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Hard Times, by Charles Dickens, Penguin Hardback Classics, 2003

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Recommended Readings



Hard Times

by Charles Dickens, Penguin Hardback Classics, 2003

Reviewed by Angela Hofstetter

Contemporary debates about climate change, "Right to Work", and No Child Left Behind illustrate how our modern world bears remarkable resemblance to Charles Dickens's mythical Coketown with its tall chimneys "out of which interminable serpents of smoke trailed," factory laborers referred to as "Hands," and a school that cares only about Facts. With idiosyncratic charm, *Hard Times* tells the tragedy of Stephen Blackpool, a noble, downtrodden worker resistant to unions and irrevocably bound to his violent, alcoholic wife; Louisa Bounderby, a beautiful young heroine given to a blustering middle-aged factory owner who falsely mythologizes his impoverished background; and her brother Tom, a desperate criminal who literally escapes prison by joining the circus. The novel's most compelling character is Thomas Gradgrind, a Parliamentarian who learns his facts-based educational program has irreversibly corrupted local students as well as his beloved children (two tellingly named Adam Smith and Malthus). Dickens's critique of Gradgrind's ISTEP-oriented pedagogy summed up by the maxim "Never Wonder" and Bounderby's reduction of workers' rights to a demand for "turtle soup and venison" with a "gold spoon" is alleviated by sentimentality and comedy. In fact, as acclaimed novelist George Orwell reminds us, it is Dickens's "generously angry" refusal to fall for "the smelly little orthodoxies that are now contending for our souls" that makes him uniquely relevant. Abandon yourself to the lovely Dickensian excesses of *Hard Times*; it's an enjoyable trip to the past with a remarkable lens on our present.

- Angela Hofstetter is an instructor of English at Butler University.