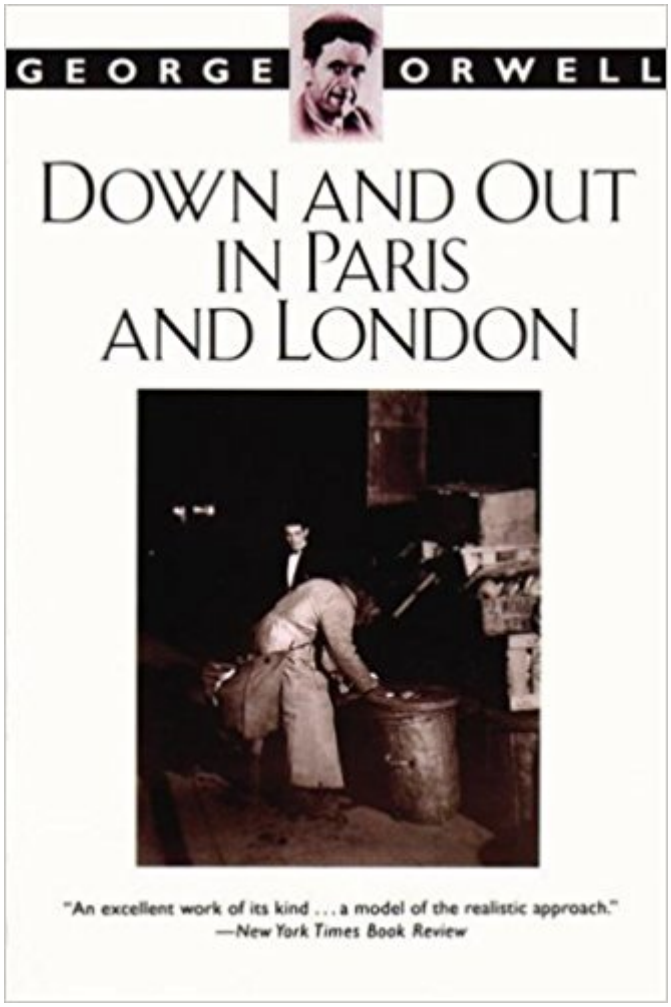
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Down And Out In Paris And London



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Synopsis

The "I" of this novel sets down the experiences of a man who finds himself in Paris, in the early 1930s, without a penny. He manages to keep alive and to record, with sensitivity and graphic power, the strange incidents and characters with which his poverty brings him in contact.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

What was a nice Eton boy like Eric Blair doing in scummy slums instead of being upwardly mobile at Oxford or Cambridge? Living Down and Out in Paris and London, repudiating respectable imperialist society, and reinventing himself as George Orwell. His 1933 debut book (ostensibly a novel, but overwhelmingly autobiographical) was rejected by that elitist publisher T.S. Eliot, perhaps because its close-up portrait of lowlife was too pungent for comfort. In Paris, Orwell lived in verminous rooms and washed dishes at the overpriced "Hotel X," in a remarkably filthy, 110-degree kitchen. He met "eccentric people--people who have fallen into solitary, half-mad grooves of life and given up trying to be normal or decent." Though Orwell’s tone is that of an outraged reformer, it’s surprising how entertaining many of his adventures are: gnawing poverty only enlivens the imagination, and the wild characters he met often swindled each other and themselves. The wackiest tale involves a miser who ate cats, wore newspapers for underwear, invested 6,000 francs in cocaine, and hid it in a face-powder tin when the cops raided. They had to free him, because the apparently controlled substance turned out to be face powder instead of cocaine. In London, Orwell studied begging with a crippled expert named Bozo, a great storyteller and philosopher. Orwell

devotes a chapter to the fine points of London guttersnipe slang. Years later, he would put his lexical bent to work by inventing Newspeak, and draw on his down-and-out experience to evoke the plight of the Proles in 1984. Though marred by hints of unexamined anti-Semitism, Orwell’s debut remains, as The Nation put it, "the most lucid portrait of poverty in the English language." --Tim Appelo --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

He saw through everything... Many have tried to imitate his particular kind of clarity without anything like his moral authority -- Peter Ackroyd * The Times * A man who looked at his world with wonder and wrote down exactly what he saw, in admirable prose -- John Mortimer --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

