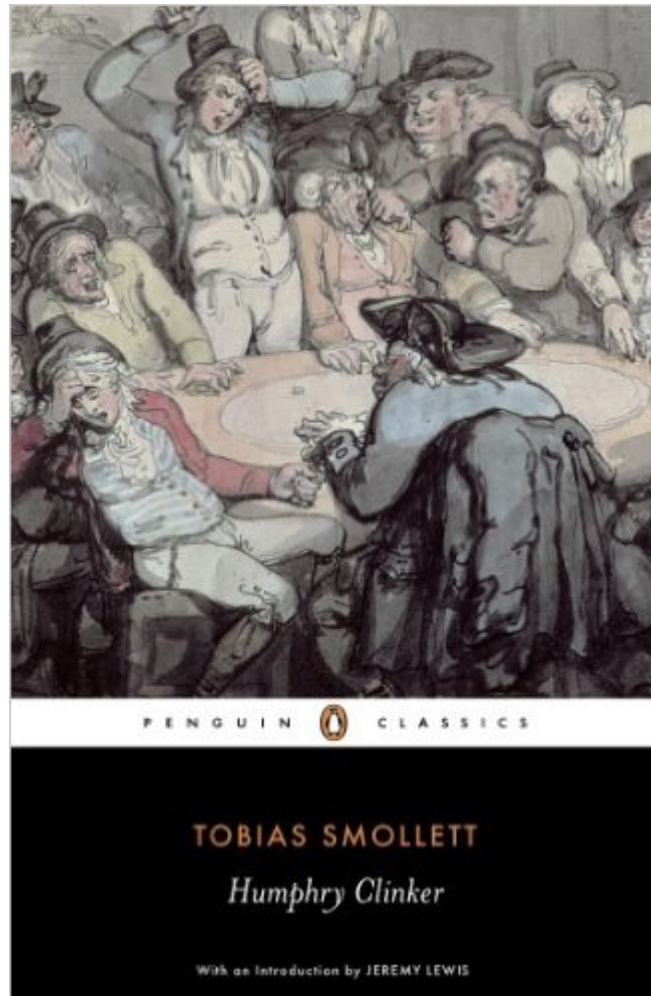


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Humphry Clinker (Penguin Classics)



Synopsis

Matthew Bramble, a gout-ridden misanthrope, travels Britain with his nephew, niece, spinster sister and man-servant, the trusty Humphry Clinker. In poor health, Bramble sees the world as one of degeneracy and raucous overcrowding, and will not hesitate to let his companions know his feelings on the matter. Peopled with pimps, drunkards, decadents and con-men, Humphrey Clinker displays Smollett's ferociously pessimistic view of mankind, and his belief that the luxury of eighteenth-century England existence was the enemy of sense and sobriety. Presented in the form of letters from six very different characters, and full of joyful puns and double entendres, Humphrey Clinker is now recognised as a boisterous and observant masterpiece of English satire. Jeremy Lewis's introduction examines why Smollett has become an unjustly neglected figure of English literature, and how the time in which he lived became a crucible for his work. This new edition contains notes, a chronology and suggested reading. 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.

Book Information

Series: Penguin Classics

Paperback: 496 pages

Publisher: Penguin Classics; Reprint edition (December 30, 2008)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0141441429

ISBN-13: 978-0141441429

Product Dimensions: 5.1 x 0.9 x 7.8 inches

Shipping Weight: 7 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 3.6 out of 5 stars See all reviews (7 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #192,907 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #60 in Books > Literature & Fiction > Genre Fiction > Epistolary #2819 in Books > Literature & Fiction > British & Irish #4725 in Books > Literature & Fiction > Classics

Customer Reviews

Tobias Smollett was a ship's doctor and a journalist. Smollett (1721-1771) is most known, however,

for his novels. Among them are "Peregrine Pickle"; "Roderick Random" and his greatest and final work "Humphrey Clinker" (1770). Humphrey Clinker is a humorous epistolary novel in which five characters relate the story of their travels. These writers are:

