



## The Wrong Box

*Robert Louis Stevenson , Lloyd Osbourne*

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A black comic novel about the last remaining survivors of a tontine - a group life-insurance policy in which the last surviving member stands to receive a fortune. It is a farcical, eccentric and brilliantly written piece of work.

## The Wrong Box Details

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## From Reader Review The Wrong Box for online ebook

### Tony says

THE WRONG BOX. (1889). Robert Lewis Stevenson and Lloyd Osbourne. \*\*.

Stevenson wrote three novels in collaboration with his step-son. This was one of them. It can be classified as a farce or black comedy. The story line is rather simple: Two men, cousins, are in line to inherit the contents of a tontine. Their respective fathers are brothers and are the last two surviving investors. On a lark, one of the cousins decides to change all the labels on the shipping crates that are in the mail car on which they are riding. Of course, they have had too much to drink. Then, the train is in an accident, and one of the uncles is killed in the crash – supposedly. That means that one of the cousins is the winner. One of the cousins decides that to protect their interests they will hide his death, so they crate up the body and slap a label on it. Unfortunately, the body is not that of their uncle/father, and the body gets mis-directed so that they lose track of it. It's a silly plot reminiscent of an early Wodehouse work. Towards the end, I was totally confused as to what the characters were really doing. Stevenson scholars claim that Osbourne did the writing, while Stevenson did the re-writing. A film was made based on this novel back in the 1960s. I remember seeing it, but not much about it.

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### Faith Jones says

Robert Louis Stevenson is a household name, whose works include Treasure Island, Kidnapped and The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde. He only lived from 1850 to 1894 and this little number was published in 1889, so represents one of his final achievements delivered at the height of his powers. There's a co-writer, Lloyd Osbourne, but he must have been reasonably good too because I can't tell which passages are Stevenson's and which are not. The story feels as if it was written by one mind, holding it in the hollow of a single hand with no hint of committee input.

RLS is generally thought of as an author of dramatic adventures, but this is a departure because it's a macabre comedy, a farce if you like. He must have been a serious man with a sarcastic sense of humour that was dying to tunnel its way out of the starched shirt. Excuse the quotation from memory, as the book is no longer to hand, but some of the lines are just as applicable today, things like "Julia often made acquaintances in Bournemouth... and would have greatly preferred more allowance and less uncle." There's also "an incident at the railway ticket office which bordered on brigandage", which sounds familiar and still topical to me. Then, after a supposed murder, failure to declare the death followed by desecration of the corpse and forgery of its signature, "the legal profession can be so petty". There's also a massive double train wreck, metal and mutilation, where one of the shell-shocked survivors declares "I think there may have been some sort of accident."

Despite dozens of excellent moments, I marked it down from a four to a three star rating not because I didn't think it was great stuff but because the language can be stilted, there are slow sections that could have been cut down to keep the action rolling, then it goes a bit wrong near the end and reads like a rush for the finish post. That aside, the core idea is terrific so I'm not underselling this.

The tontine idea this is based on is such a wonderfully, exquisitely pointless venture that even though it originated in Italy, I can easily imagine the Victorian English seizing on it and making it their own. It's brilliant of course, brilliant, but pointless. I think I need that in my life. In brief, imagine the parents of thirty children putting in a block of money for investment. The last surviving child after ninety or so years wins all

of the capital and the interest, which has accumulated over the course of their long lifetime. Naturally, they will be as good as dead when they get it and too much of an invalid to enjoy spending anything, so the whole scheme becomes ridiculous, just a way to put wealth out of circulation for up to a century. It's a good excuse for the author to show the size of the group depleting in different entertaining ways, but this wasn't explored as well as it might have been.

I can see themes in this book that have been re-used in popular culture, such as the body in the piano turning up again fifty years later in *The Green Man* (Alistair Sim) and I'd say it had some influence on *Death of a Salesman* and permeated into the roots of detective theatre.

The people for whom a tontine contract is not ridiculous are the children/nephews/nieces of the last two survivors as it's the grandchildren of the original funders who are the true beneficiaries, not the original children at all, there's the rub, and they have every incentive to prod the oldies to a premature demise.