This is an autobiography of George Orwell, known in real life as Eric Blair, when he spent some time on the streets of Paris and London when he, in his early years (1920s or 30s) was destitute. Then, Blair, who I shall refer to Orwell as his real name, was starting out as a journalism/writer, after World War I (The Great War). Eric Blair doesn’t explain how he ended up in this situation of poverty in the first place, but does provide a good account of his life on the streets of Paris and London, and his struggle to survive day by day.It was rough. Blair live hand to mouth, and being among the tramps, beggars, the destitute, he always had to watch his back, for there was always someone out to take his money, clothes, food, anything, at the first chance he gets. Needless to say, Mr. Blair survived and was able to give a clear account.The book is evenly divided between his stints in Paris, then London. He covers Paris first. Paris is pictured as the lap of luxury, fashions, French architecture. I’ve been there myself, and it is amazing. Deep down below, in the unseen sections, are the workers, the dishwashers, those who do the dirty jobs to keep Paris glittering. Blair worked as a dishwasher and other similar, back breaking jobs at luxurious hotels, where the work was hard, conditions were unsanitary, and the pay was low. He literally had to pawn his clothes, look for the cheapest rooms to rent, and worked sometimes for 18 hours a day, with very little time to sleep. There were tough bosses and tough landlords, and he had to be tight with his money, buying the cheapest, and lowest quality food. Blair did have buddies to team up with, looking out for each other, and being there for the other when he was starving. Survival produces enemies off the streets, but it also produces great friendships. Blair had to take whatever job was available, for one hotel was opening up promising good paying jobs, but there were delays, so one could not depend on any "promises," for anyone.London had it own adventure. Here Blair was traveling from spike (a hostel like place where tramps could spend one and only one night, with strict rules with a jail

sentence for violating them) to spike, with a partner named Paddy. Again, there are situations where one smuggles in food and money against the rules, where other tramps steal them, and their clothes. If the tramp complained, he would go to jail. There were religious sponsored hostels, with strict rules also, and this simply tells of the travels of Blair and his buddy, obtaining money and food and shelter for the night.In this book, Orwell/Blair does sympathize with the tramp, where his present situation is not always his fault. These are situations where one loses a job, then his home because he was unable to pay for it, or could never find a job, or many other reasons. This is very similar to today's situations where people are evicted from their homes forcing them to live out on the street or in their cars.This book is a chronicle of what these people go through, and their actions are a result of their desperate attempt simply to survive.

What a surprise to me to read a book that has such different tone than what I had considered "Orwellian". "Down and Out in Paris and London" whether fiction and non-fiction seems to follow an autobiographical narrative of Orwell's life in the late 1920's and early 1930's.While I liked the pace and found myself drawn in and enjoying this narrative a reader should know that there is no plot of note and the enjoyment rests on one's interest in Orwell's description of the life of the poor, struggling or completely indigent in Paris and London at that time. I found it worthwhile. In Paris the narrator is working in the lowest ranks of restaurants (when he is working), le plongeur which loosely translates to "dishwasher and whatever else we tell you to do". Upon returning to London he follows along with Tramps that would most resemble the American Hobos.In both cities the characters become people. He gives them substance, vice, virtue and humanness without over writing or drifting away from his goal of describing life broadly.I found Paris a bit more interesting. His group of associates and friends were better sketched and more diverse and the vignettes of life could be well imagined. The restaurant scenes are full of chaos, conflict and explanations on the shortcuts taken by all those preparing our food. It's not pretty. It's "Down and Out Kitchen Confidential". Even from the vantage point of 80 years later I'd still not recommend reading this book ahead of going to a fine French restaurant and I'll be thinking about bed bugs in hotels forever.His return to London takes us on tour of the Spikes which were the homeless shelters of their time. You can imagine an unattractive world of bad food (but good tea), gross communal bathroom, dehumanizing treatment and deeply seeded resentment on all sides. His tone struck me as "Lonely Planet for the REALLY lonely".The story is important for its portrayal and sympathy for those in need. Orwell is rich in logical explanations for the plight of these men (99% men) but the indignities that they suffer and much that they bring on themselves. He was in his 20's when he wrote this. It's

impressive to have his depth of experience, perspective and articulation of ideas at such an age and written "live time" without the benefit of reflection.

Having read only one of George Orwell's books ("1984") when I was younger, I'm rediscovering him now, having recently read "Animal Farm" and "Down and Out in Paris and London." Down and Out is a fascinating account of life as a hotel-restaurant worker in the early 2oth century in Paris and London. It's a very graphic account of what is was like to work up to 18 hours a day in brutal conditions and still be poor and hungry. It's also amazing to see the differences between being poor in France and being poor in England. Although I'm no Francophile, it certainly was easier to be poor in France.Orwell is a great writer, and it really shows in Down and Out in Paris and London. His characters are finely drawn, and the reader can almost feel the sweltering heat, the impossible working conditions, and the hunger of an empty belly.I was amazed at the conditions of the poor in England and the system that almost guaranteed that they remained in poverty. France wasn't a lot better, but at least it was a bit easier to be poor in that country.A fascinating look at life in another era.

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