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Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street

Herman Melville (1819 - 1891)

Read by: Bb Neufeld
 Length: 1 hours 55 minutes
 Genre(s): Fiction, Short Fiction

Language: English
 Style: Solo

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In an October 1939 radio broadcast Winston Churchill described his difficulty in understanding the actions of Russia by saying “it is a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma”. The remark could easily have come from the narrator of Melville’s *Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street* in trying to explain the baffling behavior of the title character, a clerk employed at his law firm. Bartleby has been engaged to help with a surge in business and performs admirably until one day he declines to proofread a document with the statement “I would prefer not to”. He refuses more and more assignments with the same response until he spends long periods staring out the window at a brick wall. The narrator attempts to reason with him and understand, but to no avail. One Sunday he stops in to find that Bartleby is living at the office. Too timid to evict him, the narrator moves the office instead. The new tenants soon ask for help in removing Bartleby, who by now sits on the steps all

day and sleeps in the doorway at night. Before long he is removed and tossed in prison. The narrator visits and bribes a guard to make sure he eats, but learns a few days later that he had “preferred not to” eat and has died of starvation. Critics and scholars have interpreted the curious character from a variety of perspectives over the years. While no one is quite sure what it all means, they agree that the story is the masterpiece of Melville’s shorter works.

Herman Melville (August 1, 1819 – September 28, 1891) is best known as an author of novels, short stories, and poetry, most notably the masterpiece *Moby-Dick, or The Whale*. He was born in New York City in 1819 to a genteel family. The failure of family’s prosperous import business and untimely death of his father forced Melville to work in a bank at age thirteen. After working as a school teacher and reporter he went to sea at age nineteen. His second voyage took him to the South Seas, where he abandoned ship in the Marquesas Islands in the summer of 1842 and accidentally spent a month in the company of a tribe of cannibals. His experiences formed the core of his first novel, *Typee: A Peep At Polynesian Life*, which became a best seller and was followed by *Omoo*, a continuation of his chronicle. He became known as “the man who lived among the cannibals”.

Melville eventually settled in the Berkshires near Nathaniel Hawthorn, who became a close friend. Melville read widely and immersed himself in metaphysics, and his work increasingly addressed philosophical issues, beginning with *Mardi* in 1849 and continuing through *Moby-Dick* in 1851 and *Pierre* in 1852. Both books met with indifference and ended his run as a popular author. After publication of *The Confidence-Man* in 1857 he stopped writing novels and worked as a customs inspector in New York for twenty years. He began to write poetry and published small collections privately. He had numerous connections with those involved in The Civil War, and the conflict became the chief subject of his poetry. His little known *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War* (1866) is ranked with his novels by many critics. Melville died of a heart attack in relative obscurity in 1891. His work was largely ignored until it was rediscovered in the 1920’s by literary historians developing an American literary tradition.