giving us an account of Vere's death ("Billy Budd, Billy Budd" on his dying lips), a naval new report that depicts Billy as nothing more than a mutineer, and a poem written by the sailors that describes Billy as an experienced man-about-the-docks. While these different accounts problematize the authority of the narrator's own version, yet I don't get the sense that we are supposed to read the narrator's version as just one of many accounts. His version still holds sway, like the captain of the vessel.

Among the piazza tales are plainly allegorical stories. In "The Lightning-Rod Man," the lightning-rod salesman thrives on the fear he claims to be able to assuage, and so is a neat satire of Calvinist ministers. "The Bell-Tower," with its allusions to the Tower of Babel, is a parable about man's hubris. The engineer Bannadonna invented the machine that killed him. Thorpe comments, and I agree, that the pride targeted by Melville is the hubris of the newly prevailing scientific and materialistic theories of his time. The aptness of these allegories has a certain charm, but their aptness can also feel too pat. They are mysteries with a key, unlike the impenetrable mystery of the title character in "Bartleby." Bartleby the scrivener, with his stubborn "I prefer"s, represents the unexplainable will of man. It is not clear if Bartleby could explain Bartleby to



himself.

The best story of this collection is not a story, more a collection of sketches. In the ten sketches of "The Encantadas, or the Enchanted Islands," Melville describes with great imaginative force and lyrical grace the geography, fauna and inhabitants of the cindery hell that is the Galapagos. Sketch First gives an overview of the islands. Sketch Second describes the two sides of a tortoise. Sketch Third looks at the stone tower Rock Rodondo, while Sketch Four looks out from it. Sketch Fifth tells the story of the U. S. frigate Essex's chase of a mysterious ship. Sketch Sixth describes Barrington Isle and the English Buccaneers who made that isle a safe hideout. Sketch Seventh narrates the tale of Charles's Isle and the Dog-King. Sketch Eighth, the story of Norfolk Isle and the Chola Widow. Sketch Ninth dwelled on Hood's Isle and the Hermit Oberlus, the spawn of Sycorax. Sketch Tenth concludes with runaways, castaways, solitaires, gravestones etc., in other words, with the scattered remnants of death. Each sketch begins with a mood-setting quotation from Spencer's "The Faerie Queen," but the work this story most reminds me of is Dante's Inferno. Melville's tale describes the little hell on earth. In this tale, he plies the full power of his descriptive style, and the formal intelligence of his religious imagination.

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## **Amy says**

Note: I read all assigned stories, but didn't actually finish the book. I'm counting it still though because the pages I didn't finish pretty much balance out all the articles I read for class that aren't in my page count.

I feel like the short story format worked well here—Bartleby and The Piazza were engaging, albeit frustrating because I wanted to shake the narrators (for very different reasons). The Encantadas really dragged for me (Typee didn't for some reason, but these did).

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