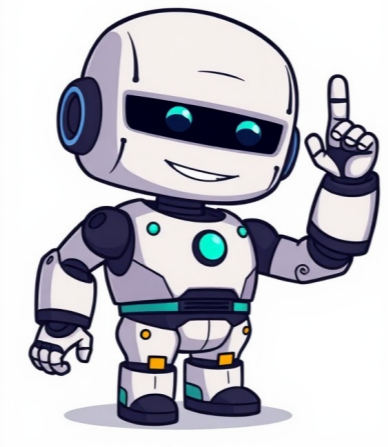


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Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky (Фёдор Михаи́лович Достое́вский, sometimes transliterated Dostoyevsky (November 11, 1821. – February 9, 1881) was a nineteenth century Russian novelist considered by many critics to be among the greatest writers of his or any age. His works had a profound and lasting impact on twentieth-century thought and fiction. Often featuring characters with disparate and extreme states of the mind, his works exhibit both an uncanny grasp of human psychology as well as penetrating analyses of the political, social, and spiritual state of Russia during his time. Many of his best-known works are prophetic as precursors of modern-day thought and preoccupations. He is sometimes said to be a founder of existentialism, most notably in *Notes from Underground*, which has been described by critic Walter Kaufmann as "the best overture for existentialism ever written." Ironically, it was not a worldview which Dostoevsky personally endorsed. After his arrest and exile to Siberia, his work took a dramatic shift. His greatest concern appears to have been the loss of spiritual values, especially by the rationalists of his day. Progressives of all stripes, taking their cue from Jean Jacques Rousseau, held that human beings were basically good, but that society was corrupt; therefore by changing the social conditions, people's natural goodness would shine through. Dostoevsky's response, as in his *Notes from Underground*, was simply to portray human irrationality. Rather than argue with socialist ideology, Dostoevsky was satisfied to simply describe human irrationality, which could not be redeemed by merely changing the social order. His novel, *Besy*, (literally, "Demons") translated as either *The Devils* or *The Possessed*, is often credited with foreseeing the coming of communism to Russia. He feared that rationalism would lead to disastrous consequences in Russia because, as he famously put it, "Without God, everything is permitted." Biography Dostoevsky was the second of six children born to Mikhail and Maria Dostoevsky(4). Dostoevsky's father Mikhail was a retired military surgeon and physician who had practiced at the Mariinsky Hospital for the Poor in Moscow. The hospital was located in one of the city's worst areas, and the patients included a cemetery for criminals, a lunatic asylum, and a public orphanage abandoned in 1846. This urban landscape made a lasting impression on the young Dostoevsky, whose interest in and compassion for the poor, oppressed and tormented was apparent. Though his parents forbade it, Dostoevsky liked to wander out to the hospital garden, where the suffering patients sat to catch a glimpse of sun. The young Dostoevsky loved to spend time with these patients and hear their stories. There are many stories of Dostoevsky's father's despotic treatment of his children although letters and personal accounts demonstrate that they had a fairly loving relationship. Shortly after his mother died of tuberculosis in 1837, Dostoevsky and his brother were sent to the Military Engineering Academy at Saint Petersburg. Fyodor's father died in 1839. Though it has never been proven, it is believed by some that he was murdered by his own serfs. According to a popular account, they became enraged during one of his drunken fits of violence, restrained him, and poured vodka into his mouth until he drowned. Most critics reject this version of events. Its acceptance appears to be based on a similar account that appears in "Notes From the Underground." Most now believe that Mikhail died of natural causes, and a neighboring landowner invented the story of his murder so that he might buy the estate inexpensively. Epilepsy Dostoevsky had epilepsy and his first seizure occurred when he was nine years old.[5] Epileptic seizures recurred sporadically throughout his life, and Dostoyevsky's experiences are thought to have formed the basis for his description of Prince Myshkin's epilepsy in his novel *The Idiot* and that of Smerdyakov in *The Brothers Karamazov*, among others. At the Saint Petersburg Academy of Military Engineering, Dostoevsky was taught mathematics, a subject he despised, and he also studied literature by Shakespeare, Pascal, Victor Hugo, and A. Hofmann. Though Fyodor never received a commission in 1841. That year, he is known to have written two romances, inspired by the German Romantic playwright Friedrich Schiller: *Mary Stuart* and *Lis and Godunov*. The plays have not been preserved. Dostoevsky described himself as a "dreamer" when he was a young man, and at that time revered Schiller. However, the "dreaming" which yielded his greatest pieces, his opinions changed, his opinions changed sometimes poked fun at Schiller. Beginning of literary career Dostoevsky was made a lieutenant in 1842, and left the Engineering Academy the following year. He completed a translation into Russian of Balzac's novel Eugénie Grandet in 1843, but it