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The Idiot (Bantam Classic)



Synopsis

"My intention is to portray a truly beautiful soul." -- Dostoevsky
Despite the harsh circumstances besetting his own life -- object poverty, incessant gambling, the death of his firstborn child -- Dostoevsky produced a second masterpiece, *The Idiot*, just two years after completing *Crime and Punishment*. In it, a saintly man, Prince Myshkin, is thrust into the heart of a society more concerned with wealth, power and sexual conquest than with the ideals of Christianity. Myshkin soon finds himself at the center of a violent love triangle in which a notorious woman and a beautiful young girl become rivals for his affections. Extortion, scandal and murder follow, testing Myshkin's moral feelings as Dostoevsky searches through the wreckage left by human misery to find "man in man." *The Idiot* is a quintessentially Russian novel, one that penetrates the complex psyche of the Russian people. "They call me a psychologist," wrote Dostoevsky. "That is not true. I'm only a realist in the higher sense; that is, I portray all the depths of the human soul."

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

What could have prompted me to first read "The Idiot" at age 13 on a beach vacation with my family I can not recall. What I do recall, however, is that I was fully engrossed day after day in a world of ideas, people and places far beyond my experience. Having now just "re-read" it 39 years later (following *Crime and Punishment* and *Brothers Karamazov*), I know I couldn't possibly have digested all of its ideas at that age: atheism vs. Christianity; nihilism vs. a dying social order; Eros vs. charity; truth vs. artifice; id vs. ego and superego. And yet, I also sense I know what captivated

me even then. The characters in this novel, though usually explained as symbolic of the ideas they represent, are yet the most vividly realized characters I had ever "read" then, and still. The real-time manner in which they are drawn and followed is as if the author simply recorded their actions and conversations as and where they happened. We get to know who these people are, not through narrative description, but, as if by "candid camera", observing what they say, withhold, do, and fail to do. What emerges are fascinating, at times frightening and at times affectionate portraits of real and troubled humans: Lizaveta, the flighty, but loving society mother; General Epanchin, the successful but utterly conventional man of the house; Aglaya, the childish but delightful beauty who resents her sister's and parents' expectation for her; Ganya, who wants money and love, but plays the wounded martyr while more obviously blaming his father for his failures at both; Ivolgin, the pathetic figure of an aging man who aches for dignity and respect but whose former glory is long gone and mostly imagined; and Lebedev, the likeable sycophant and name-dropper.

This is one of the more famous of Dostoyevsky's novels, and quite rightly so as it has his very-unique blend of psychology, philosophy and an unrelenting view of the bleakest recesses of the soul. I read the novel in the original Russian, so this isn't a review of any particular translation but the work itself. In brief, the book centres around a Prince who has returned to Russia after being treated for mental illness in Switzerland since his childhood (hence the idiot). He quickly becomes involved within the upper-middle echellons of St Petersburgian society, as people become fascinated by his direct honesty, simplicity and compassion. He becomes emotionally involved with a Fallen Woman, and this develops into a love triangle with another woman, ultimately ending in --- you guessed it! - tragedy. The Idiot is portrayed as the symbol of a child-like innocence: he genuinely wants everyone to live in harmony and love. However, the falseness, politics and backstabbing of the world of Russian middle-nobility will have none of that. The plot is quite complicated - but not in terms of twists. The story is quite simple in terms of what happened, however much of it is told inside-out, focusing on the internal world of the characters. So, if you feel like you've missed something - a reason for a character's comment, an event etc, chances are, this will be revealed later on. Dostoyevsky dwells on the extreme minute aspects of the emotional lives of his characters. This is the richest aspect of the novel - and these emotions possess all the contradiction and chaos that real people have.

Having previously read my first Dostoevsky (Crime and Punishment) I was literally chomping at the bit to start reading something else of his. I am not altogether sure as to why I found The Idiot to be

the most appealing, it probably wasn't the synopsis, because I, in my ignorance, thought I was buying "The Possessed". I realized this as I pulled away from the book store, but didn't worry about it. Dostoevsky is Dostoevsky, right? Well, sort of. I was shocked when I did not find the anti-hero I expected, but Prince Lev Nikolaevich Myshkin, a pure and beautiful soul who I loved from the start. It was hard not to cheer for him throughout the course of the novel, and to feel his pain at the corrupt and confusing society that surrounded him. He is torn apart by his first love for the intriguing Nastasya Filippovna, and then later Aglaia Ivanovna, equally intriguing. I'll be the first to admit that though I loved this book I struggled through certain portions of it, namely nearly every scene Lebedev is involved in, and Ippolit's letter. The book has a very 'meandering' quality to it, and you get the feeling at times that Dostoevsky didn't have the slightest clue how he would finish it, and so stalled for time in certain areas. This didn't really diminish the book's quality, it simply made it harder to follow. Also, towards the end it seems as if Dostoevsky finally knows, and he finally hurries off. But, there is, perhaps, some of the greatest writing ever put on paper within these pages. Scenes such as Prince Myshkin's oratory on capital punishment, the party at Nastasya Filippovna's, Prince Myshkin in the house of Rogozhin, and the most chilling scene in Rogozhin's bedroom.

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