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The Great Fire of London

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Samuel Pepys

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'With one's face in the wind you were almost burned with a shower of Firedrops . . .'

A selection from Pepys's startlingly vivid and candid diary. Originally written in code, Pepys's diary includes his unforgettable eyewitness account of the 1666 Fire.

[Samuel Pepys (1633–1703)]

Little Black Classics celebrates Penguin's 80th birthday, introducing 80 works from the classics.

The Great Fire of London Details

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From Reader Review The Great Fire of London for online ebook

Lauren James says

This is one of the Penguin pocket classics, and it's one of the best ones I've read so far. It's kind of mindblowing that in such a short period of time Pepys experienced the plague and the great fire of London. What a time.

Darwin8u says

"I am eased at my heart to have my treasure so well secured."

? Samuel Pepys, The Great Fire of London

Vol 47 of my Penguin Little Black Classics Box Set that I've read previously. For more Pepys, go [here](#).

The first part of this book (May 1st - June 30th, 1665), comes from Volume VI of Pepy's great diary, and examines the Plague in London and the Second Anglo-Dutch War along with information about the Duke of Yorke (later King James II). He sees his fortune triple, due largely to multiple roles he is playing in the government (Treasurer of Tanger, Surveyor of the Victuals) in addition to his day job as Clerk of the Acts to the Navy Board. His skill and work ethic have earned him not just the attention and favor of Lord Sandwich, but also the Duke of Yorke and occasionally the King. This year the plague hits London hard. Those who can move their families out of the city. The Plague peaks during the Summer and begins to pull back as Winter freeze comes on.*

Pepys' writing about the Great Fire of London appears in the second part of this extract (September 2nd - 15th, 1666) and comes from Volume VII. It was a fantastic first hand account of the fire, the results, and the government's response. Like a lot of Peyps' Diary, the Great Fire portion is amazing because Pepys is like a Zelig. He is everywhere (in the Privy Council and hanging with the great unwashed masses in the street). He was not a perfect (especially in the way he treated women), but he WAS interesting.

* One note to those who haven't read much Pepys. Anytime Pepys is writing in French, he is usually having a rendezvous with a "lady" or behaving badly. Early editions of Pepy's diaries either edited out Pepys' comments, or had yet to crack his "code".

An example of this is from late June (pg 22) where he says: "Thence after dinner I to White-hall with Sir W Berkely in his coach. And so I walked to Herberts and there spent a little time avec la mosa, sin hazer algo con ella que kiss and tocar ses mamelles, que me haza hazer la cosa a mi mismo con gran plaisir. ... [with the beautiful one, without doing anything with her other than kiss and touch her breasts which made me do the thing to myself with great pleasure] Thence to Fox hall, and there walked an hour alone, observing the several humours of the citizens that were there this holiday, pulling of cherries and God knows what."

Ian says

This is a short book of excerpts from Pepys' diary. The first part appears to be a representative selection of what Pepys gets up to in the middle of 1665. He goes to the office, hears reports of the war against the Dutch, meets people, visits the theatre, buys a watch, adopts periwigs, hears of the spread of plague in London, has amorous encounters with women other than his wife, etc.

The second is his account of the 1666 Great Fire of London, an apocalyptic episode vividly described. Pepys is an astute observer, both of human and animal responses to the fire. One of his more vivid remembrances is of pigeons hovering about their former abodes as they are engulfed by flames, sometimes being burned themselves while doing so. The chaos of the crisis is well communicated by the Lord Mayor's helplessness in the face of inferno when Pepys meets him. The descriptions of paranoid rumours about French arsonists strike a chord with anyone who has seen people look for scapegoats or external causes of misfortunes.

Pepys is a fascinating character, in some ways appealing (his childlike enthusiasm and capacity for unguarded observation), in others repulsive (his infidelity, social climbing and predatory attitude towards women). His diary remains a fascinating account of his times and a clear window into his innermost thoughts.

Lea says

These are two extracts from Samuel Pepys diary. The first part is incredibly dull and I have no idea why anyone would want to read it. Just made me angry at rich and unaware people. The second part is about his experience in the great fire of London, and while I still thought he was a dullard, the topic itself was just interesting enough to better my reading experience.