brought him little or no attention. Dostoevsky started to write his own fiction in late 1844 after leaving the army. In 1845, his first work, the epistolary short novel, *Poor Folk*, published in the periodical *The Contemporary* (Современник), was met with great acclaim. As legend has it, the editor of the magazine, poet Nikolai Nekrasov, walked into the office of liberal critic Vissarion Belinsky and announced, "a new Gogol has arisen!" Belinsky, the most famous critic of his day, had championed the career of Gogol and the early Dostoevsky as voices of protest against the Tsarist regime. After the novel was fully published in book form at the beginning of the next year, Dostoevsky became a literary celebrity at the age of 24. In 1846, Belinsky and many others reacted negatively to his novella, *The Double*, a psychological study of a bureaucrat whose alter ego overtakes his life. Belinsky reacted negatively to this move away from the sympathetic portrayal of the lower classes, and Dostoevsky's fame began to cool. Exile in Siberia Dostoevsky was arrested and imprisoned on April 23, 1849 for being a part of the liberal intellectual group, the Petrashevsky Circle. Tsar Nicholas I responded to the Revolutions of 1848 in Europe by cracking down on internal dissent. On November 16 that year Dostoevsky, along with the other members of the Petrashevsky Circle, was sentenced to death. 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Exile in Siberia Dostoevsky was arrested and imprisoned



With the famous Grand Inquisitor chapter, Dostoevsky delivers one of literature’s most iconic novel.1. Crime and Punishment (1866)Dostoevsky’s most iconic novel, Crime and Punishment (1866) dives into the feverish mind of Rodion Raskolnikov, a former student who believes his superior intelligence entitles him to commit murder for what he perceives to be a moral calling. Regardless, after killing a pawnbroker, Raskolnikov is consumed by psychological and moral unraveling that drives him to madness. The novel doesn’t merely ask whether crime can ever be justified; it compels readers to sit with the weight of their actions, moral hypocrisy and the ways guilt can eat away at our very core. With this book, every page is a battle between conscience and rationalization, with Raskolnikov’s sickly psyche as the battlefield.Bottom LineDostoevsky’s writing was born from personal struggles and philosophical quests, and those are the two things that have made his works a landmark in literature. His ability to engage in prose that defined faith, human promise suffering and ultimate morality showed a keen awareness about the human existence. Whether through the existentialism of The Brothers Karamazov or the impulsive tension of The Gambler, Dostoevsky has continued to provoke readers to sit with hard questions and understand their underlying answers.For more curated lists of books by genre, please visit our books hub. Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821-1881) was a Russian writer whose works greatly influenced literature and existentialism. Along with fellow 19th-century Russian author Leo Tolstoy (see our reading list of Tolstoy’s best books here), Dostoevsky is one of the most prominent literary figures in history, celebrated for his profound exploration of human psychology, morality, and the human condition. (See, for example, this famous Dostoevsky passage on true security).Dostoevsky stands at the intersection of literature and philosophy, wrestling with classic existential themes like suffering, guilt, freedom, responsibility, the existence of God, and the struggle for meaning. (To learn more about how such themes feature in existential philosophy generally, check out our short introduction to existentialism, as well as our reading list of existentialism’s best books).A genius observer of the human psyche, Dostoevsky’s characters are never merely ‘good’ or ‘bad’, but category-defying, flawed, contradictory — in other words, extremely well drawn and deeply human.Philosophers and writers have been greatly inspired by Dostoevsky’s insights into the human condition. Friedrich Nietzsche, for instance, (see our reading list of Nietzsche’s best books here) wrote:Dostoevsky was the only psychologist from whom I had anything to learn: he belongs to the happiest windfalls of my life. One short philosophical email each Sunday. Unsubscribe any time.This reading list consists of the best books for getting started with Fyodor Dostoevsky. After reading it, you’ll understand exactly why Dostoevsky is considered one of the greatest and most psychologically insightful writers in history.1. Crime and Punishment, by Fyodor DostoevskyWritten over 11 frantic months and first published in 1866, Crime and Punishment is Dostoevsky’s most famous book — and for good reason. This is arguably one of the most important novels ever written: its searing psychological depth changed perspectives on what novels could do.Over 720 magnificent pages, Dostoevsky tells the story of Raskolnikov, a destitute and desperate