



# Circles of Hell

*Dante Alighieri*

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**Circles of Hell** Dante Alighieri

'I truly thought I'd never make it back.'

Ten of the most memorable and most terrifying cantos from Dante's Inferno.

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Dante Alighieri (1265-1321).

Dante's works available in Penguin Classics are Inferno, Purgatorio, Paradiso, The Divine Comedy and Vita Nuova.

## Circles of Hell Details

Date : Published February 26th 2015 by Penguin Classics (first published 1320)

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# From Reader Review *Circles of Hell* for online ebook

## Michelle Curie says

**What would it be like to literally go to Hell and back?** Ask Dante Alighieri. But don't go for the *Little Black Classic*, because it might make you just as upset as it made me. *Circles of Hell* features ten cantos taken from the medieval Italian epic *Inferno*. In it, we follow a pilgrim making his journey through the nine circles of Hell, each with their own inhabitants and sins.

I have not read *Inferno*, which made this a horrible starting point (thus my rating). It's obviously just supposed to be a taster and it did make me want to read the whole thing, but without an introduction and no explanation of why these featured cantos have been chosen, especially since we're skipping big chunks of the pilgrimage between each, it all felt a bit out of context. With limited knowledge of the 13th century Italy there is only so much I could take away from these.

I did get was a sense of how brilliant the text in its entirety probably is. I love the idea of Hell being divided into circles and the pilgrim getting the Roman poet Virgil as a tour-guide. The writing is probably more beautiful in its original language, but it's still poetic and vivid. It's creepy and still not without humour. The second circle for example is inhabited by people who were overcome by lust and they are punished by being blown back and forth by a storm, preventing them to fall for their sin again. Among the people he meets there are Cleopatra and Helen of Troy.

The pilgrim actually meets many historical and notable personalities in hell, many of which were contemporaries, which is why it would have been nice to have some annotations here and there, as I assume the average reader (me!) isn't able to recognise the names of medieval politicians of Italy and I don't really like having to look up names every couple of pages just to escape the meaninglessness.

This particular book wasn't fun to read, but it did make me curious about the full-length piece of work (even though I will probably look out for an annotated version).

In 2015 Penguin introduced the Little Black Classics series to celebrate Penguin's 80th birthday. Including little stories from "around the world and across many centuries" as the publisher describes, I have been intrigued to read those for a long time, before finally having started. I hope to sooner or later read and review all of them!

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## Peter says

Poor translation, poor layout. Compared this edition against the proper full edition and came to the following conclusion: hack job!

Now usually I will admit that I have read very little poetry with the exception of the superb John Betjeman and would give at least four stars for its quality. This however is dire this is contains a more modern turn of phrase.

In summery Robin Kirkpatrick is a shoddy translator who should consider the words more carefully, a few more years studying the Italian language is in order here.  
NOT RECOMMENDED IN ANY WAY.

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## **Liz Janet says**

Update February 2016

If unable to read Dante's Divine Comedy in its original Italian, as well as a well-known and accepted Spanish translation, please read any other edition in English, because this one is not only not the best translated one, but also a poor pick from the entire work, I do give it props for picking my favourite of his three parts, Inferno. Hell is one of the best places Dante finds himself in, and the descriptions are some of the most beautiful, as well as the depiction of those living in hell. This one did not even try to do it justice.

.....

Dante's Comedy is a brilliant masterpiece that will live forever, yet this collection of his most famous, Inferno, was a disgrace. I have read enough badly translated literature by simply reading the little black classics. Penguin, I know you have good translations, I have read them, step up your game. I am only going to read works that were originally published in English now, and even those I am afraid they will morph them just to spite me. Like I have done with the other translated editions, go and read the original works by another translator, if disappointing, it will at least not be as horrid as this one.

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## **Darwin8u says**

*"The way is long, the road is cruelly hard."*

- Dante, Canto XXXIV

**Vol 25** of my Penguin Little Black Classics Box Set is obviously just a selection from Inferno (book 1 of The Divine Comedy). I've read Dante's 'Divine Comedy' a couple times, and Inferno several. But I'm not nearly the fan of Dante that my brother is. He collects translations and copies of Dante's Divine Comedy, I prefer Homer. Somehow, we make it through. I liked Robin Kirkpatrick's translation, but it wasn't my favorite. Here is a sample from one of Dante's more famous lines:

from **Canto III**: "**Lasciate ogni speranza, voi ch'entrate**"

**Longfellow (1867)**: "ALL HOPE ABANDON, YOU WHO ENTER IN!"

**Sayers (1949)**: "LAY DOWN ALL HOPE, YOU THAT GO IN BY ME."

**Ciardi (1954)**: "ABANDON ALL HOPE YE WHO ENTER HERE."

**Pinsky (1995)**: "ABANDON ALL HOPE, YOU WHO ENTER HERE."

**Kirkpatrick (2006)**: "SURRENDER AS YOU ENTER EVERY HOPE YOU HAVE."

**James (2013)**: "FORGET YOUR HOPES, THEY WERE WHAT BROUGHT YOU HERE."

Personally, I prefer Ciardi (or Pinsky), but I appreciate what Kirkpatrick is doing. While I can't pretend to be a Dante scholar, I appreciate that Kirkpatrick really knows his stuff. Perhaps, I'm just biased with Ciardi because of the meter and language (like the KJV of the Bible) just seems natural to Dante. Anyway, this

collection contains:

Canto III - Gates of Hell  
Canto V - The lustful  
Canto VI - The gluttonous  
Canto VIII - The wrathful and the melancholic  
Canto XIII - The violent against self  
Canto XVII - Passage to the Eighth Circle  
Canto XIX - Simonists  
Canto XXIV - Thieves  
Canto XXXIII - Traitors to nations and traitors to guests  
Canto XXXIV - Traitors to benefactors

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### **Joey Woolfardis says**

Dante Alighieri was a 13th-14th Century Italian Poet and Statesman. The Divine Comedy depicts Dante's own journey through Hell, Purgatory and Paradise, guided by the Roman Poet Virgil. Fully titled *Divina Commedia*, it is split in to the sections; Inferno, Purgatorio and Paradiso.

