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The Brothers Karamazov



Synopsis

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Customer Reviews

"I would die happy if I could finish this final novel, for I would have then expressed myself completely." This statement from Fyodor Dostoyevsky helps elucidate both the theme and purpose of *The Brothers Karamazov*, one of the greatest masterpieces of world literature. Superficially, the novel deals with a patricide and how each of the book's characters contributed directly or indirectly to that murder. Yet, *The Brothers Karamazov*, at its heart, is so much more. Its underlying theme deals with the drive for self-redemption in the eyes of both God and man and the role suffering plays in facilitating that redemption. Fyodor Karamazov has fathered four sons, Dmitri, Ivan and Alyosha, by two wives, and one, Smerdyakov, with a peasant woman known as stinking Lizaveta. Fyodor Karamazov, a vulgar and ill-tempered man represents, for Dostoyevsky, the Russian government of his times. Like the government, Fyodor shuns his children, preferring instead the materialistic, but joyless, life of wealth and possessions. His union with Lizaveta, who comes to represent all the peasants of Dostoyevsky's Russia, produces Smerdyakov, a bastard child who, in his own turn, will be raped and pillaged by the government and will go on to give birth, metaphorically, to bastard children of his own. Karamazov's eldest son, Dmitri, an impulsive sensualist, finds respect as an overbearing soldier but one whose inability to pay his debts eventually turns him into a poor and irrational man. Ivan, Fyodor's second son, is a cold intellectual who finds his fulfillment in his literary and creative abilities. He becomes famous through his writings, especially those concerning the Russian Church.

This book is over 900 pages long, and it took me only 2 weeks to read it, while working full time, which is a true testament to its compelling plot and masterful prose. That being said, this is not an

easy read, but demands much of the reader. Besides being the recounting of a fictional parricide and the ensuing courtroom drama, this is also Dostoevsky's greatest rumination on the meaning of life, the difference between good and evil, the phenomenon of human guilt, and the existence of God and the Devil. Phew. The novel begins with introduction of the three Karamazov brothers (there is one other bastard son, but he is largely in the background), Alexei, Dmitry, and Ivan. All are unique and represent different parts of the human psyche. Alexei is benevolent and good, Dmitry is passionate and generous, Ivan is serious and intellectual. They all have their inner battles with God, which Dostoevsky brilliantly brings into the plot without losing the believability of the characters. About halfway through the book, their father, Fyodor Karamazov is murdered. Much like Dostoevsky's victim in "Crime and Punishment", Fyodor is an unsympathetic character who treated his sons horribly. Dmitry is the immediate suspect and a trial follows. Even though Dmitry is blamed for the murder, this novel circles around collective guilt in the eyes of God (if he exists, which is a question that clearly torments Dostoevsky). Who is responsible for the maltreatment of the Karamazov children? Who is responsible for tolerance of Dmitry's excesses? A rich cast of characters brings every possible aspect of personality into this debate, making this novel one of the most complete and well-rounded I have ever read. The theme of this book is the human condition...

Anyone interested in the central question facing mankind will find 'The Brothers Karamazov' an essential guide. That question--on man's capacity for responsibility and the proper role of the state and religion--is posed throughout the story in dialogue and events, and is framed neatly in a 20-page section where Ivan presents a poem titled 'The Grand Inquisitor' to his brother Alyosha. The chapter that bears that title (Book V, Chapter V) is a masterpiece in itself and should be studied for its narrative technique alone. But the ideas it presents are so immense, so mind-blowing and inspirational, that literary criticism is not sufficient. Indeed, 'The Brothers Karamazov' should not be classed merely as a novel--it is a book of philosophy, theology, and sociology as well that ranks with the greatest documents in those disciplines. There is a fictitious plot, of course, and the characters in the story are some of the most interesting in all of literature, so it is rightly praised as a novel. But the modern reader looking for a plot of twists and romantic intrigues is bound to disappointment. Dostoevsky does not stir up drama through the placement of unexpected developments or improbable character traits. Instead, he relies on the inherent needs and wants of all men to make vivid his story. The amount of dialogue may be shocking (tedious) to one accustomed to the modern show-don't-tell policy in storytelling. Today, novelists and screenwriters let a character's actions speak for them--it is quicker and provides a much more convincing impression. It also limits the kind

of ideas that are posed in the story to simple, prosaic ones like `she likes him' or `he wants to defeat him.

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