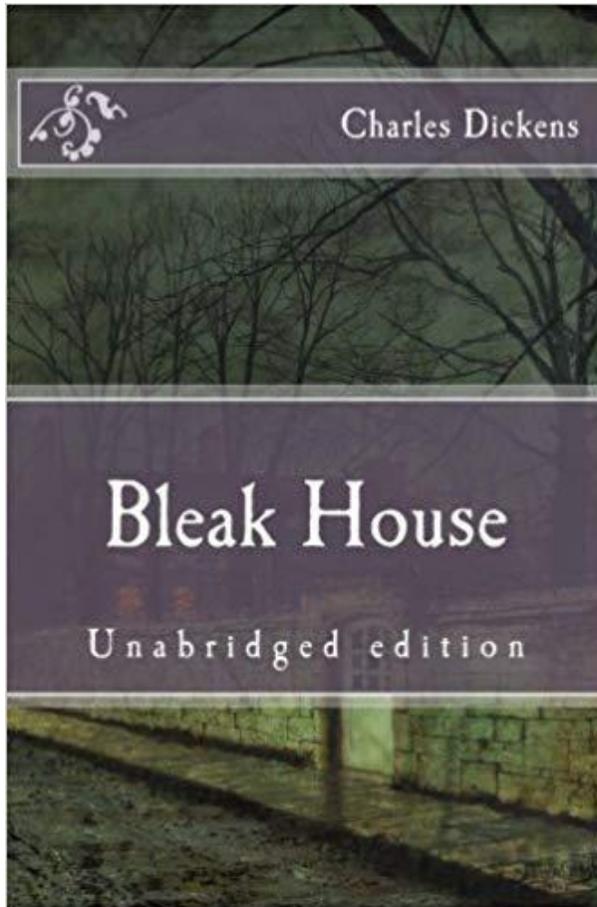


Bleak House

By Rod Fraser



'*Bleak House*' is a novel, written by Charles Dickens, published in twenty instalments over 1852 and 1853. Then it was printed and sold as a complete book in 1853. It is considered one of the author's

finest novels.

It is a story of the Jarndyce family, which includes John Jarndyce, who lives at *Bleak House*. It also includes two young members of the Jarndyce family, Richard Carstone and Ada Clare, orphans who take up residence with their legal guardian, John Jarndyce. These two are cousins and related to John Jarndyce in some unspecified manner.

Another young woman, Esther Summerson, joins them at *Bleak House* as Ada's companion (and later best friend). Over time she assumes the duties of housekeeper at *Bleak House*. She is a competent young woman, attractive, warm and engaging.



Richard Carstone is a pleasant, affable young man who soon falls in love with his cousin, Ada Clare. This love is warmly reciprocated and is constant throughout the novel.

Unfortunately Richard has difficulty finding a career and sticking to it. He tries medicine, and then law and finally the army. None is a good match, perhaps because of his obsession with a lawsuit in which he and Ada are plaintiffs.

In the event the lawsuit is settled in their favor, they will be quite wealthy. But the lawsuit has dragged on for years and John Jarndyce has warned

Richard against putting his hopes in its final settlement. Despite these warnings, Richard pours all of his money (and Ada's) into advancing their claim.

The *Jarndyce vs. Jarndyce* lawsuit is central to the whole novel. It has multiple litigants, numerous claims and a host of lawyers who are determined to keep it going until the entire Jarndyce estate is dissipated. And indeed, this is exactly what happens.



Esther Summerson is also a ward of John Jarndyce. Her parentage is unknown to her. She has been harshly brought up by someone she knows as her godmother. When she dies, John Jarndyce becomes Esther's guardian and friend. Although he is many years older than Esther, he has hopes of being her husband.

This is something Esther seriously considers, but her heart is not in it. She loves an impecunious young doctor, Allan Woodcourt, who has little money or prospects to offer her.

Much of the story involves settling these matters. Early in the novel, she is secretly engaged to Mr. Jarndyce, and hopes to make her life with him. He is a decent man, a good friend, and there is no doubt that Esther could make a success of this marriage. Esther could make a success of anything. That is

what is so wonderful about her.

Allan Woodcourt eventually finds a position in the North Country and proposes marriage. Esther is torn; she is engaged to John Jarndyce and has no wish to cause her fiancé the emotional pain of separation. Fortunately, John Jarndyce realizes what is going on and releases her from her engagement. She marries Allan Woodcourt and the two of them live in a new *Bleak House* near his work.



While this results in a happy ending for Esther, her good friend Ada Clare is not so lucky. She has cast her lot with her cousin, Richard Carstone. It doesn't turn out well.

Richard has tried the professions of medicine and law, and then purchased a commission in the army. None of this has worked for him. He is a feckless young man, looking for an easy way in life. It isn't long before a lawyer convinces him to 'invest' in his claim to *Jarndyce vs. Jarndyce*. And that is the beginning of the end.

While his love for Ada is constant and real, he moves to a shabby flat to be close to the courts (and his lawyer). Ada tries to redeem him with her love, but Richard is unshakeable in his commitment to his claim in *Jarndyce vs. Jarndyce*.

She marries Richard to share his flat and tend to his poor health, to help him with his court filings. Eventually a new will is found, which supports the claims of Richard and Ada. While a tactical triumph, it amounts to nothing. Their claims are granted by the court, but the estate is depleted. It has no funds to pay any claims. It is over.

It is also over for Richard. Shortly after the court decision, he dies of pneumonia. He never gets to meet his son, Richard Jr. Ada is left to make what she can of her future.



There are numerous other characters in this novel, each with their own story to tell. I will mention one in passing and then leave you to read the book to discover the rest.

Esther's mother is Lady Dedlock. Her father is Captain Hawdon. On the eve of Captain Hawdon's departure abroad with the army many years earlier, these two were lovers and Lady Dedlock (as she is later to become) learns she is pregnant. To protect her prospects for marriage, Esther is brought up by Lady Dedlock's sister (known to Esther as her god-mother). As far as Lady Dedlock is concerned, she was told her baby died in childbirth.

Captain Hawdon later returned to England and dies from an overdose of heroin. His death leads to

multiple complexities, among them the discovery by Lady Dedlock that Esther is her child.

They meet and Esther is told that Lady Dedlock's position in society is such that she couldn't bear the scandal of a child born out of wedlock. She would be ruined. They resolve to keep this secret to themselves and not to meet again.

Unfortunately, an unscrupulous lawyer attempts to blackmail Lady Dedlock when he discovers her secret. Rather than submit to blackmail, or disgrace her husband's name, she chooses suicide. It is all very sad, but wonderfully told.



I read this book when I was a young man, then recently watched a dramatization of the story on DVD. It is a good book, well worth reading if you're inclined to wade through 900 pages. Failing that, I highly recommend the film.

It is a BBC mini-series from 2005, of 15 episodes. I believe each one is designed to be an hour in length, leaving ample room for commercials. The treat of the DVD is, of course, no commercials. I expect you will find the DVD at most libraries. If not it is available for sale at Amazon.ca.

January 31, 2020