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## Billy Budd, Sailor

*Herman Melville (1819 - 1891)*

Read by: Scientific Advocate      Language: English  
 Length: 3 hours 7 minutes      Style: Solo  
 Genre(s): Fiction, Short Fiction

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In 1886, after writing poetry exclusively for 30 years, Herman Melville began work on a story about a handsome young sailor popular with his mates who is falsely accused of hatching a mutinous conspiracy. His accuser is master at arms John Claggart, who envies Billy and who is described as “defective or abnormal” and “possessing a natural depravity”. Upon learning of the charges, ship’s captain Vere summons the two to his cabin. When Claggart states his case, Billy, who stutters, cannot respond and in frustration strikes Claggart dead. The captain recognizes that Billy’s action bore no malice and that he is morally innocent, yet he is duty-bound to conduct court-martial proceedings.

Melville labored fitfully on the story for five years, yet it was unfinished at the time of Melville’s death in 1891. His widow, Elizabeth, discovered the

351 leaves of manuscript in a chaotic state, with a dizzying array of corrections, annotations, cancellations, and cut and pasted leaves. She attempted to organize the multiple drafts into a coherent storyline but ended up stashing the manuscript in a tin box. It was discovered in 1919 at his granddaughter’s house by Raymond M. Weaver, a Columbia professor researching a biography of Melville. Scholars have since determined that it was written in three phases, with each of the three main characters added at each phase. *Billy Budd* was at last published by Weaver in 1924 and again in 1928, and was hailed as a masterpiece, standing alongside *Moby-Dick* as one of the great books of all time.

**Herman Melville** (August 1, 1819 – September 28, 1891) is best known as the author of *Moby-Dick, or The Whale*. Born in New York City to a genteel family, the failure of the family business and untimely death of his father forced Melville to work at age thirteen. He went to sea at age nineteen. His second voyage took him to the South Seas, where he abandoned ship in the Marquesas Islands and accidentally spent a month in the company of a tribe of cannibals. His experiences form 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 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 were 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 wrote poetry and published small collections privately. 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 by literary historians developing an American literary tradition.