



NAXOS

AudioBooks

CLASSIC
FICTION
ABRIDGED

MERVYN PEAKE

TITUS GROAN

Read by Rupert Degas

A dramatic scene of a castle on a cliff. The castle is built on a high, rocky cliffside overlooking the ocean. The sky is dark blue with scattered white clouds. The castle has several towers and spires, with some windows glowing yellow. The cliffside is covered in green vegetation. The overall mood is mysterious and atmospheric.

1	Gormenghast taken by itself would have displayed...	7:23
2	As Flay passed the curator on his way to the door...	5:33
3	It was impossible for the apprentices to force themselves...	5:43
4	He peered at the immobile huddle of limbs.	4:40
5	From his vantage point he was able to get a clear view...	7:47
6	Her Ladyship, the seventy-sixth Countess of Groan...	4:06
7	Every morning of the year...	4:43
8	Mrs Slagg entered.	5:30
9	Leaving the tray on the mat outside...	3:13
10	Mrs Slagg made her way along the narrow stone path...	6:40
11	Titus, under the care of Nannie Slagg and Keda...	6:58
12	Tradition playing its remorseless part...	6:35
13	Meanwhile, hiding behind a turn in the passage...	4:49
14	Mr Flay was possessed by two major vexations.	4:59

15	Yesterday had exhausted him...	4:18
16	On the afternoon following her brother's birth...	6:25
17	As she stood breathless beside the table...	6:03
18	Mrs Slagg was so agitated at the sight...	6:25
19	The Doctor all this while had had his glass of cognac...	4:40
20	As he returned through the hall his mind was so engrossed...	6:49
21	Autumn returned to Gormenghast like a dark spirit...	2:50
22	The library of Gormenghast was situated...	6:18
23	At the same moment that Flay was leaving Fuchsia's bedroom...	7:07
24	Instead of crossing over to the Doctor's house...	6:45
25	When Keda came back to her people...	7:24
26	There was a discreet tapping at the twins' door.	6:42
27	'And now you must tell me, dear ladies...'	6:25

28	On one excuse or another...	4:22
29	It happened on the day of Steerpike's second daylight visit...	7:42
30	The crags of the mountain were ruthless...	6:10
31	There had been a slight but perceptible lifting...	6:05
32	Suddenly not only was Irma seized...	6:14
33	Prunesquallor did what he could to help Mrs Slagg...	4:48
34	The Doctor and Flay, leaping forward, half caught her.	6:02
35	One evening, several weeks after the burning...	5:30
36	Unable to reconcile the heroism of Steerpike's rescue...	4:08
37	It was only when the coffin stood near the graveside...	4:24
38	About a week after Sourdust's burial...	6:03
39	Spring has come and gone...	5:29
40	Suddenly a voice comes from the mouth.	4:07
41	The morning light is strengthening...	7:48

42	Steerpike has some difficulty in finding Flay...	7:21
43	Barquentine is unaware...	7:15
44	It was four days since the Dark Breakfast...	5:53
45	Wiping the sweat from his brow as he rose to his feet...	6:49
46	They were about halfway to the Hall of Spiders...	5:56
47	Swelter was running the flat of his hand along the steel...	4:56
48	Swelter, once his sense of balance was restored...	4:17
49	Of the nightmare that followed it is needful to say...	5:50
50	The inexplicable disappearance of both Lord Sepulchrave...	5:28
51	Something in a white shroud was moving towards the door...	4:34
52	The day of the 'Earling' was a day of rain.	3:37
53	Barquentine had started...	4:48
54	In the arms of the woman on the shore...	6:09

Total time: 5:09:12

Mervyn Peake

(1911–1968)

Titus Groan · Gormenghast · Titus Alone

The *Gormenghast* trilogy (as *Titus Groan*, *Gormenghast* and *Titus Alone* are slightly inaccurately known) seems at first sight out of step with its times. The first volume was published in 1946, when a numbed Britain was greyly austere, still in shock and just beginning to learn some of the broader horrors of the War: the devastating implications of the atom bomb were almost overwhelmed by the emerging atrocities of the Holocaust. *Titus Groan*, a grimly comic, fantastical, Gothic tale, was surely just an escapist work, a kind of dark relief. But while the imaginary world it so completely describes is essentially self-contained (rather than echoing the concerns of Britain in the '40s), Peake had more claim than most to an understanding of the evils in the real one. He had been a war artist at the liberation of Bergen-Belsen.

He had also suffered the first of two nervous breakdowns, and was by temperament slightly otherworldly. He was the son of missionaries – his father a doctor, his mother a nurse – and spent

his early years in China before returning to England to complete his education in 1923. Tracing specific influences is bound to lead to conjecture, but his imagination was certainly stirred by the architecture and the unquiet society of China at the time, and his first published story was written when he was 10 for the Missionary Society's magazine.

Passionate, unconventional, romantic and almost in some senses wild, he had worn a cape, an earring and his hair long in the early '30s when he was pursuing his first love (art) and his second (poetry). Despite his evident skills he was undisciplined almost on principle, and after failing the necessary exams at the Royal Academy Schools he moved to the Channel Island of Sark, where a former tutor had established an artists' colony. His work was exhibited there and in London, where in 1935 he returned and began teaching at the Westminster School of Art. He met Maeve Gilmore on her first day as a student there and they married the following year. By the end of 1940

he had had a one-man show in London, illustrated a collection of children's verse, written and illustrated a children's book himself, had a son, moved to Sussex, and begun the writing of *Titus Groan*.

