

Old Curiosity Shop (Wordsworth Classics)

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With an Introduction and Notes by Peter Preston, University of Nottingham The Old Curiosity Shop (1840-41), with its combination of the sentimental, the grotesque and the socially concerned, and its story of pursuit and courage, which sets the downtrodden and the plucky against the malevolent and the villainous, was an immediate popular success. Little Nell quickly became one of Dickens' most celebrated characters, who so captured the imagination of his readers that while the novel was being serialised, many of them wrote to him about her fate.

The sound of Little Nell clattering hurriedly over cobblestones immediately sets the stage by bringing to mind the narrow and dangerous streets of Victorian London. No fewer than 20 performers are called upon to conjure up the Dickensian world of wanderers, ne'er-do-wells, con artists, and kind Samaritans--and each performance is excellent. Tom Courtenay plays the sadistic Quilp, "the ugliest dwarf that could be seen anywhere for a penny" with magnificent sarcastic glee, and Teresa Gallagher's silvery, childlike voice is ideally suited for the role of the angelic Little Nell.

Nell is on her way home to the dusty shop where she and her grandfather live a rather mysterious life. The old man disappears every night--visiting gambling dens with the naive hope of winning a fortune. Instead he sinks deeper and deeper into debt. Enter Daniel Quilp, moneylender, who becomes furious upon learning that the grandfather is a pauper and will never be able to repay his tremendous debt. Quilp seizes the curiosity shop and begins making lecherous overtures to Nell, so she and her grandfather steal away one morning to seek their fortunes elsewhere. But the demonic dwarf is never far behind.

Sound effects are employed judiciously and serve mainly as a springboard for the listener's imagination. The sound of a crying baby is enough to convey the image of crowded lodgings and genteel Victorian poverty, while raucous laughter and high-pitched squawks evoke the barely controlled chaos of an outdoor Punch and Judy show. The dramatization pares Dickens's weighty novel down to two and one-half hours, but does so skillfully, retaining Dickens's wit, marvelous dialogue, and delightful characterizations.

(Running time: 155 minutes, 2 cassettes) --Elizabeth Laskey

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by Dickens's creation of a dazzling contemporary world inhabited by some of his most brilliantly drawn characters—the eloquent ne'er-do-well Dick Swiveller; the hungry maid known as the "Marchioness"; the mannish lawyer Sally Brass; Quilp's brow-beaten mother-in-law; and Quilp himself, the lustful, vengeful dwarf, whose demonic energy makes a vivid counterpoint to Nell's purity. For more than seventy years, Penguin has been the leading publisher of classic literature in the English-speaking world. With more than 1,700 titles, Penguin Classics represents a global bookshelf of the best works throughout history and across genres and disciplines. Readers trust the series to provide authoritative texts enhanced by introductions and notes by distinguished scholars and contemporary authors, as well as up-to-date translations by award-winning translators.

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