*The Wrong Box* is black humour, it's vicious, insulting, full of greed, cruel and utterly immoral, just like money itself. There can only be one winner in this story – and that's the reader. I hope you like it as much as I did.

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### **Aziza Aouhassi says**

L'histoire ne manque pas de rebondissements et de quiproquos ce qui la rend encore plus amusante. une lecture légère qui peut correspondre à un jeune public.

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### **Bettie? says**

Opening: **How very little does the amateur, dwelling at home at ease, comprehend the labours and perils of the author, and, when he smilingly skims the surface of a work of fiction, how little does he consider the hours of toil, consultation of authorities, researches in the Bodleian, correspondence with learned and illegible Germans—in one word, the vast scaffolding that was first built up and then knocked down, to while away an hour for him in a railway train! Thus I might begin this tale with a biography of Tonti—birthplace, parentage, genius probably inherited from his mother, remarkable instance of precocity, etc—and a complete treatise on the system to which he bequeathed his name. The material is all beside me in a pigeon-hole, but I scorn to appear vainglorious. Tonti is dead, and I never saw anyone who even pretended to regret him; and, as for the tontine system, a word will suffice for all the purposes of this unvarnished narrative.**

<http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/1585>

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### **Betsie Bush says**

\*giggles\* absurd mayhem... pure entertainment

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### **A.h.d. says**

This comic novel by R.L. Stevenson (better known as the author of Treasure Island and Kidnapped) is a lot of very silly fun. Most of the action involves a much mislaid corpse, but, instead of being a gruesome tale, it's hilarious. The disappointment is the finale, which really doesn't quite hold up. It doesn't really end. It simply stops.

The book was adapted as a motion picture, and, unlike so many movies based on books, this film is actually far better than the book. Should you want to laugh until your sides hurt, I suggest you skip the book and rent or buy the DVD of The Wrong Box. It features Peter Sellers, Michael Caine, John Mills, Ralph Richardson, Peter Cook, and Dudley Moore - as distinguished a cast of actors as anyone could wish for, and all at the top of their form.

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### **Jaci says**

Genial.

Me gusta el humor con el que está escrito.

Sin duda es un gran escrito. Me gustó, pero a veces se hacía un poco largo y extenso, pero disfruté de la lectura

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### **Wanda says**

21 JUL 2014 -- download here --

<http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/1585>

23 JUL 2014 -- in looking for more information about William Dent Pitman, author of The Quincunx Case, I discovered this exact name, "William Dent Pitman," featured as a character in The Wrong Box by Robert Louis Stevenson and his step-son, Lloyd Osbourne. I have a feeling this author is a combination of Stevenson and Osbourne and they were each having a fun time with us readers. I presented this question to Bettie, whose vast knowledge of books is unparalleled. I will cross-post this to my review of The Wrong Box.

22 JAN 2017 - reading this with the 19th Century Literature group at Yahoo. So far, this is a fun read!

2 FEB 2017 - a dark comedy about greed. Morris (and to some extent, John, his brother) are always looking over the fence at what like will be like when everyone is dead and the tontine belongs to them (well, really Morris believes it belongs to him alone), they have lost sight of common sense and the leather business. The Wrong Box is a silly refreshing read - enjoy!

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### **Laura Verret says**

Much more humorous and to the point than 'The Wrecker'. While totally unbelievable, it was still quite quite funny. Point in case - Morris's enumerations of 'good' and 'bad' things in chapter six was hilarious.

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" Bad. —— Good.

4. I have almost no money.

4. But there is plenty in the bank.

5. Yes, but I can't get the money in the bank.

5. But—well, that seems unhappily to be the case.

6. I have left the bill for eight hundred pounds in Uncle Joseph's pocket.

6. But if Pitman is only a dishonest man, the presence of this bill may lead him to keep the whole thing dark and throw the body into the New Cut.

7. Yes, but if Pitman is dishonest and finds the bill, he will know who Joseph is, and he may blackmail me.

7. Yes, but if I am right about Uncle Masterman, I can blackmail Michael.

8. But I can't blackmail Michael (which is, besides, a very dangerous thing to do) until I find out.

8. Worse luck!

9. The leather business will soon want money for current expenses, and I have none to give.

9. But the leather business is a sinking ship.

10. Yes, but it's all the ship I have.

10. A fact.

11. John will soon want money, and I have none to give.

11.

