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Kierkegaard: A Single Life



Synopsis

Discover a new understanding of Kierkegaard's thought and his life, a story filled with romance, betrayal, humor, and riots. Kierkegaard, like Einstein and Freud, is one of those geniuses whose ideas permeate the culture and shape our world even when relatively few people have read their works. That lack of familiarity with the real Kierkegaard is about to change. This lucid new biography by scholar Stephen Backhouse presents the genius as well as the acutely sensitive man behind the brilliant books. Scholarly and accessible, *Kierkegaard: A Single Life* introduces his many guises—the thinker, the lover, the recluse, the writer, the controversialist—in prose so compelling it reads like a novel. One chapter examines Kierkegaard's influence on our greatest cultural icons—Kafka, Barth, Bonhoeffer, Camus, and Martin Luther King Jr., to name only a few. A useful appendix presents an overview of each of Kierkegaard's works, for the scholar and lay reader alike.

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Customer Reviews

Stephen Backhouse's *Kierkegaard: A Single Life* is an extremely useful book that makes Kierkegaard accessible to those just beginning to know him. Backhouse's account of Kierkegaard's life is exemplary but particularly useful is his summary of Kierkegaard's works. -- Stanley Hauerwas, Gilbert T. Rowe Emeritus Professor of Divinity and Law, Duke University
Stephen Backhouse has given us a wonderfully lively and sympathetic portrait of one of the greatest minds of the nineteenth century, sparing us nothing of

Kierkegaard's abrasive, contrarian personality, but also illuminating the extraordinary courage and spiritual depth of the man. We have waited a long time for such an accessible introduction, growing out of deep study of the abundant original sources and bringing them alive with a light and sure touch. -- Rowan Williams, Master of Magdalene College and former Archbishop of Canterbury

Drawing on the wealth of new biographical material that has become available in the last twenty years, Backhouse's life of Kierkegaard sets the Danish thinker in his time and place and does so with confidence and verve. Few books about this most subtle and elusive of figures could be described as page-turners, but Backhouse combines a fast-moving style with a strong grasp of the big issues that makes this a compelling read. For those who have not yet read Kierkegaard himself, this will leave them wanting to do so - which must be the best outcome for any work of this kind. -- George Pattison, Professor of Divinity, University of Glasgow

This is an extraordinarily likeable book about a not-very-likeable, though fascinating, figure. This is not hagiography; Backhouse gives the full measure of Kierkegaard, and loves him in all his weirdness. Backhouse is a great storyteller---witty, imaginative, and with an eye for irony and humor. This book fills a need for an introduction for the educated nonspecialist to Kierkegaard's life and thought, which are inseparable. How lucky we are that this need has been filled with such flair. -- Dr. William T. Cavanaugh, Director, Center for World Catholicism and Intercultural Theology, DePaul University

Almost every road in modern Christianity leads back, at some point, to Kierkegaard. Yet few appreciate this fact because we've lacked a knowledgeable and accessible guide. Finally, we have one in Stephen Backhouse. I've waited my whole life for this book. And so has the church. -- Dr. Richard Beck, Associate Professor of Psychology, Abilene Christian University

Stephen Backhouse has written a lively, accessible and expert introduction to an often misunderstood but hugely influential and prophetic thinker. This is an ideal place to start understanding Kierkegaard's life and thought, which has much to say to the contemporary church and world. -- Graham Tomlin, Bishop of Kensington, President St Mellitus College

Starting with the astonishing scenes at Kierkegaard's funeral, Stephen Backhouse traces the life and impact of this extraordinary, elusive, passionate critic of passionless Christianity. Backhouse's book is both learned and accessible, so that the issues that Kierkegaard wrestled with walk off the page to challenge us again today, while the man himself haunts us, calling us and hiding from us, as he did his contemporaries. -- Dr. Jane Williams, Assistant Dean and Lecturer in Systematic Theology, St Mellitus College

Kierkegaard believed that to understand an historical figure, one must be able imaginatively to become the person's contemporary. In this gripping biography, Stephen Backhouse helps us become contemporaries of Kierkegaard

himself. In these pages the Danish thinker comes alive. This book gives us an extraordinary portrait of an extraordinary human being. -- C. Stephen Evans, University Professor of Philosophy and Humanities, Baylor University
This book is a fascinating read about a fascinating person. Stephen has skillfully created a glimpse into the life and work of a perplexing and brilliant character. -- Luke Norsworthy, Podcaster and Pastor. Organization- Newsworthy with Norsworthy Podcast and Westover Hills Church

Stephen Backhouse is the Lecturer in Social and Political Theology at Mellitus College, London. He has published a number of critically well-received books and articles on religion, history, and Kierkegaard, from the popular Compact Guide to Christian History for Lion through to the academic Kierkegaard's Critique of Christian Nationalism for Oxford University Press.

This biography gives you a sense of Kierkegaard's life experience as the maligned, tormented, ridiculed figure, largely for his physical appearance which often made people, being what they are, ignore the quality of his ideas. The writing in this book is somewhat awkward with some rather unusual usages of common English terms. After the life story is told, the author then provides one- or two-page summaries of each of K's publications, so the book is a useful digest if you want to pursue further reading in K's work. Overall, an ok read.

I teach philosophy, ethics and the Christian Tradition in college and regularly spend some time with Soren Kierkegaard, particularly his book "Fear and Trembling." SK focuses on the single individual and the angst of possible futures that arise from free will. SK's nemesis is the crowd, the herd. Often called the Father of Existentialism, SK is at the headwaters of a philosophical movement that pushed back against the collectivism of Hegel and those who followed, those who saw history as revelatory of truth and of "God." As history progressed, so it was asserted, the Real and the Absolute were manifest. It was much of this genre of thought that was behind the work of Karl Marx and his utopian communism. To stand against the people manifest in the State was to stand against the flow of history and time. One can only imagine the minimal attention given to the significance of the individual and individual choice. SK was thoroughly Christian and saw in the biblical characters, particularly Abraham, true Knights of Faith, ones who saw their Absolute Duty to God and did not rely on others to mediate to them the true way. The true Christian is not a second-hander, to use the phrase of Ayn Rand. Understanding and appreciating SK is critical to unwrapping 19th century philosophical movements that rushed like a torrent into the 20th. Yet SK is notoriously inaccessible.

His use of Socratic irony and his playful use of pseudonymity for and in his books can easily lose the reader. He meant it to be so. He wrote like life is. Things don't go in straight lines. So a book that brings some blue sky to cloudy terrain is appreciated, and Stephen Backhouse's Kierkegaard: A Single Life is just that book. I have finished one reading and now on my second. I see a third reading quickly following. Not only does Backhouse offer of a graspable outline of SK, he stimulates us with it to think more deeply about the nature of truth, the depth of our struggle, and the exploits of true faith. The bottom line is that he motivates me to want to read SK more widely by giving me a frame of understanding, a rhythm of his thought process and identification of the currents and cross currents I will encounter. I will have more to add later on. But for now there is only one point to make - BUY THIS BOOK. And, oh yeh, read it, too. :-)

I loved how much I got to know about the life of the great thinker but it made a minor attempt to connect the life and thoughts as much as I was hoping. Overall I would recommend this a great primer on the Danish Gad fly.

Excellent and interesting biographical work on a popular theologian and writer!

Informative as anticipated...

The church needs Kierkegaardian figures always. We need people to stand on the outside and shout at the places the church has failed.

The book gives a clear view of one of the most misunderstood and misused philosophers. Very readable and yet structured in such a way as to give context and understanding to SK.

A lively biography that reads easily.

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