



## **A Child of the Jago**

*Arthur Morrison*

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## **A Child of the Jago** Arthur Morrison

This novel, first published in 1896, is the story of Dick Perrot, born and bred in the Jago; but it is also a brilliant portrait of the community. The Jago is a London slum where crime and violence are the only way of life, and from which there is no escape for the inhabitants. Only the characters themselves are fictional: Morrison's descriptions of the fearful physical conditions are based directly on what he saw. He conjures up an extraordinarily vivid picture of a world which, even as he wrote, was about to vanish in one of the first of the slum clearance schemes.

## **A Child of the Jago Details**

Date : Published August 30th 2005 by Chicago Review Press (first published 1896)

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Author : Arthur Morrison

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## From Reader Review A Child of the Jago for online ebook

### Robert burke says

Take Oliver Twist add Gissing's Nether World add violence, and hopelessness and you will have Morrison's Child of the Jago.

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### Jane says

I read the beginning of this Slum Fiction book and then work took over but picked it up again yesterday and finished it this morning. The casual violence and the hardships faced by the Victorian poor as well as the unwritten rules that governed those who lived in the Jago - an area of East London, has been an eyeopener. The material for this novel was based on people Morrison knew and genuine events. This is a heartbreaking read in many ways and was reminiscent of Upton Sinclair's The Jungle - set in the meat packing area of Chicago during the depression. Poverty is insidious and it is hard to get out!

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### David says

Imagine a book that starts out like a generic imitation of Dickens, like most Victorian socially-interested novels, initially light-hearted, which degenerates into gut-splattering violence a few chapters in.

Morrison's only remembered work displays all the hallmarks of naturalism, and is probably best remembered for its sociopathy. From the mass violence scenes where the bodies of flat, empty characters are battered to the death of Looey who is replaced by another faceless girl child, an event narrated with all the compassion of a census taker adding up the numbers of members in a family, the book places absolutely no value on human life. Dicky Perrot's rather predictable death at the end and his final comment along the lines of "there's another way out, better," seems to cap it all off. What way, might that be, Arthur? He more or less says -- and a room full of English PhDs agreed -- that Dicky's last words are the equivalent of death is better than poverty. His introduction that mentions his concern for the problems addressed just heightens the awfulness of the book's total disregard for morality.

If you like Dickens, read Dickens. If you want someone ripping off Dickens, try Walter Besant. If you want something disturbing, this doesn't even really fit the bill, lacking the camp of a serial-killer novel; the book pretends to care but really luxuriates in its own horrors. Thomas Harris has nothing on Arthur Morrison.

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### Tom says

An unflinching tale about the incredible poverty and astonishing violence found within the inner Victorian London. At each turn, our characters are presented with events more brutal than the last, wrenching the heart strings of even the toughest cockney. Much like the inhabitants of the Jago, the reader is relentlessly battered over the head, not with a cosh, but with the unrelenting suffering that occurs within the Jago. Despite this, the book is one that illuminates the strength of family and friends even during such trying circumstances, living long in the memory of those who have read it.

A Child of the Jago was written over a hundred years ago, but the desperation found in these pages is still as

relevant and shocking today as it was when it was first published. If you have a relative that appears to be turning to a life of crime, this novel is going to send them straight to the nearest religious establishment.

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### **Tao Chen says**

Not bad

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### **Elizabeth Moffat says**

The East End of London in the late 19th century was sometimes quite a pitiful place, the slums in particular, where just making it through the day was an achievement in itself. Crime, violence, prostitution and poverty were rife, and I think Arthur Morrison paints a vivid portrait of the squalor at that period of time in this short novel. Our main character, Dicky Perrott has known nothing else but the life in the Jago, with only one rule for life – “thou shall not nark,” and seen no other solution to his family’s poverty but crime. Unfortunately, his father is not much of a role model for him, when he is imprisoned for theft and violence against a “High Mobsman,” and his mother did little to gain my sympathy by playing a rather passive role in trying to improve their situation.

