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Kierkegaard In 90 Minutes



Synopsis

“Each of these little books is witty and dramatic and creates a sense of time, place, and character....I cannot think of a better way to introduce oneself and one's friends to Western civilization.”
Katherine A. Powers, Boston Globe.
“Well-written, clear and informed, they have a breezy wit about them....I find them hard to stop reading.”
Richard Bernstein, New York Times.
“Witty, illuminating, and blessedly concise.”
Jim Holt, Wall Street Journal. These brief and enlightening explorations of our greatest thinkers bring their ideas to life in entertaining and accessible fashion. Philosophical thought is deciphered and made comprehensive and interesting to almost everyone. Far from being a novelty, each book is a highly refined appraisal of the philosopher and his work, authoritative and clearly presented. --This text refers to the Paperback edition.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Highly readable and very approachable, true of each volume in this series. This book, as well as the entire series, is light in terms philosophical exposition but highly readable and makes a good introduction as well as a good source for historical context and personal stories. In being so thin a volume, which is at once the greatest virtue and greatest vice of this book, there is not much to review or there is simply too much to be said about what is not said. I have thus presented one key take away from the book in the title to this review: Free will brings anxiety, our minds reel at choice, we must make a leap of 'faith'.

Like most of the commenters, I wasn't really thrilled with this work, although some of them sounded a little too lost in their own philosophical "stuff" for me. I hope the author hasn't looked at the reviews, because I'm sure he's a nice and smart person who knows a lot about his subject. But, I couldn't give a good review and I'm a pretty easy mark. Maybe it's the series that doesn't work for me, and this is the first one I've read. I thought his comments on some of the other philosophers were a little off although perhaps he was just trying to be breezy and show his general philosophy chops at the same time. I know some people demand examples, but I'm returning the book to the library and I probably won't have the examples for long in my head, so I'll just use one - Plato. Plato did write about "being," contrary to what the author wrote here. See the Symposium and Timaeus, for examples. Nor did Plato and/or Socrates first introduce reason into philosophy. I don't know why he suggested that. He can't believe it if he gave it some thought. I love philosophy, and I am an admirer of great philosophers. On the other hand, I think most of it, mostly the parts that do not show how little we know or what we cannot conclude, are usually rife with bologna, to use a polite metaphor. Hence I tend to like Hume, Peirce, Popper and even a very little Socrates/Plato (definitively not their political philosophy). But even all of them are capable of nonsense, least so, Hume, in my opinion, although he too was a man of his times in some respects. Philosophers also tend to write a lot and contradict themselves. It makes them themselves difficult subjects to write about. But, that doesn't mean a book about the philosopher, which at least reasonably summarizes the philosophy, can't be very good. This wasn't. Whatever organization K's philosophy might allow, it wasn't transmitted. Except for a very little bit about subjectivity, freedom . . . you know, existentialism, I really can't tell you much about his philosophy. I know, I know, it was a 90 minutes summary. I've read some excellent books about philosophy in the last year or so - At the Existentialist Cafe and a Book Forged in Hell, as examples. This wasn't one of the them. I read A Very Short Introduction to Hobbes, which, similar to this series, is a summary. It was much better. Perhaps this series is meant for those who do not read philosophy generally, although it is hard to think why they then might pick up this book except perhaps for a school report. I probably will read another 90 minute summary, but, I have some fear and trembling about it.

Understanding the basics of Kierkegaard in 90 minutes sounds promising. However, it's quite often that such exciting promises fall short. This good is a great example of this. Right now I am taking a graduate level Kierkegaard class. Having no background in Kierkegaard going into this class, I figured that this short book might help me get a general overview of Kierkegaard before I was thrown into such a hard class. This book gave some good biographical information about

Kierkegaard's early life. But other than that this book was not very helpful at all. The author seems unwilling to accept that Kierkegaard was a Christian and therefore presents all of Kierkegaard's religious work as worthless. He lets his personal views get in the way his presentation of the real Kierkegaard. This is ridiculous... On top of that, the author only focuses on a couple of works - and even though he doesn't represent well. 90 minutes has a cost...

There is a great deal of the depth of Kierkegaard's work and life that will be lost in a short overview like this. However, on balance, intertwining a biographical sketch with a discussion of his writings works out pretty well. The point of view that Prof. Strathern adopts might be a bit annoying to some. Still, he captured the sorrow and sadness of Kierkegaard's short life. The beauty of Kierkegaard's thought also shines through a bit. There is a fragmentation to his rational thought, and a tragic shift to the "irrational" (in the "leap of faith") that can shake one, even in a book as short and superficial as Prof. Strathern has produced here. In addition, Prof. Strathern's clever prose is entertaining to read, even if a "story" isn't quite what one wants with respect to someone both as eccentric and powerful a thinker as Kierkegaard. I can recommend this book as a very elementary door into a profound thinker's world.

What would Kierkegaard have thought about this book? He would have perhaps appreciated Strathern's humor, his narrative skill, his quickness of mind, his emphasizing Kierkegaard's thought as directed not to abstraction but to 'lived life.' But he probably would have resented the effort to reduce the complexities of his thought, their contradictions and dialectical intricacies to easily digestible form. For Kierkegaard 'difficulty' in itself has a value, and the path of the true truth seeker is not one which can be achieved readily, easily without suffering. The essence of Kierkegaard can only be found in confronting his own complex, and highly qualified prose. I like Strathern's books very much, but it seems to me here he chose a subject not especially amenable to this kind of treatment.

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