Stephen Heiner says

Mr Pepys gives us the insights into the drudgeries of a very important man, as well as the horror and sadness behind the early days during and after the Great Fire.

Bookdragon Sean says

Did you know that in London today there is only one building that is legally allowed a thatched roof? It's, without a shadow of a doubt, the best building in London; it's full of wonder, poetry, and the highest form of art. I'm, of course, subjectively referring to Shakespeare's Globe. Such was the devastation of the great fire of London that today (almost four hundred years later) the law is still in place. The globe is the marvellous exception to the rule.

I'm digressing a bit here. Admittedly, I just wanted an excuse to praise one of the best places on earth. Can you blame me? I saw Richard II last week and I'm still in a state of awe. But, enough of that- there's a book

to review! Well, a very short one.

This diary is incredibly emotive in the good parts. The Great Fire of London was a terribly destructive event and Pepys, certainly, dramatized it here.

With one's face in the wind you were almost burned with a shower of fire drops

He was an eyewitness to the devastation and was, naturally, completely horrified by what he saw. The blaze engulfed houses and reduced streets to rubble; it incinerated half the city and left its population homeless. They had to start again. The only beneficial thing to come of it was its consequential culling of the plague. This was, indeed, a time of turmoil for Londoner's and this diary makes that very clear. However, only around a third of it is actually given over to the event. The rest of it is Pepys's entries about his day-to-day life. These weren't very interesting and only served as page fillers. This made me enjoy the edition a little less because very little of it was actually about the Fire. I enjoyed the bits that were on topic, but the rest was pointless.

Penguin Little Black Classic- 47

The Little Black Classic Collection by penguin looks like it contains lots of hidden gems. I couldn't help it; they looked so good that I went and bought them all. I shall post a short review after reading each one. No doubt it will take me several months to get through all of them! Hopefully I will find some classic authors, from across the ages, that I may not have come across had I not bought this collection.

Lör K. says

With one's face in the wind you were almost burned with a shower of Firedrops...

Nearly everyone in England knows of Samuel Pepys, who wrote of the Great Fire of London and buried a block of cheese in his garden as the fire closed in on where he lived. Pepys taught us about the fire as it went, and now we look back on what he wrote during 1666 as we learn through history.

When I saw *The Great Fire of London* in Penguin Little Black Classics, I had to get it, and I had to get it fast. I was really excited to read this. Unfortunately I found this to be really boring, and very hard to read. The first half of this was just a drag. It was informative about the Black Plague and how it worked throughout London, but there was just something about it that left me bored and yawning, barely able to make it past eight pages.

I ended up skipping ahead massively, too bored to read about the dreary life of Samuel Pepys; this wasn't why I got the book. I skipped ahead to the start of his diary entry in September 1666, and about the fire, and I was much, much more invested. I sped through this half of the book, and I really, really enjoyed it. Pepys really puts it into perspective what it was like, how things were. It was fascinating, and I feel like I learned a

lot more than I ever learned back in primary school, and this was really, really sweet.

If you're going to read this, I would recommend getting it out of your local library and only reading the second half of it. The first half really isn't worth it, unless you really like reading diaries.

Matilda says

Ça fait plusieurs années que j'entends parler de Samuel Pepys, et je voulais vraiment lire ses journaux. Cependant ce n'est pas possible de trouver une édition de poche transportable de ses œuvres et je n'avais pas envie de me balader avec deux volumes de mille pages de chez Bouquins sous le bras. Du coup quand j'ai vu que les Little Black Classics avaient sortis un extrait de ses comptes-rendus, j'ai sauté sur l'occasion. D'autant plus quand la période concernée par ses écrits est celle de la Grande Peste de 1665 ainsi que le Grand Incendie de Londres. C'est bien le Grand Incendie qu'on vend sur la couverture, mais les éditeurs ont ajouté avant une entrée concernant le mois précédent et permettant de nous mettre en contexte (et accessoirement de publier un volume un peu plus épais).

Il faut savoir que Pepys écrivait son journal en code, et que du coup il a fallu le retranscrire. Il écrivait aussi sans faire de jolies phrases avec sujet, verbe et complément. Du coup on a plus l'impression de lire des notes qu'un récit rédigé. Ce qui rajoute à la véracité du matériel, pas de longs dialogues reportés in extenso, pas de descriptions de trois kilomètres de long, mais des souvenirs qu'il tâche de préciser le plus possible, surtout dans le cas de l'incendie.