What did surprise me about this book was the level of violence which I hadn’t expected from the onset. There are rival gang wars and murders aplenty, and the horrifying tradition of “coshing,” where a young woman would distract the gentleman target enough so that he could be bopped on the head and left unconscious, while the perps made off with anything valuable he had on him. Throughout the novel, there is an air of melancholy, made even more poignant by the fact that we know as the reader that these were people’s situations in the East End at that time, and either nobody seemed to give a damn, they flat-out denied there was even a problem, or they turned a blind eye to the ghastly poverty. Father Sturt, who comes to take over the parish (and save all the sinners) is a beacon of light through the story, attempting to change the tenant’s fortunes, even though he has little hope of succeeding.

So, as a novel describing the East End, Arthur Morrison captured the situation so perfectly, and I did enjoy the book as a whole, understanding the message he was trying to get out, although it felt in general that there was something missing for me. Perhaps it was slightly too short and I didn’t feel I got to know the characters properly, although I have to admit the ending really lifted the book again in my estimation, it was fast-paced, exciting, and thoroughly horrible!

Please see my full review at <http://www.bibliobeth.wordpress.com>

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### **Sandra says**

Painful story of an impoverished family in London who must lie, steal and murder to feed themselves. Statement on the demoralizing effects of hunger, poverty and ghetto mentality.

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### **Rachel Stevenson says**

Gang violence, running battles with the police, an underclass stealing everything that isn't nailed down? Let's hope Osborne & co haven't read this novel; they'll be using it as a blueprint for our future society.

Coming off somewhere between Dickens and Zola, Morrison writes not particularly sympathetically about life in the Victorian Shoreditch slum but posits, against the prevailing belief of the time, that criminality is caused by poverty rather than it being the natural character of the underclass. Morrison died in 1945 so didn't get to see the changes in the East End; how surprised he'd be by Shoreditch nowadays.

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### **StrangeBedfellows says**

When this was presented to me as a "slum novel" I was prepared to hate it. I expected poverty, thugs, filth ... in short, a celebration of human indecency, like "Gangs of New York" in prose form. Well, there was certainly all that, yet strangely I still liked it.

Through all the suffering, ugliness, and ignorance portrayed in this novel, there is also a childlike ... sweetness, for lack of a better word. And not simply because the story focuses on a young boy and his interactions with family, friends, and neighbors. All the denizens of the Jago exhibit a poignant appeal that has them coming across as tangible, complex characters.

I think this an overlooked gem of British literature, quite unlike the other British literature of this period that I have read. I would definitely recommend it to others, especially those looking for something that "feels" real. After all, this book was inspired by the author's observations of the real London slum, the Old Nichol. Reading becomes an exercise in morbid fascination, as you wonder how much is fictionalized and how much is genuine.

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### **Abigail says**

A pretty good read--well-written, and Morrison does not shy away from brutality. The end feels very sudden.

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### **Tara Thomas says**

Written a few years after his Tales of Mean Streets, this is a more detailed account of slum life in the Jago (Old Nichol slum in London) as it's being torn down around them. A story about the childhood of Dicky Perrott as he struggles to escape a life of crime. Morrison is critical of philanthropic and church institutions, class struggle, and warfare between adjacent slums surrounding the ghetto, while depicting Dicky's father figures, Fagin-like characters, a shop keeper, and a preacher who attempts to give him hope. Such a sad ending!

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### **Mel says**

While not a fan of most of his short stories I thought I should probably try and read Morrison's novel about the slums in East London. It was odd in lots of ways. It seemed to be under the impression that every poor person was a criminal, and that they were criminals because it was easier than working, not because there were no jobs. (Women's work was ignored or discounted). The oddest thing was that a bunch of homes were destroyed and people made homeless in order to build a new church at great expense. But of course this wasn't considered a "bad thing". I think it was good to have read this. Particularly for my new job. But I'm not sure I'd recommend it as it seemed to glorify the worst stereotypes. It was like he was wanting to be Zola, but failing on so many levels!

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## Peter says

Naturalism has been called the literature of "pessimistic materialistic determinism"...and by golly Arthur Morrison gives us a basinful in *A Child of the Jago*, his 1896 novel of slum-life in the East End of London. Taking his cue from arch-Naturalist Émile Zola's view of mankind as "*human beasts*", Morrison tells the story of young Dicky Perrott – doomed at conception to poverty, squalor, ignorance, immorality, and violence thanks to "*the grimed walls and foul earth*", "*the close, mingled stink*" of the Jago slums.

