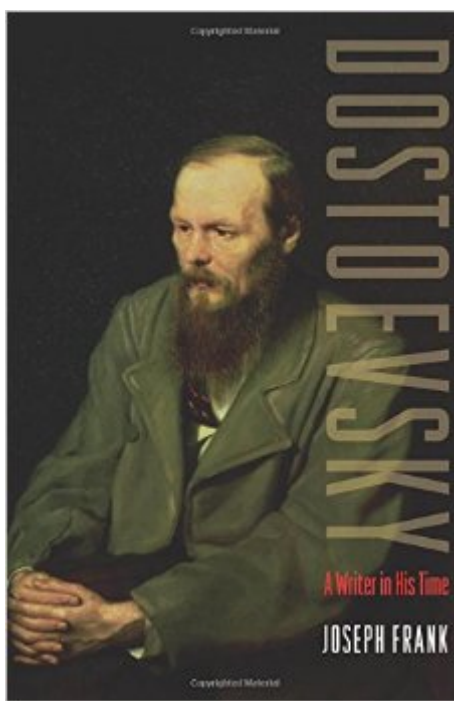


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Dostoevsky: A Writer In His Time



Synopsis

Joseph Frank's award-winning, five-volume Dostoevsky is widely recognized as the best biography of the writer in any language--and one of the greatest literary biographies of the past half-century. Now Frank's monumental, 2500-page work has been skillfully abridged and condensed in this single, highly readable volume with a new preface by the author. Carefully preserving the original work's acclaimed narrative style and combination of biography, intellectual history, and literary criticism, *Dostoevsky: A Writer in His Time* illuminates the writer's works--from his first novel *Poor Folk* to *Crime and Punishment* and *The Brothers Karamazov*--by setting them in their personal, historical, and above all ideological context. More than a biography in the usual sense, this is a cultural history of nineteenth-century Russia, providing both a rich picture of the world in which Dostoevsky lived and a major reinterpretation of his life and work.

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Customer Reviews

Here are some of the reasons to read *DOSTOEVSKY: A WRITER IN HIS TIME*, despite its formidable length: Because it itself is an abridgement of the five separate volumes (averaging 500 pages each) of the magisterial biography Joseph Frank wrote over a 25-year period. Because Fyodor Dostoevsky was one of the world's greatest authors and, intellectually (as well as spiritually?), one of the most complex of the world's great writers. Because with Dostoevsky, knowledge of his life and times is more helpful in understanding his literary work than is true for many authors. And because Frank's biography - both in its original five volumes and in this one-volume abridgement - is the definitive study of Dostoevsky's life and work, at least in English

(and is likely to remain so for decades to come). Here are some of the major points discussed at some length in Frank's biography that are most germane to an understanding of Dostoevsky the author:* Of all the great Russian writers of the nineteenth century - including Pushkin, Lermontov, Gogol, Turgenev, and Tolstoy - Dostoevsky was the only one who did not come from a family belonging to the landed gentry. On his father's side, he was descended from Lithuanian nobility, but the family had fallen to "the lowly class of non-monastic clergy." While his family was not poor, it certainly was not wealthy, and in the course of his life Dostoevsky had much greater exposure to the Russian masses than, say, his contemporaries and rivals Turgenev and Tolstoy. One result was that throughout his life Dostoevsky evinced genuine empathy for the Russian peasantry still untouched by secular Western culture.

In the 1960s, when Joseph Frank submitted his first manuscript for a volume on Dostoevsky's fiction to Oxford University Press one reader summarized its negative reception bluntly: "I don't see how Mr. Frank can write so many pages about Dostoevsky without saying anything of his life." With the publication of *Dostoevsky: A Writer In His Time* earlier this year, a massive abridgement of five volumes written over three decades, Frank breaks once and for all with his early critic's stilted categories in portraying the human subject. His innovative method of biography, influenced heavily by literary criticism, starts with artistic expression and moves backward, seeking to carefully situate his subject within ideological context. The conventional biographical point of view, Frank clarifies early on in his preface, does not do justice to the complexities of Dostoevsky's creations (xiii). Thus, a precise account of an era's ideological doctrines reflected and refracted in literary achievement is the best way to fully grasp that era's most dominating figures. Frank's objective in the abridged version is unwavering: to furnish readers with the context--social, cultural, literary, and philosophic--that will help forward a better understanding of the work (xiv). Whether or not Frank's biographical approach ought to be generalized as a model is debatable but such an approach, few would contest, is uniquely useful for Dostoevsky; the Russian literary giant was so shaped and consumed by the intellectual debates in the second half of the 19th century that his writing emanates almost naturally in capturing and defining the era's ideological--and Western literature's eternal--strivings.

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