


# Billy Budd, Bartleby, and Other Stories

*Herman Melville , Peter M. Coviello (Introduction)*

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**Billy Budd, Bartleby, and Other Stories** Herman Melville , Peter M. Coviello (Introduction)

**A new, definitive edition of Herman Melville's virtuosic short stories—American classics wrought with scorching fury, grim humor, and profound beauty**

Though best-known for his epic masterpiece *Moby-Dick*, Herman Melville also left a body of short stories arguably unmatched in American fiction. In the sorrowful tragedy of *Billy Budd, Sailor*; the controlled rage of *Benito Cereno*; and the tantalizing enigma of *Bartleby, the Scrivener*; Melville reveals himself as a singular storyteller of tremendous range and compelling power. In these stories, Melville cuts to the heart of race, class, capitalism, and globalism in America, deftly navigating political and social issues that resonate as clearly in our time as they did in Melville's. Also including *The Piazza Tales* in full, this collection demonstrates why Melville stands not only among the greatest writers of the nineteenth century, but also as one of our greatest contemporaries.

This Penguin Classics edition features the Reading Text of *Billy Budd, Sailor*, as edited from a genetic study of the manuscript by Harrison Hayford and Merton M. Sealts, Jr., and the authoritative Northwestern-Newberry text of *The Piazza Tales*.

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*From the Trade Paperback edition.*

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# From Reader Review Billy Budd, Bartleby, and Other Stories for online ebook

## Christopher Condit says

Only read Bartleby and Billy Budd. Just makes me want to read Hawthorne and Conrad. I have lost my taste for Melville.

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## Callie says

I only read Benito Cereno for school.

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## Derek Baldwin says

The 'Other Stories' I could not stomach, in particular the lengthy Benito Cereno, a tale with a twist I could see coming from miles off. But the two title stories are fantastic.

Bartleby is extremely funny and hugely enjoyable. I was at a conference recently, settled into my chosen seat. Along came a delegate who explained to me that she needed to sit at the end of the row and therefore would I mind awfully shuffling one seat inward? Not at all. Settled again some further request is made that I shuffle inward once more, and likewise she, do that some soul so deserving of it may have the aisle seat. This time all debate was instantly curtailed by my retort "I would prefer not to."

As for the Inside Narrative of Billy Budd, Sailor: absolutely brilliant in its tone, the unmistakeable rage at injustice, and the homoeroticism which must have been very unusual at the time of writing.

For these two stories alone this was a worthwhile read. If you can gain anything at all from the Other Stories then I congratulate you.

Whether I shall go on to finally read Moby Dick time alone shall tell.

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## Davis says

Pretty good.

Bartleby was awesome (tho not as good as I remembered for some reason)

some of the longer shit really dragged on, definitely didn't need to be so long but idk definitely just a product of time

he has really good sensibilities sort of and idk got more emotional than I thought it would,,,, pretty nice parts definitely.

Billy Budd is pretty cool, really ahead of its time and just nice and good  
some good writing, but took a long time, also a lot a lot of just boring shit describing shit way too long.  
pretty good

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## **Inderjit Sanghera says**

Weird and wonderful, the short stories of Herman Melville, from the story of the incorrigible scrivener Bartleby, to the homo-eroticism of 'Billy Budd' to Melville's mellifluous imagery 'The Piazza', a kind of lachrymose wisdom is embedded within Melville's stories of lugubrious loners and insouciant individuals who inhabit the fictional world created by Melville.

The bucolic short story "The Piazza" is the tale of an unnamed narrator's perambulations across the idyllic Massachusetts countryside. The narrator, although broadly satisfied with his abode, laments the fact that there is no piazza, thus inhibiting his ability to truly enjoy. A kind of heir to Don Quixote, who is just of the literary characters name-checked by the erudite narrator, he is often too caught up in his dreams and fantasies to truly appreciate the beauty of the world around him-nevertheless this is Melville's most poetic work, in which his pen shimmers and shines with beautiful imagery;

"For not only do long ground-swells roll the slanting grain, and little wavelets of the grass ripple over upon the low piazza, as their beach, and the blown down of dandelions is wafted like the spray, and the purple of the mountains is just the purple of the billows, and a still August noon broods upon the deep meadows, as a calm upon the Line;but the vastness and the lonesomeness are so oceanic, and the silence and the sameness, too, that the first peep of a strange house, rising beyond the trees, is for all the world like spying, on the Barbary coast, an unknown sail"

Eventually the narrator comes across a woman-who may or may not just be a figment of his imagination, who is also caught up in her sense of isolation-what good is beauty if it is punctuated so often with boredom? During their dialogue she wistfully wishes that she lived in the house she can occasionally see across the valley, whose inhabitant she realises must be a completely happy person-with the narrator realising that the house she is talking about is his own. In some ways the novel is about the joys of the imagination, of hours spent in febrile fantasies and delirious day-dreams, but in many ways it is about appreciating what you have, about not spending your life wistfully wondering about what may have been or could have been, but on appreciating what you have.

