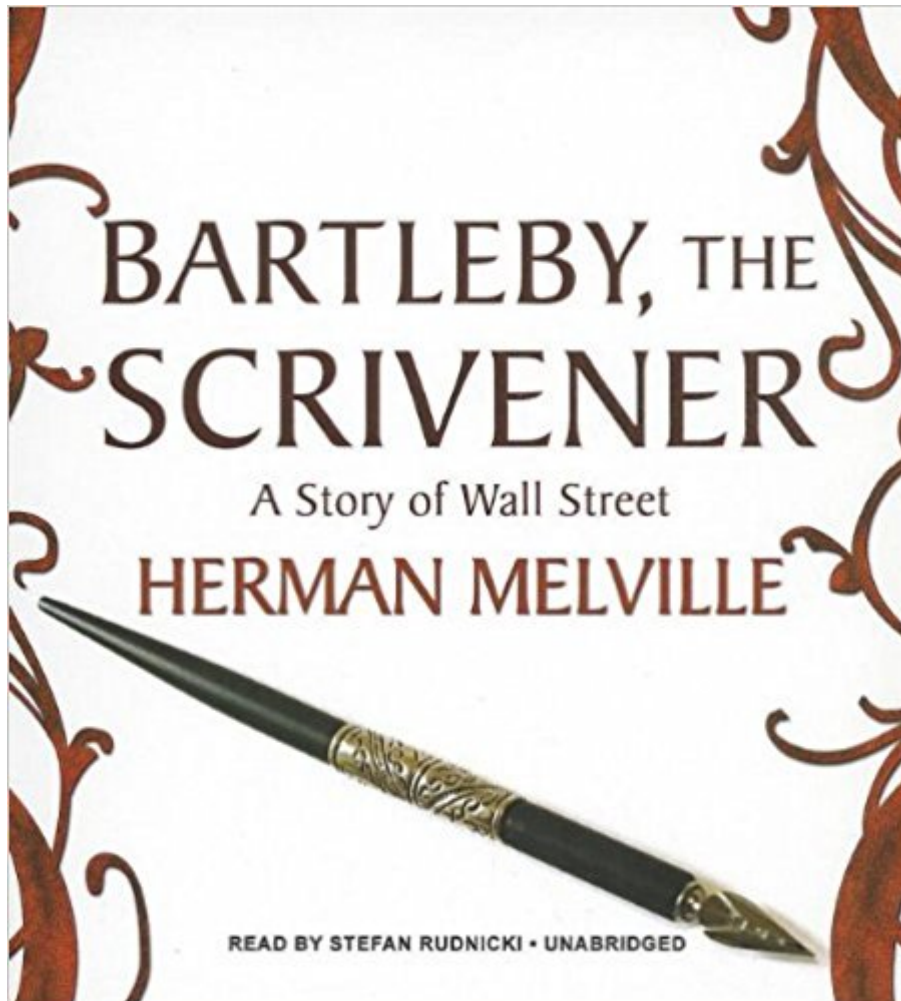


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Bartleby, The Scrivener: A Story Of Wall Street



Synopsis

Herman Melville's tale of corporate discontent tells the story of a quiet, hardworking legal copyist who works in an office in the Wall Street area of New York City. One day, Bartleby's employer requests he proofread one of the documents he has copied. Bartleby declines the assignment with the inscrutable "I would prefer not," the first of what will become many refusals. The utterance of this remark sets off a confounding set of actions and behavior, making the unsettling character of Bartleby one of Melville's most enigmatic and unforgettable creations.

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Customer Reviews

"Bartleby" is strictly speaking just a magazine sketch, one of a batch of informal sketches from magazines reprinted together as *The Piazza Tales*. It has the format of a memoir of an eccentric character, Bartleby, as told by a nameless first-person narrator, "an eminently safe man" by his own account, a lawyer who earns his living through the most mundane, routine legal paperwork, who also complains that 'reformers' have deprived him of his lucrative sinecure in state government. "I am a man who, from his youth upwards, has ben filled with a profound conviction that the easiest way of life is the best," he says of himself. In short, in this "Story of Wall Street", he is a drone, a financial parasite, and he would have been recognized as such by Melville's readership in the 1850s, a era when Wall Street was regarded with as much suspicious as in 2009. He is also a smug, sanctimonious, cautious man, irritably comfortable to exploit the labor of his copyists, one of whom is an impaired alcoholic and the other perhaps a pre-medication psychotic. When the third impaired eccentric, Bartleby, joins the staff, our Narrator is readily 'generous' in tolerating him as

long as he can make a dime. It seems to me fairly obvious that we readers are supposed to treat the Narrator with distrust, perhaps even dislike. Melville wrote at the beginning of the now-established literary tradition of the 'unreliable narrator', supplanting the omniscient narrator of the majority of 19th C novels. But Melville transcends that tradition in his first effort, giving us a 'clueless' narrator, an observer who is honest only in his acknowledgement of his complete non-understanding of his subject. To accept the Narrator's analysis of Bartleby would be a fatal error of readerly judgement.

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