12. And the venal doctor will want money down.

12.

13. And if Pitman is dishonest and don't send me to gaol, he will want a fortune.

13.

'O, this seems to be a very one-sided business,' exclaimed Morris."

The only thing that irked me was the lack of resolution about the cart-driver. Who was he? And how did his story end?

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### **Lou says**

When I read the title of this book, I thought it would be a dark horror story but I was wrong. This book is extremely humorous and funny. I had never imagined! It is very well written and has a mischievous tone and ironic because the author makes fun of the misfortunes that happen to the characters. Also entertains the reader and it invites you to be part of this unique adventure

This story is very different from what he wrote in "The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll & Mr. Hyde" but it shows the versatility of the writer and editorial quality.

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### **Mariatakones says**

Quizá no sea el relato que más me ha gustado de este autor, pero no hay duda de que es muy divertido. Irónico hasta la última página y siguiendo las bases de la comedia de enredo

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### **Yibbie says**

If you like mysteries that are more a series of misunderstandings and humerus coincidences, as I do, you'll love this story.

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### **Jim says**

Humor from RLS? This is a comedy based on the notion of a tontine, in which a group of people invest money and the last surviving member takes it all. But what if there is some ambiguity on who is alive and who is not? That is the principle on which *The Wrong Box* by Robert Louis Stevenson and Lloyd Osbourne is based.

Unfortunately, the humor doesn't come off well for this Yankee reader -- perhaps it's a bit too British. It is funny in parts, but sometimes I found it a bit forced.

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### **David says**

Entertaining - try and keep up with the antics of two cousins trying to get their share of a tontine by hook or crook. I was fortunate enough to read a copy of the US First Edition, so the tone of the times was set with the thick pages and ragged edges with this story of thick humor (and wits of the main characters) and ragged reversals of fortunes. Chapter VI, "The Tribulations of Morris, Part the First" has the exact tallying of pluses and minuses of a situation we have all done at some time or another in our lives - but probably not with such dire consequences.

## Bev says

Body, body--Who's got the body?!

The Wrong Box (1889) is a hilarious mystery spoof by Robert Louis Stevenson and his stepson Lloyd Osbourne. It revolves around Masterson and Joseph Finsbury, two brothers who are the last surviving beneficiaries of a tontine. A tontine is a rather diabolical "investment" scheme--subscribers pay into a fund that is then invested for the lifetime of the participants. It is a winner-take-all scheme meaning that the only one to benefit is the last man or woman standing. This, of course, puts all sorts of temptation in the way of the participants (and/or their heirs)--especially once the numbers start to dwindle naturally. I, mean, after all if you have to live to be 100 in order to outlive the competition just how much are you going to be able to enjoy the spoils? And one's sons or nephews might also think it a good idea to shuffle the competition (and you--last, of course) off the playing field so they have an opportunity to enjoy it for you.

Michael Finsbury is Masterson's son. He is a successful lawyer who isn't afraid to skate a little close to the wind if necessary to get a client off and win a case. Morris and John Finsbury are nephews (and wards) of Joseph. Because Joseph was not the best of businessmen and managed to fritter away what little money he held in trust for his nephews, Morris has gotten the old man to sign over his winnings from the tontine (should he outlast Masterson). So--more than ever, Morris spends his days watching over dear Uncle Joseph just to be sure that he doesn't catch a cold that turns into pneumonia and leads to death before tontine.

He also has a vague feeling that his Uncle Masterson is really dead and Michael is just pretending the old boy is still alive and kicking while he waits for Joseph to keel over. Once that happens, he [Michael] will produce a "tame doctor" who will verify Masterson's death (after Joseph's) and Michael will scoop the pot. This must be avoided at all costs.