"Bartleby", however, is the true highlight of this collection of short stories. The principle character, aside from the narrator, a nameless, nondescript lawyer, is Bartleby, a scrivener whose pretty much sole dialogue in the story is the response of "I would prefer not to" to any work which he feels beneath him which, eventually, applies to any work at all. It is hard to really understand what-if any-moral Melville wanted us to take away from the story, outside the sense of non-conformity and individuality which Bartleby demonstrates in his inability to interact with other individuals in anything approaching a normal manner-instead he acts a kind of phantasm who haunts the life and consciousness of the well-meaning if slightly dull lawyer who employs and eventually inadvertently houses him. In some ways the story is a kind of precursor to Kafka's nightmarish descriptions of office life, of its meaningless tasks, the sense of conformity it enforces on and the ultimate meaninglessness of it all (Nippers and Turkey seem like the kind of characters who Josef K would run into in the office blocks he explores in 'The Trial') however irrespective of whichever moral message Melville was attempting to promote, 'Bartleby' remains one of the most original short stories of the 19th century.

'Billy Budd' is a story pervaded with homo-eroticism, of the beautiful Billy Budd and the jealous, highfalutin John Claggart who, presumably is swept in a physical passion for Billy which festers into hatred and causes him to falsely accuse Billy of treason. As with *Moby Dick*, Melville is able to capture both the excitement and dreariness of life at sea, the drudgery of every-day tasks juxtaposed with the excitement of discovery and the raucous dynamics between the crew. However, more than this 'Billy Budd' is the story of loss of innocence, of the innate goodness of Billy Budd, whose death by hanging is captured in the full-light of dawn and which, Christ-like illuminates the innate goodness of his soul in a world too corrupt for Billy to survive in.

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## Scriptor Ignotus says

The three standout works of this collection are *Bartleby*, *Benito Cereno*, and *Billy Budd*. *Bartleby* is far and away my favorite, because it showcases everything I love about Melville: his delightful sense of humor, the quirkiness of his narrators, the opulence of his prose, and his penchant for allusion, whereby he elevates the mundane to the level of the gods. Everything about the story is irresistibly endearing: Three law clerks in Manhattan named Turkey, Nippers, and Bartleby; the fact that the narrator, instead of simply firing Bartleby, is first driven to flights of high philosophical speculation about the mysterious nature of his polite but useless new scrivener. I loved how even the word “prefer” became a punchline.

*Benito Cereno* is an underrated masterpiece of Melville's corpus. Written just prior to the outbreak of the American Civil War, it is a scathing allegory on the relationship between master and slave. Off the coast of Chile in the year 1799, an American vessel comes across an ailing ship, showing no colors but clearly in distress. It turns out to be a Spanish slave ship that is missing about half of its crew; and as the American Captain Delano meets the Spanish Captain Benito Cereno and inquires about how the ship and crew came to such a state, he gradually learns that everything aboard the *San Dominick* is not as it seems.

*Billy Budd* is essentially a Christian allegory set at sea. The Handsome Sailor is impressed into service on a British warship, earns the affection of the crew through his guilelessness, but also awakens the envious hatred of the ship's master-at-arms, who sets in motion a tragic chain of events. While I enjoyed the story, the Biblical metaphors often felt forced, even at the expense of the integrity of the plot. It wasn't clear to me why (view spoiler). I also found the ornateness of Melville's language somewhat difficult to imbibe in this piece, even though I hadn't had that difficulty with any of the other stories in this volume, or with *Moby Dick*. This may be because I just wasn't as keen on this story as I was on the others.

Ah, Bartleby! Ah, Benito! Ah, Billy! Ah, Melville! Ah, humanity!

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## Kaede says

*The Piazza*

2.5 stars

*Bartleby the Scrivener*

3.5 stars

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## **Nick Pipitone says**

I had a very tough time making it through this book of short stories. I know Melville is known as one of the greats, but the writing seemed so outdated that I could barely understand it. I ended up skipping over a few of the stories, which were incredibly dense. After all, most of these stories were written in the 19th century.

The reason I picked this book up, really, was to read "Bartleby." And, yes, "Bartleby" was a hilarious and awesome story. "The Lighting Rod Man" was also pretty cool.

My recommendation: Look for "Bartleby" at the library. I was pretty dissatisfied with the rest of the stories.

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## **Patrick says**

Why?

I was being all snobby after reading Moby Dick (which I really enjoyed). One reviewer claimed that Billy Budd was another classic written by Melville, so I decided to give it a go.

What did I think?

The ideas presented within this novella are great, and Melville does another great job in the exploration of morality, pettiness, and the law. Unfortunately, Billy Budd suffers from the grand excesses that many of a reader heap upon Melville and his style. This was an incredibly dense work, and turned out to be a chore to read. Readers who believe that Moby Dick was an ordeal, should run away from this work.

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## **Cat says**

If you only know (of) Moby Dick, this collection offers so much more. An eclectic bunch of stories that Melville wrote after Moby Dick. For me, the one that stands out is Benito Cereno. Exploring topics of race, assumptions, power, presentation, it felt current. Toni Morrison examines it in her collection of essays *Playing in the Dark*.

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## **Karen says**

Only read "Bartleby"

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