Ayant été écrit au milieu du 17e siècle, j'avais peur que le style soit un poil compliqué, mais la forme quasiment sténographique rend tout cela plus simple. Pas trop de choses inconnues, et les quelques différences d'orthographe concernent des i transformés en y et etc. Les mots originaux sont faciles à reconnaître et on n'est pas perdus.

D'un point de vue purement linguistique j'ai aimé observer la syntaxe et l'utilisation des temps grammaticaux (je conviens ce que je ne sera pas le truc qui intéressera le plus de monde, mais en tant qu'angliciste je trouve ça terriblement intéressant) légèrement différente de la version d'anglais contemporain qu'on utilise aujourd'hui. Je relirai bien le tout en recherchant des exemples spécifiques de telles variations afin de les étudier.

Evidemment le journal, et ces extraits particulièrement, ne sont pas uniquement intéressants d'un point de vue linguistique, ils sont aussi une mine d'information sur la vie quotidienne (de la classe supérieure de la société) de l'époque, ainsi que sur les événements historiques présentés plus haut. Pepys ne se contente pas de nous parler de la pluie et du beau temps, mais ajoute des remarques sur les vêtements de l'époque (les siens, ceux de son épouse), parle beaucoup de son travail d'administrateur naval ainsi que de ses collègues et amis fortunés.

J'avais vraiment l'impression de lire un roman historique, nous parlant de nourriture, d'us et coutume, de tissus, et nous plongeant réellement dans l'ère en question. J'ai bien sûr pensé à *The fever and the flame* lu il y a quelques mois et parlant précisément de cette période et je vous y renvoie.

Maintenant Pepys ne parle pas tellement de la peste et ce qu'il en dit m'a un peu étonnée. Alors que dans *At the sign of the sugar plum* on était plongé dans la désolation qui s'empare de Londres avec l'épidémie, Pepys bâclade tranquille dans les rues pendant ce temps-là, lance quelques remarques sur les pauvres bougres qui y succombe et va boire un verre de vin chez des copains après.

La différence de perspective entre les différentes classes sociales est assez énorme, et plus encore peut-être pendant le récit du Grand Incendie. Quand des gens fuient les flammes complètement démunis, Pepys enterre dans son jardins ses meilleures bouteilles de vins et une meule de fromage, question de priorité. Sa maison est

miraculeusement épargnée, et les choses qui l'inquiètent le plus sont qu'on protège l'immeuble où il travaille et qu'il puisse se consacrer à ce sur quoi il planche en ce moment. Il s'étonne de ne pas trouver où acheter de nouvelles chemises et gants pendant un énorme incendie, et va manger chez des amis pour oublier le tout.

J'ai aussi été étonnée de découvrir que Pepys était plutôt jeune quand il a commencé son journal, la trentaine, et que c'était un petit coquin. Il nous parle de sa jeune et jolie femme, mais aussi des moments où il va courir le guilledou et des petites descriptions friponnes viennent accompagner le tout. Scènes censurés dans les éditions antérieures du journal d'ailleurs.

Ce mélange de descriptions historiques et d'événements triviaux de la vie quotidienne (achat d'un nouveau costume, aller se promener uniquement pour le parader, maman encombrante qu'il faut occuper, etc.) donne un rendu intéressant et plaira aux curieux. Que ce soit les guerres anglo-néerlandaises qui vous intéressent, les vêtements d'époque, ou que vous aimiez tout simplement lire des journaux personnels, vous serez servis.

J'aimerais bien à présent pouvoir me procurer une version intégrale pour pouvoir y piocher de temps en temps, ainsi que pouvoir lire plus d'entrées sur la Grande Peste.

Laura says

From BBC Radio 4 - Saturday Drama:

London in 1666 was a health and safety nightmare. It was illegal to build with wood and thatch but people did it anyway. Foundries were forbidden in the city but that didn't stop them operating. Charles II had banned dangerous overhanging windows but this was ignored by local government who carried on building them regardless. Many homes still contained muskets and gunpowder left over from Cromwell's time. Six hundred tons of highly potent gunpowder were stored in the Tower of London itself. Riverfront warehouses were full of oil and tallow. There was no fire service.