1. Matthew Bramble: He is based on the character of Smollett. Bramble is a Welsh squire who is filled with cynical thoughts and an aching body. He is a widower who travels seeking health in such watering spots as Bath. His letters are written to a doctor. Bramble is a good man who was much loved by Charles Dickens.
2. Tabitha Bramble: Matthew's ugly sister is a Methodist man hunter. She is funny as she seeks to wed Captain Lismahago. She writes to her housekeeper at Brambleton Hall. Tabitha is hypocritical and often engages in disagreements with brother Matthew and her niece and nephew. Her writing ability is hampered by poor grammar and misspelled words.
3. Jerry Melford is an Oxford graduate who is smart and sanguine. His letters are a joy to read as he comments on all the ludicrous action of the travelers. He finds love at novel's end and weds a wonderful girl.
4. Lydia Melford is the beautiful young naive girl whose guardian is Uncle Matthew. She is courted and wed as the book ends. She looks upon life through rose colored glasses in virginal purity.
5. Winifred Jenkins is the maid of the party. She is almost illiterate; her letters abound in malapropisms, puns and misspellings. She falls in love with Humphrey Clinker. Humphrey Clinker writes no letters. He is a simpleminded lad who rescues Squire Bramble from drowning. Clinker even preaches a Methodist sermon! It is discovered that he is the illegitimate son of Bramble! All ends well as every character with the exception of Matthew Bramble is wed. The book gives us a bird's eye view of England and Scotland in the late eighteenth century. We meet many interesting characters eager to share their philosophy and religious views. Smollett was a realist with a keen eye for the sights, smells and misery all around. The major obstacle to reading this book is the archaic language and long sentences. The Penguin edition contains a section of over 50 pages explaining word meanings and other eighteenth century customs the modern reader is not familiar with. Humphrey Clinker is a slow read and is best comprehended by perusing a letter or two at a time. The book is a picaresque novel in the tradition of Cervantes' "Don Quixote" and Le Sage's "Gil Blas." Smollett is less moralistic than Henry Fielding; much more fun to read than the prim and proper Samuel Richardson (as in his novels "Pamela" and "Clarissa") and deserves wider readership. Try this Scottish doctor's prescription for the blues and pour over "Humphrey Clinker."

Written shortly before the author's death, "The Expedition of Humphry Clinker" is regarded as the novelist Tobias Smollett's best work. Smollett tells the story of Squire Matthew Bramble's excursions in the Britain of the early part of George the third's reign. His entourage includes his irritable spinster

sister Tabatha Bramble, his niece and nephew, along with assorted family retainers including the eponymous Clinker. The events are narrated via the letters of this cast, addressed to a number of off-scene recipients. It's easily recognisable as an eighteenth century novel with its casts of eccentrics, a far rougher sensibility than Victorian era-novels, intricate and improbable plotting and an authorial voice which is not shy of expressing an opinion. To begin with I enjoyed the book, from time to time Smollett does hit the funny bone, and as a travelogue of Britain in the 1760's it has its moments of interest. Unfortunately the further I got into the book, the more a growing feeling of exasperation pushed enjoyment to the margin; the lack of depth and consistency in the characters, and the bombastic and narrow authorial voice, became major problems. My initial feeling for the travellers dissipated and well before the finish they became little more than crude caricatures. The plot, such as it was, turned out to be lot less intricate and a good deal more improbable than I had hoped. The ostensible hero Clinker, is a pale shadow of Henry Fieldings contemporaneous hero—Tom Jones, and barely figures in any meaningful way. The introduction to my aging Penguin English Library edition by Angus Ross claims that in this novel Smollett shows himself, in comparison with his earlier fiction, "not to be as eccentric and prickly after all" which given the qualities of this work hardly has me rushing out to read Smollett's other books. Not a great read, I'll be sticking with Sterne, Fielding and Defoe for my eighteenth century fiction in future.

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