This is not so much a novel as a fictionalized anthropological study of an alien underclass by a highly biased observer. The book was dedicated to (and largely commissioned by) Arthur Osborne Jay, a muscular and rather eccentric clergymen who appears in the novel in the guise of Father Sturt. Jay worked in the Old Nichol Street rookery – the model for the fictional Jago – and though he may have done his best to help individuals, took an extraordinarily pessimistic view of his neighbours en masse. In his opinion, they were condemned by their hereditary environment to lives of vice. You just had to look at their bestial and subhuman phrenology. Best to level the slums and transport the residents to some not unpleasant penal settlement, managed so as to "to stop the supply of persons born to be lazy, immoral, and deficient in intellect". Eugenics – the scientific answer to the blighted lives of the poor!

All this means that, as a piece of fiction, *A Child of the Jago* is dispiriting. Not so much for its content – some of the slang and period descriptions are lively enough – but for the way its pseudoscientific message is hammered home page after page after page. The deliberately stereotyped characters can never be more than cartoon-like and are led through their predestined paces for the education of the shocked but concerned Victorian reader. A bit of Dickensian sentimentality and good humour wouldn't have gone amiss – but no such luck. "*Here lies the Jago, a nest of rats, breeding, breeding, as only rats can...Is there a child in all this place that wouldn't be better dead – still better unborn?*" Amen to that, says Father Sturt. And so the book beats on till death and slum clearance bring it to a close. Interesting as a piece of period social commentary perhaps, but not much of a literary treat.

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## Jennifer says

Four stars for Morrison's riveting tale, and a fifth for Diana Maltz's introduction and choice of material for the appendices. A great source of information about the Old Nichol neighborhood in the late nineteenth century.

Another outstanding publication from Broadview Press.

## Paul Bryant says

This novel is 156 pages long but you have to have all the extra 60 pages of notes & glossaries & so forth because of this kind of thing:

*They and their friends resorted to a shop in Meakin Street kept by an “ikey” tailor, there to buy the original out-and-out benjamins, or the celebrated bang-up kicksies, cut saucy, with artful buttons and a double fakement down the sides*

Or

*Those of the High Mob were the flourishing practitioners in burglary, the mag, the mace, and the broads with an outer fringe of such dippers as could dress well, welshers and snidesmen.*

So this is a short novel of life in the very worst slum in the East End of London around 1890, where the death rate was four times higher than London in general. We follow the fortunes of the Perrott family and it is no spoiler to say that the general drift is down, down, down and down.

Morrison veers between broad satire, low comedy, and bald tragedy. He distinctly echoes Dickens’ brilliant sketches of lowlife. Our hero Dicky Perrott learns to become an Artful Dodger character, and his main criminal accomplice is a fence who is surely first cousin of Fagin.

In the late Victorian period the astonishing squalor and wretchedness of the East End (and other English slums) became a source of fascination for the army of middle-class do-gooders (parodied here as the East End Elevation Mission and Pansophical Institute) and there were a bundle of books, novels and reportage, published –

In Darkest England  
Homes of the London Poor  
Workers in the Dawn  
How the Poor Live  
Life below the Surface  
Neighbours of Ours : Slum Stories of London  
Maggie : A Child of the Streets

You can see it was a whole genre. A Child of the Jago became maybe the most famous, most read, and most discussed of all of these.

By the way, the genre continues into our own times – check out Lou Reed’s great album New York which is a meditation on ghetto life

*Pedro lives out of the Wilshire hotel  
He looks out a window without glass  
The walls are made of cardboard, newspapers on his feet  
His father beats him cause he’s too tired to beg*

*He’s got 9 brothers and sisters*

*They're brought up on their knees  
It's hard to run when a coat hanger beats you on the thighs  
Pedro dreams of being older and killing the old man  
But that's a slim chance  
he's going to the boulevard  
He's going to end up, on the dirty boulevard*

(Dirty Boulevard)

And Neil Young from his album Freedom

*I see a woman in the night with a baby in her hand  
Under an old street light near a garbage can  
Now she puts the kid away, and she's gone to get a hit  
She hates her life, and what she's done to it  
There's one more kid that will never go to school  
Never get to fall in love, never get to be cool.  
Keep on rockin' in the free world*

(Rockin' in the Free World)

And you may also check out several movies like *Boyz n the Hood*, *Menace II Society* and *City of God*.