This Little Black Classic is the prefect place to start if you wish to discover whether Dante is right for you. It features a selection of Cantos (verses in a poem) taken from Inferno, the passage that Dante takes through the nine circles of Hell. It features degrading, desolate and destitute imagery of all those who have fallen and left Earth to burn for eternity in damnation.

Beautifully written as most of these LBCs are, there is probably no piece of work that has so captivated and influenced writers so much as Dante's *Divina Commedia*.

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### **Ffion Wyn says**

I feel I really ought to read more of Inferno than the bits that are found in this book before passing judgement, however, this is amazing! I am very tempted to read it over the summer but I'd have to try and find a copy by the same translator- it's so readable!

The description is awesome (if a bit gory....). I couldn't help but compare it to *The Road* (studying it for coursework). The only reason that it's not 5 stars is that, because it's bits taken from another book, it got a bit confusing as there are mentions of characters etc that seem to pop up out of nowhere.

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### **Noelia Alonso says**

I like this. The language is so rich and powerful but being only a few excerpts of the book takes a lot out of the story. So I guess now I have to pick *Inferno* and read it all

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## Celestine says

Meh, considering I already knew the whole 9 circles, this book is too selective and vague.  
Also had to read it like 8th-grade poetry, thanks to grade saver.  
Helped me yet summarise a book I had low interest on.

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## Akke says

idk.

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## Regitze says

My favorite part of Dante's famous descend through Hell and Purgatory, and subsequent ascend to the Heavenly spheres has always been the first third: the cantos about the nine circles of Hell. Therefore, I pretty much knew I would like this book a lot and I would probably have given it a much better rating if it hadn't been composed of seemingly random selections of the admittedly long section. The integrate structure of Hell and the horrifically creative punishments are oddly captivating and this version lacks a more coherent description found in the original. I really think you should pick up the full work instead even if it is long. Because it makes so much more sense. I've read the full work two or three times for different courses in college over the last five years and that's pretty much why I was able to follow this book as too many chunks were missing.

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## Leanne says

Adored this, I plan to get a full translation now. This has completely got me addicted.

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## Bookdragon Sean says

This is quite possibly the worse edition I've come across in this collection so far. It is simply terrible. I would avoid this completely if you're thinking about giving the poet a try. *The Divine Comedy* is hard to follow at the best of times and this edition makes it even worse. I've started reading the full work no less than six times over the past year, and each time I've had to go back to the beginning out of confusion. I was due another reattempt, so I thought I'd give this edition a try; it was a big mistake.

In here are, what is quite frankly, some random cantos from the Inferno; thus it is quite difficult to retain any sense of the story. They're random and, when isolated, are difficult to conceptualise. **I think this edition is rather pointless.** When I do manage to get through the work, it will be the full work. I couldn't imagine that this would be of use to anyone; it is a poor representation of his work, and to make matters worse it sacrifices the beauty of it. Dante uses his own, unique, three line stanzas, which, on their own, are a true feat of poetry. They're quite complex. In this edition the publishers have merely separated the stanzas with a little indent. This, for me, makes for some very poor reading and destroys part of the poem.

I wouldn't recommend this to anyone. If you, like me, want to read some of Dante's writings, then I should suggest trying his full works.

Penguin Little Black Classic- 25

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.

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### Jessica Triana de Ford says

It was hard going until I started reading it out loud and then it naturally fell into a wonderful rhythm.

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### Walter Schutjens says

With this review im not commenting on the whole of Dante's Inferno, just the extracts concerning this book.

I found the prose beautiful, better than the likes of Shakespear. That of course bears the element that I did not understand 50% of what was going on, because true understanding required a careful dissection of the stanzas. It was simply the construction of the the line with elaborate adjectives and similes, that sketched a horrifying portrayal of hell. **"together these all stirred a storm that swirled for ever in the darkened air where no time was, as sand swept up in breathing spires of wind."** .

The loss of the other two stars is due to the poor publication of an incoherent series of extracts. That fail to enlighten the reader with any background, and thus making the book harder to understand.

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### Prema Arasu says

Five stars for Inferno as a whole text (this is an extract)

I studied a heavily annotated student's translation of The Divine Comedy earlier this year for university, and as a result, could discuss extensively the merits and shortcomings of presenting extracts from Inferno in this Penguin series, but I won't - I'll just comment that yes, its inclusion does contribute to the worldly scope of the box set as Dante had massive influences on the Renaissance and the Italian language - however I think that selections from La Vita Nuova may have been a better choice.

In the Inferno, the pilgrim descends through the nine circles of hell guided by the Roman poet Vergil who is a pre-Christian pagan and therefore cannot enter heaven. In each circle, sinners suffer their punishment, a contrapasso which are ironic reflections of their sins. Sinners in the eight circle, for example, are blown about endlessly in a whirlwind as they have committed lust and likewise in their life have been unable to resist the sway of temptation. One's fate after death is determined by life choices rather than divinity.

Figures from history and even Dante's immediate society of fifteenth century Florence are observed within hell, enduring punishment for their mortal sin. He also includes figures of Greek and Roman mythology; writers who were known to have probably existed such as Plato and Homer as well as people who are only known in a mythological context such as Helen and Orpheus. Classical mythology is blended seamlessly into a Christian narrative in the distinctive style of renaissance literature.

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