

# Harvard Classics (Bookshelf)



The *Harvard Classics*, originally known as *Dr. Eliot's Five Foot Shelf*, is a 51-volume anthology of classic works from world literature, compiled and edited by Harvard University president [Charles W. Eliot](#), that was first published in 1909.

Dr. Eliot, then President of Harvard University, had stated in speeches that the elements of a liberal education could be obtained by spending 15 minutes a day reading from a collection of books that could fit on a five-foot shelf. (Originally he had said a three-foot shelf.)

The publisher P. F. Collier and Son saw an opportunity, and challenged him to make good on this statement by selecting an appropriate collection of works; the *Harvard Classics* was the result. Eliot worked for one year together with William A. Neilson, a professor of English; Eliot determined the works to be included and Neilson selected the specific editions and wrote introductory notes (Kirsch 2001). Each volume had 400 to 450 pages or so; and the included texts are “so far as possible, entire works or complete segments of the world’s written legacies” (Going 2006).

The collection was widely advertised by Collier and Son, in Collier’s Magazine and elsewhere, with great success. As Adam Kirsch, writing in 2001 *Harvard* magazine, notes, “It is surprisingly easy, even today, to find a complete set of the Harvard Classics in good condition. At least one is usually for sale on eBay, the Internet auction site, for \$300 or so, a bargain at \$6 a book. The supply, from attics or private libraries around the country, seems endless—a tribute to the success of the publisher, P.F. Collier, who sold some 350,000 sets within 20 years of the series’ initial publication” (Kirsch 2001). A separate 20-volume selection by Eliot, the *Harvard Classics Shelf of Fiction*, was published in 1917.

Collier’s was a major publisher of sets in the early 1900s and throughout the century issued many multi-volume sets of authors as diverse as [Charles Dickens](#), [Rudyard Kipling](#), John Steinbeck, [P. G. Wodehouse](#) and [Arthur Conan Doyle](#).

Currently, a hardcover set of the Harvard Classics (now in the [public domain](#)) is

published by Easton Press and a paperback version by Kessinger Publishing.

See: [https://www.gutenberg.org/Harvard\\_Classics\\_\(Bookshelf\)](https://www.gutenberg.org/Harvard_Classics_(Bookshelf))