

NOTES FROM: *The Brothers Karamazov*, by Fyodor Dostoyevsky

SUMMARY: *The Brothers Karamazov* is the last novel that Dostoyevsky ever wrote, and in my opinion it's one of the absolute *best books* ever written. *In all of world literature*. In fact, I took the pseudonym "Karamazov" from this very book, mostly because of the first quote below in my notes. It's a thought that's shaped my worldview and guided my thinking from the very first time I read it.

The book itself is about the three Karamazov sons (there may be a fourth, but you'll have to read the book and find out) and the murder of their father. Each brother is *completely different* from the others, and each personifies disparate themes that Dostoyevsky explores throughout the book, including love, religion, nihilism, and morality, among others.

What's so astonishing about *The Brothers Karamazov* (one of many things, I mean), is how Dostoyevsky *steel-mans* the positions of the philosophical opponents he attacks. It would have been *so easy* for him to make the representatives of different philosophies and ideas into these dumb, cardboard cutouts of the real thing. He could have weakened and watered down their arguments to be easier to refute, and he could have spent the whole novel just dunking on atheists and nihilists. *But he doesn't*. He actually does the opposite.

Dostoyevsky was *deeply horrified* by the creeping spread of atheistic sentiment in Russia at the time, but he doesn't make the character of Ivan Karamazov, for example, into some bumbling idiot who doesn't know what he's talking about or can't express his ideas clearly. No, in the novel, Ivan's actually *deeply* intelligent and Dostoyevsky puts into his mouth the *strongest versions* of the case against God. Likewise with other characters and debates.

Not only that, but his "good" characters aren't *all* good. They're each *believably imperfect*, exemplifying wonderful qualities and beautiful ideas and intentions, yet also possessing real human flaws, weaknesses, and shortcomings. *The Brothers Karamazov* isn't some book that is just another cheap setup for the author's ideological beliefs. It's an *earnest engagement* with some of the most important problems that humanity has ever encountered and dealt with. All this in a 19th-century murder/mystery thriller, no less!

What's even *more* astonishing to consider is how the novel describes Dostoevsky's *personal progression* through each "phase" himself: He *was* the hedonistic man of the world like Dmitry; the self-aware, anxiety-ridden intellectual like Ivan; and he, paradoxically, *grew into* the childlike, deeply faithful and sincere Alyosha. Through his near-death experience of almost being executed by the Tsar (a story for another time), being sent to Siberia and forced to do hard labor, battling poverty, losing his first wife, his brother, his son (*also named Alyosha!!!*), just on and on and on...

Through everything, Dostoevsky came to believe that life was *still* worth living. That evil may exist, but that we aren't powerless against it. That the power of active love is *real and enduring*, and that *this* earth could be the Paradise we were promised, if only we had the eyes to see it and the will to build it.

***The Brothers Karamazov* is a monument to the idea that Paradise exists, and that it's both a future promise and a present possibility. But you also have to remember, it was written to be *enjoyed*! It's not some thinly-veiled philosophical treatise, but a thrilling, exciting, funny, horrifically sad, tragic, suspenseful, *gripping novel* that's captured the imagination of the entire literary world and has never let it go. There are plenty of books that have changed my life, and there will be plenty more in the future, but I can tell you right now: I never, ever, *ever* want to go back to who I was before I read *The Brothers Karamazov*.**

“Do not weep, life is paradise, and we are all in paradise, but we do not want to know it, and if we did want to know it, tomorrow there would be paradise the world over.”

“Above all, don't lie to yourself. The man who lies to himself and listens to his own lie comes to a point that he cannot distinguish the truth within him, or around him, and so loses all respect for himself and for others. And having no respect he ceases to love.”

“What is hell? I maintain that it is the suffering of being unable to love. For that, you do not need Eternity; an hour will suffice, or even a moment.”

“I believe like a child that suffering will be healed and made up for, that all the humiliating absurdity of human contradictions will vanish like a pitiful mirage, like the despicable fabrication of the impotent and infinitely small Euclidean mind of man, that in the world's finale, at the moment of eternal harmony, something so precious will come to pass that it will suffice for all hearts, for the comforting of all resentments, for the atonement of all the crimes of humanity, for all the blood that they've shed; that it will make it not only possible to forgive but to justify all that has happened.”

“And what's strange, what would be marvelous, is not that God should really exist; the marvel is that such an idea, the idea of the necessity of God, could enter the head of such a savage, vicious beast as man.”

“Love all God's creation, both the whole and every grain of sand. Love every leaf, every ray of light. Love the animals, love the plants, love each separate thing. If thou love each thing thou wilt perceive the mystery of God in all; and when once thou perceive this, thou wilt thenceforward grow every day to a fuller understanding of it: until thou come at last to love the whole world with a love that will then be all-embracing and universal.”

“I can see the sun, but even if I cannot see the sun, I know that it exists. And to know that the sun is there - that is living.”

“Remember particularly that you cannot be a judge of anyone. For no one can judge a criminal until he recognizes that he is just such a criminal as the man standing before him, and that he perhaps is more than all men to blame for that crime. When he understands that, he will be able to be a judge. Though that sounds absurd, it is true. If I had been righteous myself, perhaps there would have been no criminal standing before me.”