Morris decides that the best plan would be to head to the country with Uncle Joseph and keep him all cozy at the seaside where he can breathe the lovely country air and be just as healthy as can be. Plans go awry when there is a train smash-up and an elderly dead body is found in the rubble--with bruised face and wearing what seems to be Uncle Joseph's coat. Morris and John are in despair--there goes their inheritance! So they decide to stash the body in an out-of-the-way cottage until Morris comes up with a plan to ship uncle's body to himself in a huge barrel. The barrel gets mislabeled and the body winds up going on an unexpected journey--from barrel to packing crate to piano and back again. Who has the body? And is Uncle Joseph really dead? Is Uncle Masterson really dead? Who is going to inherit all that money?

This is an absolutely delightful story--the black comedy is a little unexpected from Stevenson, but it is hilarious. Watching Morris drive himself quietly crazy as he tries to outsmart Michael and track down his missing uncle is great fun. Who would have thought that the most prominent and interesting character in a book would be a dead man who won't sit still long enough for you to get a really good look at him? Not that the other characters aren't interesting, they are. Stevenson always provides great characters and those in The Wrong Box meet his standards. Highly recommended.

First posted on my blog My Reader's Block. Please request permission before reposting. Thanks.

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## daniel says

*THE READER OF THIS REVIEW, if this should meet the eye of, he will hear of SOMETHING TO HIS ADVANTAGE on the next paragraph*

Hilarious mayhem, too bad the ending was somewhat rushed and surely wasn't up to the prevailing jocularity which characterized the remainder of the story.

*Preferred character: Michael Finsbury*

*Best chapter: CHAPTER VII. In Which William Dent Pitman takes Legal Advice*

*'It seems very wild,' said Pitman. 'And what will become of the poor young gentleman whom you know by sight?'*

*'It will do him good,'—said Michael cheerily. 'Just what he wants to steady him.'*

*'But, my dear sir, he might be involved in a charge of—a charge of murder,' gulped the artist.*

*'Well, he'll be just where we are,' returned the lawyer. 'He's innocent, you see. What hangs people, my dear Pitman, is the unfortunate circumstance of guilt.'*

ps: I heartily suggest you to follow this book with the reading of the famous classic of all times "*who put back the clock?*" whose main character Robert Skill, had probably been—in his own century—more widely renowned than Harry Potter himself.

audiobook at: <http://librivox.org/the-wrong-box-by-...>

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## **C. Mills says**

Funny story about men who are trying to hide a body so the others in the tontine don't know that he's dead. The poor body gets lost, shipped to the wrong address, stored in a piano case, and so on. A black and white movie was made of this.

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## **Sarah says**

This black comedy isn't what you'd expect from Robert Louis Stevenson, but it is hilarious! Here's the teaser I gave our book club:

Suppose your only hope of coming into your very large inheritance was for your guardian (whom you can't stand) to outlive your uncle, whom you haven't seen in years. And suppose that despite your best efforts to keep your guardian in good health, the two of you are in a train accident. Then imagine that your guardian, who likes you even less than you like him, escapes in the chaos while you lie unconscious, and that when you come to your discover in the wreckage a dead passenger whose features are no longer recognizable, but who happens to be wearing the exact same outfit as your guardian. Would you not do the only logical thing, and pack the corpse into a barrel and mail it to yourself so you could carry on as though your guardian were still living until you could be certain your uncle is pronounced dead first? And would you not be terribly alarmed when a prankster switched the address labels and you received in the mail, not the corpse you expected, but instead a gigantic marble statue of Hercules?

## **Kay says**

Read in March 2000. Reread in December 2016.

I didn't enjoy the second reading of this very much, I'm afraid. The humor seemed contrived and I lost patience with the lengthy, digressive preambles for each chapter. This collaborative effort between Stevenson and his stepson, Lloyd Osbourne, seemed to me to be forced and convoluted. Stevenson on his own, I think, has a much lighter touch.

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## **Cynthia says**

Muy buen libro. Aventuras de un cadáver es una historia divertida. Es uno de esos libros que me alegraba encontrar en mi velador al anochecer. Varias veces me reí con gusto aunque no creí que me gustara tanto en un inicio. Tal vez sea porque a mi me gusta el humor negro y la ironía... como sea, creo que vale la pena darle una oportunidad, lo recomiendo.

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