



Smith

Leon Garfield

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This brilliant, picaresque novel follows the adventures of an illiterate young ragamuffin known only as Smith. Smith picks the pocket of a stranger, only to witness immediately the strangers murder. Smiths booty from the theft is an Important Document, no doubt worth quite a lot to somebody, which is proved by the pursuit of Smith by two very shady characters. Smith artfully dodges them and winds up in the odd company of a wealthy blind man, who takes Smith into his home and provides him with an education. But this new comfort is lost when Smith himself is suspected of the very murder he witnessed. Smith was a "Boston Globe--Horn Book" Honor Book, winner of the Phoenix Award, and a Carnegie Honor Book.

Smith Details

Date : Published September 1st 2000 by Sunburst Books (first published 1967)

ISBN : 9780374467623

Author : Leon Garfield

Format : Paperback 195 pages

Genre : Historical, Historical Fiction, Childrens, Fiction, Young Adult, Mystery

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Polly says

Very well done, but oh my, so hard.

Jenny says

It is too bad that I didn't know about this book when my son was young, I think he would have enjoyed it. Smith is a twelve year old London urchin obtains a mysterious document and witnesses a murder. He learns to read, finds out who his real friends are and discovers what the document says while teaching a blind judge something about justice.

Catherine Austen says

Loved it. Gripping mystery, lively history, likeable complicated young hero. Set in dreary old London, with lots of poverty and crime, and every word builds the scene and captures the mood. It's fun to read aloud - the words feel good on the tongue - but young readers might huddle over it quietly, whipping through the pages, eager to know what happens next. A modern classic.

Jane says

Haven't read any Leon Garfield since I was about 10. Loved him then. Lots of atmosphere, great imagery, fab vocab (makes you think about why kids struggle to express themselves now!) Get rid of potential giggles at names like Dick and Fanny and words like prick and gay which modern writers would avoid in their earlier use and this is a cracking story. Read in 2 goes. Black Jack soon...

Leah says

Stand and deliver...

"A rat was like a snail beside Smith, and the most his thousand victims ever got of him was the powerful whiff of his passing and a cold draught in their dexterously emptied pockets."

Smith is a twelve-year old pickpocket surviving by his wits in the London of the 18th century. But one day Smith picks the pocket of an elderly man and as he runs away, he sees the man being attacked and killed. Running for fear that he will be caught and accused of this much worse crime, Smith has to wait to find out what he managed to steal – a document, clearly official, but that's as much as he can tell since he can't read. But Smith knows documents are worth money and he's determined to find out what it says...

This book is always marketed as if for children and it certainly is suitable for any child from about ten or eleven, I'd say. But it is also entirely suitable for adult consumption and very enjoyable. Who wouldn't enjoy a story about pickpockets, highwaymen, mysterious documents and murder? Like *Treasure Island* or the *Quatermain* books, this is complex and well written enough to satisfy even a demanding adult, while having enough excitement and adventure to appeal to a younger audience. And, because of its historical setting, it hasn't suffered from age.

Garfield's skill is in creating an entirely believable setting and filling it with interesting characters – sympathetic good guys, villainous bad guys and several that fall somewhere between the two. Smith himself is a mixture of hard-nosed thief who will do anything to survive and soft-hearted child who can't stop himself from helping Mr Mansfield, a blind gentleman whom he meets by accident while on his quest to learn to read. Mr Mansfield is a man who believes in law and justice but who gradually learns the meaning of trust and pity, while his daughter devotes herself to protecting him from anyone who might wish to take advantage of his blindness or good-nature. Together with Smith's sisters and Lord Tom, the highwayman, all the characters are slightly caricatured in the way Dickens' characters are.

And the Dickens comparison extends to the setting – this London, its streets and jails, its dirt and poverty, and the heaths around it where the highwaymen ruled could have come straight from the pages of the master himself. But, unlike Dickens’ little pickpocket *Oliver Twist*, Smith is not sickeningly good – he’s more of an Artful Dodger, trained by the circumstances of his life to rely on his own wits to survive. The one concession Garfield makes to a younger readership is to keep the language simpler than Dickens, making this an easier and shorter read, but without ever condescending or patronising the reader. But the simpler language still allows room for some great writing and imagery...

"Even great ladies came and went – their huge skirts swinging and peeling down the doleful passages like so many brocaded bells, tolling:

What a pity. What a shame. Dick's to die on Tuesday week. What a pity. What a shame. Poor Mr Mulrone."

I first read this book many years ago and am often reluctant to re-read a book that I remember with pleasure in case it doesn't live up to my memories. In this case, I enjoyed it just as much again and look forward to reading more of Garfield's work. Highly recommended to young and old alike.

NB This book was provided for review by the publisher, NYR Children's Collection.

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Jennifer says

Excellent book. Kept me entertained and wanting to read more. I like that it touches on the horrors of the time without making them overly gruesome. Excellent for preteens.

Nilakshi Bandara says

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Todd Stockslager says

Review Title: Small classic

Imagine a 12 year old boy who picks pockets for a living in Dickens's London of ill weather, low haunts, and upper class society all sharing the same crowded streets of the City. Seconds after picking the pocket of his latest victim, he ducks into a side alley and overhears the brutal murder of the man, by a pair of brown-suited thugs in search of something the man no longer has. Smith, the young pickpocket, realizes he has just stolen the thing which the grown men were willing to murder to obtain, and in short order deduces that this thing is of great value but also puts him at great risk if he was observed in the act of picking the man's pocket by such murderous men who would certainly stop at nothing to get the thing back. He returns to his humble dwelling which he shares with two older sisters intent on finding out what he has and figuring out a way to profit from it. Pulling out the prize he realizes it is a document--and neither Smith nor sisters can read!