Further information can be found at [Wikipedia](#).

Peter says

The plague and how to avoid it... Mr Pepys talks of the plague and beforehand talks of changing the clothes he has worn all through winter!

About his concern for the plague he decides to buy some chewing tobacco because of the realisation that he, basically, smells to high heaven and this will cover his nasty whiff by smelling and chewing it! You smelly blighters. Cor what a whiff!

Wow he stayed in my old town of Barking and the fire took out there as well.

Books like this are superb if not well written mainly as I can see from his perspective exactly where the fire was spreading, which I had done many years ago. GOOD STUFF!

No boring bits just history as it happened.

Colleen Fauchelle says

What I found encouraging about this little book was that Samuel Pepys did have days when he got up went to the office, meet with people, sure they were high up people eg Lord Sandwich and Dukes and sirs. Went home, worked in the office and went to bed. He had 'normal days' and my diary is sometimes like that when it seems to be stuck on repeat.

Samuel does mention his wife, buying a new suite, the Lords Day, the plague and he was pleased about the victory over the Dutch on June 3 1665.

The last 30 pages is about the Great fire of London in 1666 (three hundred years before I was born in 1966) To start with they didn't seem to do much about the fire and then the fire got to big and it was every man for himself. For Pepys it ment shifting his bags of gold and belonging to a safer friends house. He was still able to travel arround London. The fire did haunt his dreams. After it was over his house was safe.

Joey Woolfardis says

A difficult book to rate. It is priceless as a historical reference and you cannot rate it as lower than 5 for that. But he was not particularly great at writing and it isn't all that exciting except for a historical reference. I was expecting a little more, perhaps, maybe just better writing, but goodness it is extremely interesting regarding what it pertains.

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Wanda says

4 SEP 2016 - a fabulous listen-to. Thank you, Radio 4, Saturday Drama/BBC.
Here - <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01sc9cp>

JK says

The Great Bore of London - Samuel Pepys.

I have always been fascinated by the Great Fire, but this is the first time I've read Pepys account of it. A first-hand witness, it's a shame his diary wasn't a victim of the flames. His report was so dire, so full of tedious details, that my need for a startling version was quashed. I didn't need to know who he had dinner with, nor did I delight in his soulless descriptions.

Writing of the times, definitely, but it didn't stop my apathy. The only exciting moment was when Pepys was transporting his treasured personal effects to safety and decided to bury some parmesan cheese out his pal's back garden - a dullard, yes, but also a man after my own heart.

Daren says

I honestly thought I would find this book more interesting than I did.

It is an excerpt of the diary of Samuel Pepys, published in a Penguin Little Black Classic, taken from his full diary, consisting of two parts.

The first, supposedly about the plague arriving in London, really is rather dull. The plague gets a brief passing mention towards the end of the text, the remainder is fairly mundane information, some almost like reading gibberish unless concentration is applied:

12 May 1665: By water to the Exchequer, and there up and down through all the offices to strike my tallies for 17500l- which methinks is so great a testimony of the goodness of God to me; that I, from a mean clerk there, should come to strike tallies myself for that sum, and in the authority that I do now, is a very stupendous mercy to me. I shall have them struck tomorrow. But to see how every little fellow, looks after his fees, and to get what he can for everything, is a strange consideration - the King's Fees, that he must pay himself for this 17500l coming to above 100l...

25 June 1665: Up, and all day in some little grutchings of pain, as I use to have - from winde - arising, I think, from my fasting so long and want of exercise - and I think, going so hot in clothes, the weather being hot and I in the same clothes I wore all winter...

The second part of the excerpt covers the inception of the fire on 2 September 1666 through to 15 September, when the fire is still in full control of the city. This section is a little more interesting.

Obviously it covers the fire from the perspective of a wealthy property owner, with assets at risk, having sometimes only a matter of hours to collect what possessions can be taken from a home before it succumbs to the flames.

2 September 1666: ...so as we were forced to begin to pack up our own goods and prepare for their removal... Mr Hater and I did remove my money and Iron chests into my cellar - as thinking that the safest place. And got my bags of gold into my office ready to carry away, and my chief papers of accounts also there, and my tallies into a box by themselves...

For me this sits somewhere between two and three stars, but closer to two than three, so that's where I settle.