So none of this has gone away.

This bitter novel has a raw energy and is surprisingly nasty. The violence which permeates every facet of slum life is wearing, as is the constant near-starvation. Usually, writers on the underclass turn out to be keeping some kind of patented socialist solution close to hand, to brandish in the closing chapters or to berate the reader with in the introduction. Arthur Morrison had no such beliefs in improvability. He seems to have thought that the slum families were born into Hell and lived in Hell and died in Hell and could never get out of Hell due to their own corrupted natures and the incorrigibility of their environment. A cheerful soul, our Arthur. And yet, why write a novel like this at all if not as a protest? And why protest something which can never be ameliorated?

Utterly bleak it may be, but *A Child of the Jago* was criticized by several writers at the time of pulling its punches.

The book grew out of Mr Morrison's friendship with a pastor who was working in the slums here depicted, and he is the hero of the novel. He really does do a lot of good work. He almost acts as a corrective to the bleak wail of despair which is the rest of the novel. But he's just one guy. What you are left with is an acrid aftertaste and the sound of broken glass.

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## **Tshana says**

This book was an eye-opener for me. Although, set in an English slum in the Victorian era, this story can be applied to dwellers of the inner-city in my own country.

It seems that Morrison wants the reader to think about how social class impacts on an individual's destiny. From an early age, Dicky Perrot appeared to be on a downward spiral, not because he was a bad person but due to the fact that he grew up in an environment that never stimulated positive moral development.

Productive ambition was never an option because he did not know that his life could be better until the vicar got him a job. I think this illustrates that children need to be encouraged to dream about success and constantly told that they are capable of achieve such success. His attitude to the new job was heartwarming.

Mr. Weech who I would call the main antagonist of the book, selfishly thwarts any dreams that Dicky has of success. At this point of the story, I wished that I could somehow enter the Jago and set things right.

The conclusion evoked feelings of discomfort, sadness and weary relief.

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### **Vong says**

This book reminds me of Oliver Twist but without any 'Dicken's sentimentality.'

I was quite shocked to read about death, murder, beatings and rape described in such a stark and graphic way. But in some ways was appreciative of the fact that Arthur Morrison does not shy away from the harsh reality of slum life in 1980s London.

Unlike Morrison, Dickens rewards his character at the end with a loving middle class family. Dicky has no escape from the violent life of London.

In the same way i was quite annoyed that Dicky did not take up the opportunity to better himself at the copper shop.

Oh well you cant have it all.

This would be a great book to share with older children. year 7/8- history, english, phse?

A comparison perhaps between the two would be quite interesting. year 6 perhaps. Yes year 6 can handle this!

Recommend!

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### **BELIEVESINMIRACLES says**

This book is mch shorter than The Nether World, but follows a very similiar storyline and setting, as well as time period.

The places where this book takes place truly existed in the East End of London over 100 years ago, but no longer exists as there was a massive slum clearance many many years ago. The area was called 'The old Nichol ', and you can google it and see old maps and if lucky a few old photos taken from the area at the time.

Yet another grim, grimy, depressing and miserable story of the East End's sub poor, not just regular poor, meaning just making ends meet, I mean the type of poor where you may not eat for two days, the infant may sleep on a dirty blanket on the floor, and the wife or common law girlfriend may get a good slap in the mouth when her drunk man comes home and there is no food so no dinner.

Despite its grimness, it is in my top 3 favorite books, especially Victorian books about the East End.

A++++

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### **Nancy says**

The Jago was a corner of Shoreditch, notorious as the filthiest of London's 19th century slums. In his 2nd East End work, A. Morrison brings to life all the squalor of this area, among whose only commandment was "thou shall not nark."

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### **Melissa Jackson says**

The plight of everyone in this story is excruciating and utterly depressing to read. The despair and tragedy is literally non-stop. Yet somehow, through all the death and poverty and horror of the Victorian working class condition, there are moments of poignant beauty.

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