He had also joined the Royal Artillery, although he was a good deal more interested in becoming a war artist. His several applications to become one were turned down in part because it was suspected that he might be applying in order to get out of the Army. It would not be an unseemly speculation to suggest that this was correct; but his mental state was such that he was invalidated out of the Army anyway after a nervous breakdown in 1943.

After six months' recovery, he was finally taken on as a war artist, and at the end of the War witnessed Nazi trials as well as the previously unimaginable concentration camps. As an artist he had always been attracted to the macabre, but this actual horror changed him deeply. His wife said that he became 'quieter, more inward looking, as if he had lost his confidence in life itself'. His other work during the War included illustrating *The Hunting of the Snark*, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, writing more

poetry, and finishing *Titus Groan*.

He and his family went to live in Sark in 1946 (the year of *Titus Groan*'s publication), in the house previously occupied by the Commandant of the German occupying force; but financial constraints forced them back to the UK in 1950, where Peake taught, illustrated, published *Gormenghast*, and wrote a comic novel (*Mr Pye*) and several plays. But the plays were not the financial winners he had hoped for, and he suffered another nervous breakdown in 1957. This led to the more evident display of the symptoms of a type of Parkinson's Disease which, alongside the effects of encephalitis lethargica that he contracted in childhood, was slowly to kill him over more than a decade.

In 1956 he wrote *Boy in Darkness*, a short horror story about Titus (although the name is not mentioned in the book), and in 1959 *Titus Alone* was published. By now, however, Peake was hardly able to write, and *Titus Alone* was incomplete on publication. Later editions were corrected by his widow and the writer Langdon Jones. Preparatory notes for a further volume (*Titus Awakes*) were also discovered among his many papers after his death.

Titus Groan

Written in various barracks around the UK during the Second World War, *Titus Groan* establishes within its opening paragraphs all the core themes of the story: the looming architecture, the dismal landscape, the equally oppressive rituals of the castle itself, and the acceptance of the lowly population of outsiders that they have no place in the arcane and elite world within the castle's walls.

But change is coming. Steely, devious, determined and unscrupulous, Steepike is not going to allow moribund rites and ancient customs to keep him in the kitchens of the vast and vengeful cook, Swelter. Outside the castle, ruled by even more stringent obligations, the beautiful Keda is loved by two men, and becomes, tragically, pregnant. Between them, these two will bring about the most profound changes at Gormenghast for generations. Meanwhile, new generations are arriving. The book opens as Titus Groan, the 77th Earl, is born, and the bizarre world of the castle prepares all the formalities of welcoming him to his duties.

This bleak world could be a satire on the already collapsing social structures of English society (after all, Arundel Castle was an inspiration for the one at Gormenghast); and Peake's childhood in China, where hierarchical absolutes dominated society even more profoundly, is also lurking in the precise, weighted prose. There is something less specific and more universal about the book, however, a suggestion of a darkness at the core of things that is not social so much as human. But crucially there is humour, too. Peake's delight in the absurd (especially the characters' names) works not just as a release of tension, but also as a signifier that the world portrayed is not merely tragic.

At a time when people were writing political dystopias and bleakly emotionless works, *Titus Groan* is far more than an escape. It feels as though it was necessary; as if there was a want in the literature then and now, and this fulfilled it.

Notes by Roy McMillan



Rupert Degas, a versatile and charismatic audiobook reader, has read a substantial list of books for Naxos AudioBooks, notably Murakami's *A Wild Sheep Chase*, *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle* and *Dance Dance Dance*, Kafka's *The Trial*, Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, Rose Tremain's *Restoration*, Tom McNab's *Flanagan's Run*, and *The Adventures of Brigadier Gerard* by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. He is in considerable demand as a voice for cartoons, and is the voice of Pantalaimon in Philip Pullman's *Northern Lights*; but he is also regularly seen in London's West End in plays as varied as *Stones in his Pockets* and *The 39 Steps*.

The music on this recording is taken from the NAXOS catalogue:

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New Zealand Symphony Orchestra; James Judd, conductor

8.557264

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San Diego Symphony Orchestra; Yoav Talmi, conductor

8.553597

Credits

Produced by Roy McMillan

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Edited by Sarah Butcher

Music programmed by Sarah Butcher

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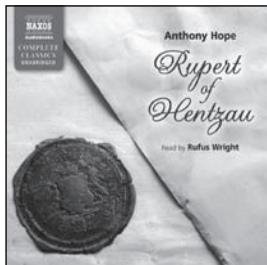
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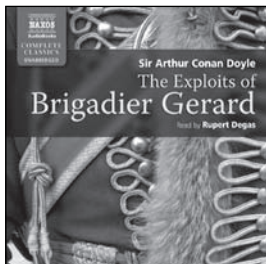
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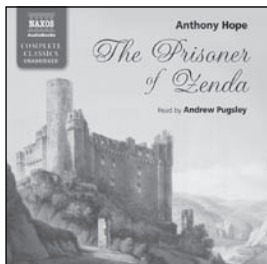
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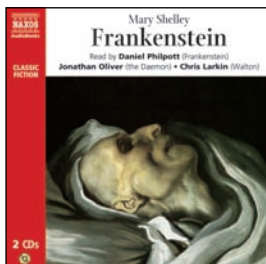
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