



# The Atheist's Mass

*Honoré de Balzac*

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THIS 26 PAGE ARTICLE WAS EXTRACTED FROM THE BOOK: Country Doctor; Quest of the Absolute and Other Novels, by Honore de Balzac.

## The Atheist's Mass Details

Date : Published December 8th 2005 by Kessinger Publishing (first published 1836)

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Author : Honoré de Balzac

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# From Reader Review The Atheist's Mass for online ebook

## Peter says

The title story was quite enjoyable. There is something about this story that pulled me in, maybe it is because as I read more of these older classics there is more that I can compare it with perhaps. The second story was reasonable enough but lacked the warmth that seemed to pervade the first.

Overall it might be worth visiting de Balzac for some more stories.

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## Navid Taghavi says

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## Skip says

### Balzac and other geniuses.

I began my evening watching, John Le Carre's, BBC production of , TINKER, TAILOR, SOLDIER, SPY. After that I watched the masterful Itzhak Perlman perform Beethoven's Violin Concerto in D major. And I finished of the night reading Balzac's, THE ATHEIST'S MASS. What an exclamation point to an elevated night. One of the great things about Balzac is that he always leaves you with yourself, or myself in my case.

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## Lea says

Both short stories were ok but I didn't find them engaging or particularly well-written.

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## Joey Woolfardis says

I disliked this not for what it told, or spoke of, or what morals it may have wanted to express but for the fact that it was boring and slow and, well, just bad. Translations are not often so terrible as this.

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## Gláucia Renata says

Conto publicado em 1836, traz como personagem o médico Desplein, professor do já conhecido dr. Bianchon. Desplein é uma homenagem ao famoso fisiologista dr. Guillaume Dupuytren, cirurgião da família real, morto um ano antes da publicação do conto.

Traz como tema um mistério: o que leva um ateu convicto como Desplein a rezar e orientar uma missa 4

vezes ao ano? É isso que o leitor irá descobrir junto com dr. Bianchon.

Histórico de leitura

80% (56 de 70)

"Católico ardoroso, nunca me disse uma única palavra sobre minha religião."

16% (11 de 70)

"Um médico a quem a ciência deve uma bela fisiológica e que, jovem ainda, se colocou entre as celebridades da Escola de Paris, centro de luzes ao qual todos os médicos da Europa prestam homenagem, o dr. Bianchon praticou durante muito tempo a cirurgia antes de se dedicar à cirurgia."

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## BlackOxford says

### A Morality of Friendship

When one despairs of humanity, yet experiences a friendship with another human being, how can one commemorate that friend's life after his death? Certainly by 'doing unto others.' But merely passing on the gift of friendship feels an inadequate tribute to the memory of the originating friend in an unworthy society. There is something spiritual in the connection itself which can't be transmitted beyond itself. Something is 'owed' to the friendship. "*Genius*," Balzac says, "*always presupposes moral insight*." And since morality is about people not ideas, or beliefs, or principles it may be necessary to give these up in order to be authentically moral, particularly if one is an "*invincible atheist*." Perhaps a spiritual offering is the only solution.

As an incidental footnote: I was for some time a member of St. Benet's Hall, one of the Catholic colleges at Oxford University. There arose a rumour at some point, attested by several reliable folk, that Richard Dawkins was seen more than once entering the Hall on Sunday mornings for Mass. I discounted the story as an Oxford myth. After reading this Balzac story I'm not so sure. It might have been true.

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## Maede Poorsafae says

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## Dhaval says

The short story of the master surgeon Desplein and how his disciple Bianchon caught the avowed atheist heading to mass four times a year. Desplein relates how although being a naturalist, he still attends mass.

I think the central conflict in this short story is what atheist feel and the naturally human desire to please

either yourself or others. When is a lie evil? Is it wrong to tell someone it's going to be okay, when you know they are going to die?

Desplein is driven by compassion, and many of those touched by the divine are as well. The question, then, do you need to be religious to be compassionate? And if you are not religious, should God (if you believe) be compassionate of those who are not?

Very interesting short story, one of which, I can easily relate to and that does not have easy answers for the believers or nonbelievers.

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### **Elizabeth says**

Two little samplers in one tiny black book. The first a discovery of why an atheist might attend a solemn mass for twenty years, the second a seemingly sentimental tale about the strange performances of normality enacted during the French revolution. Telling of their times, they were saccharine didacticism on the one hand, and screaming revelations of political and social inequalities on the other. The art of misdirection embodied. Clever stuff.

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### **Darwin8u says**

*"I am like many pious men, men who appear to be profoundly religious but are quite atheistic as we are, you and I."*

- Honoré de Balzac , "The Atheist's Mass"

**Vol N° 41** of my Penguin Little Black Classics Box Set. This book contains two of Honoré de Balzac's short stories.

Included were:

1. "The Atheist's Mass" - ★★★★★
2. "The Conscript" - ★★★★★

"The Atheist's Mass" or "La Messe de l'athée" killed me; ate me up and devoured me. Perhaps, it was the prose. It could be. It was clean, quotable, philosophic, humanistic. It is the kind of writing I could read for days at a time. But it was more than that. Balzac, in this story, seemed to capture the complexity and the nuance of man. The story is considered to be part of Balzac's *Scènes de la vie privée* in La Comédie Humaine. "The Conscript" or "Le Réquisitionnaire" is a story about a French aristocrat, Mme de Dey, during the French Revolution (1793). She is balancing her social needs in Normandy while trying to protect her son's legacy.