former student whose grappling with his own conscience makes for haunting, enthralling reading.Covering existential themes like suffering, guilt, and the possibility of meaningful redemption, Crime and Punishment is simply a must read for anyone interested in Dostoevsky, philosophical literature, or literature generally.2. Notes from Underground, by Fyodor DostoevskyIf you’re keen to get into Dostoevsky, but not sure about diving into one of his longer works straight away, then his 1864 novella Notes from Underground is the perfect place to start.The unnamed narrator of Notes from Underground is one of the most distinctive voices in literature, characterized by all the classic themes you expect to find in a work by Dostoevsky: isolation, suffering, and existential angst.A masterclass in exploring humanity’s irrational and self-contradictory nature, Notes from Underground belongs on the bookshelf of anyone interested in Dostoevsky.3. The Brothers Karamazov, by Fyodor DostoevskyWhile Crime and Punishment is Dostoevsky’s most famous novel, The Brothers Karamazov is often touted as his masterpiece.Sigmund Freud described it as the “most magnificent novel ever written.” The writer Joyce Carol Oates, meanwhile, notes:There is no writer who better demonstrates the contradictions and fluctuations of the creative mind than Dostoevsky, and nowhere more astonishingly than in The Brothers Karamazov.First published in 1880, The Brothers Karamazov — packed with darkly wonderful prose — follows the lives of three brothers, each battling their own personal demons. One of its key themes is “if God does not exist, then everything is permitted.”Dostoevsky’s most sustained investigation into the depths of humanity and the meaning of life. The Brothers Karamazov is epic in length, scope, and reputation, rendering it necessary for any Dostoevsky collection.4. The Idiot, by Fyodor DostoevskyWhile Crime and Punishment portrays the struggles of a guilty man, The Idiot (written immediately after the former, and first published in 1869) portrays the struggles of a man of perfect innocence.Taken together, the two books thus form a brilliant critique of society from the perspectives of saint and sinner. In a civilization obsessed with money, power, and manipulation, how are we supposed to live?While not as famous as Crime and Punishment, The Idiot is a wonderful companion to it, and contains some of Dostoevsky’s most lucid and moving prose.5. Demons, by Fyodor DostoevskyOne of his more complex and challenging novels, Dostoevsky’s Demons was inspired by the true story of a political murder that horrified Russia in 1869.Dostoevsky ferociously satirizes the political ideology bubbling at the time, yet also manages to incorporate more universal themes on human nature, the existence of God, and ultimately (as always!) the meaning and purpose of life.While somewhat less accessible than some of the other novels on this list, Demons is nevertheless a deeply rewarding read for anyone interested in why Dostoevsky is recognized as one of the greatest writers of all time.6. Notes from a Dead House, by Fyodor DostoevskyIn 1849, before writing any of his major works, Dostoevsky was sentenced to four years of hard labor in a Siberian prison camp for participating in a socialist discussion group.Notes from a Dead House (also translated as House of the Dead, and first published in 1861) is Dostoevsky’s personal memoir from that time, thinly disguised as a piece of fiction to elude government censors.Immediately before Siberia, Dostoevsky was subject to a mock execution: he and his fellow prisoners were lined up and told they would be shot. The trauma of this experience — lining up, believing it to be the end — infuses Dostoevsky’s prose with a fierce, desperate energy that went on to inform not just Notes from a Dead House but all of Dostoevsky’s subsequent writing. (Dostoevsky specifically describes what he believed to be the last moments of his life, for instance, through his protagonist in The Idiot).Far from a relentlessly bleak lament on Dostoevsky’s terrible Siberian experiences, however, Notes from a Dead House is filled with gallows humor and meditations on human freedom. “The prisoner himself knows that he is a prisoner,” Dostoevsky writes, “but no brands, no fetters will make him forget that he is a human being.”Notes from a Dead House is the book that relaunched Dostoevsky’s literary career following his imprisonment in Siberia, making him a celebrity in the creative salons of Saint Petersburg, and setting him up to write his major works.If you’re interested not just in Dostoevsky’s novels, but in the key events that shaped his life and writing, Notes from a Dead House is for you.Further readingAre there any other books you think should be on this list? Let us know via email or drop us a message on Twitter or Instagram.In the meantime, why not explore more of our reading lists on the best philosophy books:READING LISTSEssential Philosophy Books by Subject

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