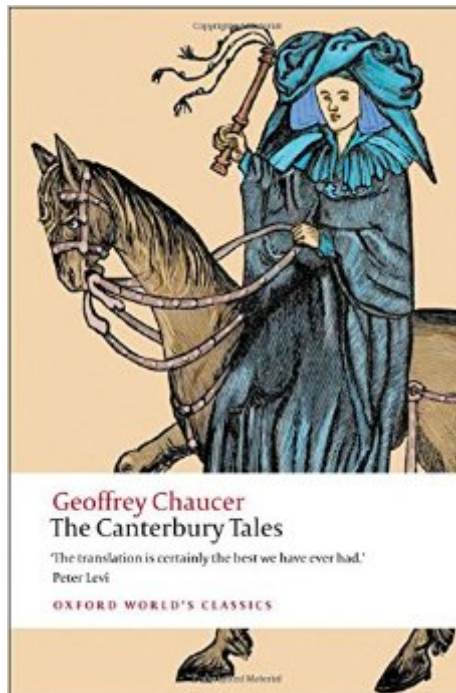


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# The Canterbury Tales (Oxford World's Classics)



## Synopsis

Beyond all doubt the greatest work of English literature before Shakespeare, Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* brings together an unforgettable group of pilgrims on their way to Canterbury, pilgrims who came from all ranks of society, from the crusading Knight and burly Miller to the worldly Monk and the famously lusty Wife of Bath. Their tales are as various as the tellers, including romance, bawdy comedy, beast fable, learned debate, parable, and Eastern adventure. The resulting collection gives us a set of characters so vivid that they have often been taken as portraits from real life, and a series of stories as hilarious in their comedy as they are affecting in their tragedy. Even after 600 years, their account of the human condition is fresh and true. David Wright's verse translation has long been admired for its brilliance and fidelity. This new edition adds representative passages from the important but overlooked prose tales, *Melibee* and the *Parson's Tale*, in new translations by Christopher Cannon, who also provides a new critical introduction and invaluable notes.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Over some period I have read several translations of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. My first experience, selections in a high school text, was not promising. (Perhaps, I was not yet ready for Chaucer.) Translating poetry from one language to another is difficult and often unsuccessful. Translating Chaucer from Middle English is not much easier. English has changed dramatically in the last 600 years, to the point that Middle English is nearly indecipherable. For example, we read

Chaucer's description of the Knight's appearance: Of fustian he wored a gipoun (Of coarse cloth he wore a doublet) All bismotered with his habergeoun (All rust-spotted by his coat-of-mail) A glossary, diligence, and time are required for reading the original Chaucer. If you choose to do so, the Riverside Chaucer edition (edited by L. Benson) and the Norton Critical Edition (edited by Olson and Kolve) are highly recommended. The Signet Classic paperback edited by D. R. Howard modernizes the spelling a bit, but largely adheres to the original Chaucer and is an easier introduction to Middle English. Although in most cases the instructor assigns a particular version of Canterbury Tales, it can be exceedingly helpful to pick-up an additional version or two. A slightly different translation may entirely surprise you, even resonate with you, making Chaucer much more enjoyable. I suggest that you look for these versions: Selected Canterbury Tales, Dover Thrift edition - provides a poetic, rather than literal interpretation, and is quite readable. The collection of tales is fairly small, however. Canterbury Tales, Penguin edition, translated by Nevill Coghill, is an excellent poetic translation.

The version of this classic I read was a translation into modern English by Nevill Coghill. As you can see above, I awarded Chaucer (and the translation) five stars; but I do have a criticism. This translation (and many other publications of Chaucer) do not contain the two prose tales ("The Tale of Melibee" and "The Parson's Tale"). These are rarely read and I understand the publisher's and the translator's desire to keep the book to a manageable size. Still, that should be the readers decision and no one else's. I had to go to the University library and get a complete copy in order to read those sections. As I mentioned, this copy is a translation into modern English. However, I do recommend that readers take a look at the Middle English version, at least of the Prologue. Many years ago, when I was in high school, my teacher had the entire class memorize the first part of the Prologue in the original Middle English. Almost forty years later, I still know it. I am always stunned at how beautiful, fluid, and melodic the poetry is, even if you don't understand the words.

Twenty-nine pilgrims meet in the Tabard Inn in Southwark on their way to Canterbury. The host suggests that the pilgrims tell four stories each in order to shorten the trip (the work is incomplete in that only twenty-four stories are told). The tales are linked by narrative exchanges and each tale is presented in the manner and style of the character providing the story. This book was a major influence on literature. In fact, the development of the "short story" format owes much to these tales.

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