Like several of the writers in this series, I knew Balzac by reputation. My wife has read several of his books. But I had never read a story or novel he had written. These two stories insure that I will dive a lot deeper into his books over the next several years.

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## Michelle Curie says

Honoré de Balzac was a French writer who composed *La Comédie humaine*, a collection of interlinked novels and stories that together present life as it was in France during the post-Napoleonic era. This *Little Black Classic* features two short stories taken from his magnum opus: **The Atheist's Mass** and **The Conscript**.

While the first tells the story of a masterful doctor and known atheist, who is seen attending a mass four times a year. As the story unfolds, we learn of compassion, tenderness and respect for the faith of others. The second gives us insight into the life of a mother who is waiting for her son to return from war.

**Both are powerful stories with a moral.** I fell for de Balzac's writing immediately: his words are slow burning, he takes time to introduce his characters, but because of that he enables them to come alive. There's a lot *telling* and comparatively little *showing* in here, but we're provided a stunning portrait of times different to ours today.

In 2015 Penguin introduced the Little Black Classics series to celebrate Penguin's 80th birthday. Including little stories from "around the world and across many centuries" as the publisher describes, I have been intrigued to read those for a long time, before finally having started. I hope to sooner or later read and review all of them!

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## Steven Godin says

An average short story by Honoré de Balzac written in 1836, that was later included in "The Human Comedy (La Comédie Humaine)", this story has little in the way of plot but rather contains a variety of powerful messages, ranging from social aspects, to morals and religion.

Balzac allies with his two main characters, Doctors Horace Bianchon and Desplain, and delivers a refined insight into the integration of beliefs and knowledge in the context of humanity.

Using the report of young Dr. H. Bianchon, whose medical practice was supervised by the renowned Dr. Desplain, the story introduces a significant social and philosophical matter, that of atheism, as a result of scientific thinking, and its implications in direct human relationships in 19th Century France. Although the text is not what I expected, it fact for me it's pretty poor, it still manages to provide a complex perspective on the matter through the portrayal of two types of relationships, that between Bianchon and Desplain (both atheists) and the one between Desplain and Bourgeat, a religious water-carrier who helped Desplein start his medical career although he himself was poor and could not even afford to fulfil his own modest dreams.

What initially appears to be a hypocrisy alarm that needs to be verified turns out to be an example of humanity, respect, understanding of human nature and gratitude. It is about understanding and accepting individual differences, and at the same time allowing yourself to be who you are and staying true to your own mindset and beliefs. It is about humanity as one of the highest forms of virtue, one that surpasses any limitation of status or creed. It is also about privacy and intimacy. About generosity and propagation of kindness. I get all that, far enough, it carries an important message, but it's no more than that. As a story

though it's easily forgettable, read so much better.

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### **Michelle says**

The more I read these books, the more I want to stick two fingers up to the writing 'rules'. In this book we are 'told' rather than 'shown', and you know what, I was still gripped and still invested in the story. Because that's what's important, right? Not that you followed the rules and did what the writing manuals tell you, but that you had a story to tell. These books would probably not be picked up by so-called 'mainstream' publishers these days (I can imagine the kinds of rejection letters Balzac would get from agents), but in my opinion that just makes them even worthier of attention. It's good to remind ourselves every now and then just what imagination and innate skill can do.

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### **Kevin J.J. Carpenter says**

#### **The Atheist's Mass: 4/5**

The eponymous story of this Little Black Classic is a deeply emotional ballad concerning the peculiar habits of Doctor Desplein, a remarkable surgeon and explicit atheist, who also happens to attend mass four times per annum. As the pieces unfold, however, Desplein's bizarre actions blossom into a beautiful sentiment, offering some social commentary on the construct of belief and the power that it pertains.

I don't want to say too much, because it's very moving, and I encourage anyone questioning the sanctity of faith and religion to give it a read, not so much to alter your mindset, but to understand and appreciate the complicated mosaic of the human spirit. I will leave the review with this quote, which I found particularly eloquent and unfortunately accurate: "If I don't believe in god, I believe still less in men."

#### **The Conscript: 4/5**

During the French Revolution, Madame de Dey, an aristocratic countess, is heavily respected and revered by her local constituents for her tact and generosity, even despite their dedication to the Revolution. As she surreptitiously awaits for the arrival of her military son, however, the pillars of her civil liberties begin to break down as suspicion promptly infects the better-half of the town, leading to a melancholic finale that begs the reader to, once again, consider the raw power of the human spirit.

I very much enjoyed this short story—both were equally scintillating, hidden gems from the vast history of literature. The irony de Balzac injects into his prose is beautiful, even if his introductions are dull and bloated, bleeding a torrent of unnecessary exposition until the story actually starts, though I suppose it's a trait of the times when his stories were written. There's just so much emotion within de Balzac's themes that I found myself teary-eyed a couple of times, and the reality of the situations he proposes is so stark, you quickly forget that you're reading fiction

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