With this gripping premise Leon Garfield takes off on a thrill ride from those low streets to high society to Newgate Jail and the shadow of the hanging tree. What would you do if it were you? Getting someone to read the document so you can figure out how to use it to better your low lot in life may mean disclosing the method by which you obtained it and expose you to discovery by the killers. Smith goes through a great range of options each of which seems promising and all of which seem to end in disaster. But Garfield keeps the reader guessing which direction each encounter will take, with a sharp eye for quick description, conversational dialogue, and immediate action.

As you might guess by the publisher, Garfield in 1967 when he originally wrote Smith was mining the same territory later worked by the Lemony Snicket and Harry Potter series: treat young readers with respect and engage their intellect and emotions. It is a powerful formula for success, and rewards even older readers who appreciate the quality of the story despite the lack of "adult" material. Mind you, Garfield describes dirty streets and unwholesome characters without flinching. While he doesn't describe graphic horror or use vulgar language, he still tells a tale where people do wrong, are treated wrongly, and pay for their faults (and virtues) without expecting a level of justice and fair play that doesn't exist in the real world.

At about 200 pages it can easily be read in a day or two, and indeed will interest you enough to pick it up and read ahead as fast as you can to find out what happens. Much does happen, and Garfield pulls the reader along with his crisp style. Obviously the reader embraces Smith and wants him to succeed (and survive when it seems likely he will not), and it is clear that Garfield wants us to like his characters despite or even because of their flaws. As a young reader coming to this book, you would realize that, like most everyone you know in real life, these characters, the good and the bad, have virtues and flaws sometimes in equal amounts and not always on the side of the ledger where you want them to be.

I was recommended and given this book by a neighbor while living and working in London who knew my love for reading, Dickens, history, and London, and I was not disappointed. Nor will you be. London is here in its historical presence, channeling the low haunts of Dickens's Oliver Twist, and results in a small boy who is a great character in a small classic.

Bea says

It's just a book but it made me smell, taste and live in Victorian London. We've just done a bit of Dickens at school and this was a similar but more straight forward read.

Ian Tymms says

Dickensian in the best of ways. A ripping yarn with some superb writing. Some of the allusions will be challenging for modern Middle School readers - particularly those not with a British background.

Grade 6 story but the writing style might better suit G8.

J.A. Kahn says

Read this at school. It is a wonderful story, heart-warming and funny. Follow Smith, the pickpocket, as he scrapes along the edge of life.

Catherine says

The great strength of this book is that it has a real 'whodunnit' plot tied up with crooked lawyers, highwaymen and secrets from the past. Set in nineteenth century London, there is quite a lot of unpacking to do with confident upper KS2 readers both in terms of the conventions of the age but also in the way in which Garfield writes which is so different to the way in which children's books are written today (first published 1967). 12 year old Smith inadvertently witnesses the murder of someone whose pocket he has just picked. The murderers were seeking what he had stolen so they begin a relentless pursuit of the boy. What he took was a document but neither he nor anyone he knows can read and he fails to persuade anyone to teach him. This fact in itself can lead to a very fruitful discussion. There are overtones of Oliver Twist (often the only reference point child readers have for the story) as Smith is taken into the house of a kindly gentleman before being betrayed (an ongoing motif of the story) and ending up in Newgate prison. The prison and the nature of prison and punishment in Victorian Britain is another theme to explore. Poor Smith is gradually let down by everyone but his noble spirit (at times perhaps implausibly so) and desperation to believe that the document holds the key to a better future keep him going and keep him making good decisions, helped by the odd coincidence. The final revealing of the plot twist comes right at the end after one of his betrayers, his good friend the highwayman Lord Tom, steps in to rescue him and in the end, the document does indeed prove life changing. A book that introduces children to a very wide range of vocabulary and holds interest right to the end because of the constant pressure of being caught by 'the men in brown' and the realisation that everyone is deserting him. This book deserves a higher profile!

R.R. Stone says

A story that left an everlasting imprint!

Some good things are just imprinted on your mind.

I read the first chapter of the book as a part of my course, when I was six or seven . The image of a pickpocket, the old suburbs of London, and the whole notion of romanticism of the past really captivated my mind. I always wondered what happened after the first chapter.

What happened to Smith? Did he meet a good end?

Over time I even forgot the name of the book. I just remembered that it was about a pickpocket.

When a got older it remained buried in some dark and dusty corner and nook of my mind. But once, as if on a whim, I set upon to find the name of the book.

And by God I'm so happy that I found it.

By the time I finished it, I had laughed and smiled many a times. I am 22, and it made me smile and laugh without any of the stupid sexual innuendos that you see nowadays. I was sad at Smith's plight and I was tickled when I read his musings. And the descriptions of the Old London; it seems as if Mr. Garfield has painted a picture on a canvas, in so simple words. I am just amazed that why this book got none of the attention it deserved.

In short- Oh boy, it was a delight to read!

Sarah says

Maybe four stars is excessive, but I really enjoyed this book. Funny stuff.

Tracey says

A good story in Dickensian style. Highly recommend
