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The Canterbury Tales (Penguin Classics)



PENGUIN CLASSICS

GEOFFREY CHAUCER
The Canterbury Tales



Synopsis

In *The Canterbury Tales* Chaucer created one of the great touchstones of English literature, a masterly collection of chivalric romances, moral allegories and low farce. A story-telling competition between a group of pilgrims from all walks of life is the occasion for a series of tales that range from the Knight's account of courtly love and the ebullient Wife of Bath's Arthurian legend, to the ribald anecdotes of the Miller and the Cook.

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Customer Reviews

Over some period I have read several translations of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. My first experience, selections in a high school text, was not promising. (Perhaps, I was not yet ready for Chaucer.) Translating poetry from one language to another is difficult and often unsuccessful.

Translating Chaucer from Middle English is not much easier. English has changed dramatically in the last 600 years, to the point that Middle English is nearly indecipherable. For example, we read Chaucer's description of the Knight's appearance: Of fustian he wered a gipoun (Of coarse cloth he

wore a doublet) Al bismotered with his habergeoun (All rust-spotted by his coat-of-mail) A glossary, diligence, and time are required for reading the original Chaucer. If you choose to do so, the Riverside Chaucer edition (edited by L. Benson) and the Norton Critical Edition (edited by Olson and Kolve) are highly recommended. The Signet Classic paperback edited by D. R. Howard modernizes the spelling a bit, but largely adheres to the original Chaucer and is an easier introduction to Middle English. Although in most cases the instructor assigns a particular version of Canterbury Tales, it can be exceedingly helpful to pick-up an additional version or two. A slightly different translation may entirely surprise you, even resonate with you, making Chaucer much more enjoyable. I suggest that you look for these versions: Selected Canterbury Tales, Dover Thrift edition - provides a poetic, rather than literal interpretation, and is quite readable. The collection of tales is fairly small, however. Canterbury Tales, Penguin edition, translated by Nevill Coghill, is an excellent poetic translation.

The version of this classic I read was a translation into modern English by Nevill Coghill. As you can see above, I awarded Chaucer (and the translation) five stars; but I do have a criticism. This translation (and many other publications of Chaucer) do not contain the two prose tales ("The Tale of Melibee" and "The Parson's Tale"). These are rarely read and I understand the publisher's and the translator's desire to keep the book to a manageable size. Still, that should be the reader's decision and no one else's. I had to go to the University library and get a complete copy in order to read those sections. As I mentioned, this copy is a translation into modern English. However, I do recommend that readers take a look at the Middle English version, at least of the Prologue. Many years ago, when I was in high school, my teacher had the entire class memorize the first part of the Prologue in the original Middle English. Almost forty years later, I still know it. I am always stunned at how beautiful, fluid, and melodic the poetry is, even if you don't understand the words.

Twenty-nine pilgrims meet in the Tabard Inn in Southwark on their way to Canterbury. The host suggests that the pilgrims tell four stories each in order to shorten the trip (the work is incomplete in that only twenty-four stories are told). The tales are linked by narrative exchanges and each tale is presented in the manner and style of the character providing the story. This book was a major influence on literature. In fact, the development of the "short story" format owes much to these tales.

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