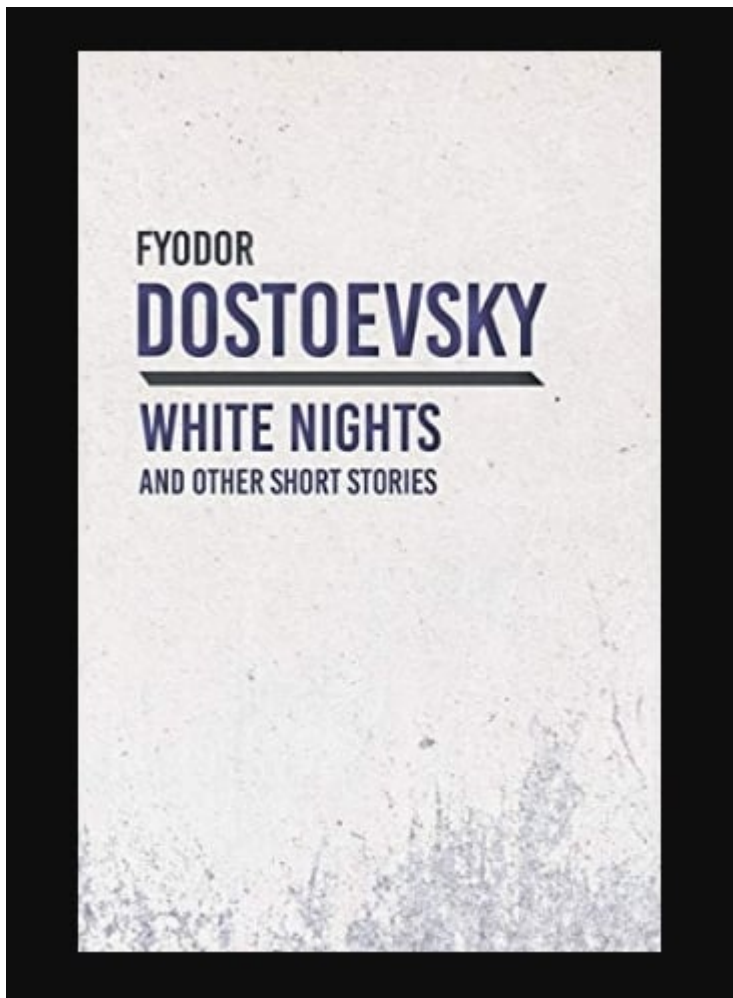


# Six Additional Brief Reviews of Novels

By Armando Simón

**White Nights and Other Stories** by Fyodor Dostoyevsky

Dostoyevsky had a sense of humor??



Dostoyevsky is one of my favorite writers, a psychological writer, a political, anti-totalitarian writer, his most famous work being the masterpiece *Crime and Punishment*.

This edition brings together ten of his short stories, of varying lengths. His most famous, most popular short story is the surrealistic *Crocodile*. As far as style, it was ahead of its time, anticipating the genre of “magical realism.” It is about a man who is swallowed whole by a crocodile that is on exhibition. Instead of dying, he remains alive inside the animal and communicates freely with persons outside the reptile. As with so many of his other characters the victim

pompously gives forth utopian theories that everyone must adhere to.

*Crocodile, Bobok, and Another Man's Wife* shows that Dostoyevsky had a great sense of humor, something that seems to be out of character for those who are acquainted with his tragic novels and his equally tragic life. In this, he is like Edgar Allan Poe, who is famous for his Gothic stories and his tragic life, but who also had a great sense of humor. With both men, the tragedy has tended to eclipse the humor.

Another characteristic of Dostoyevsky that one finds both in his novels and in the short stories, *White Night, An Unpleasant Predicament, A Faint Heart and An Honest Thief* is the ambivalence of some of his characters; they go back and forth in intent as to their plan of action, or of their feelings. This was unique with Dostoyevsky.

And, as with all of Dover publications, the price is a bargain.

**Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil: A Savannah Story** by John Berendt

Many years ago, I saw the movie based on the book and enjoyed it but saw no need to pick up the book or the DVD. Recently, I picked up the book at random and was instantly captivated by it. The writing style immediately grabs one and the narrative and the eccentric characters more charming in the book than in the movie. I was pleasantly surprised at how much I enjoyed it; in fact, there were a few instances where I laughed for a long time. I was very glad to have picked up the book. As one of the characters in the book describes the surroundings and the characters, it is "Gone with the Wind on mescaline."

It describes Savannah, the central point around which the history of the city and the odd characters revolve around the murder trial of one Jim Williams, a highly popular aristocratic antiques dealer. The entire work, though, is

character driven rather than the plot being central. And, as odd as it may sound, in the book Savannah feels like an exotic location.

### **Archangel: A Novel** by Robert Harris

Synopsis: a historian, whose specialty is the Stalin era, goes to Moscow for a conference. There, he is accosted by an old man claiming to be Beria's former henchman and to have Stalin's secret diary; the old man disappears and is soon found dead. The historian goes searching for this missing diary, ultimately ending up in the city of Archangel, but what he slowly uncovers is a secret too bizarre for him. Through his search, he becomes associated with a megalomaniac, unprincipled, American journalist and the old man's daughter, who is a prostitute. At some point he realizes that he has been a catspaw all along.

I read this book shortly after seeing the movie and both versions have some advantages over the other. The advantages of the book are as follows: in the book, you really get a feeling for just what a total scumbag is the journalist; he would get a big story even if it meant the deaths of innocents. The second advantage is that the characters in the book state that the girl has a screw loose; this is important because it explains why her last, climactic, act is so un-Russian. The third, and what I believe is the surprisingly strong, transcendental, theme of the book (which makes it much more than just a mundane mystery book): the book's theme hammers into the reader that one should pay attention to history, that it is not just a boring, academic, enterprise. One HAS to be aware of history because history has a nasty habit of turning around and biting you in the ass.

### **Facial Justice** by L. P. Hartley

I've read quite a few dystopian novels. This one has some flaws as far as narrative, but philosophically it packs a

wallop. The main attack in this dystopian novel is the obsession for absolute equality, something that the political Left is obsessed with. For example, some leftists in real life have gained control of certain institutions where games are played and thus have declared that there are to be no winners or losers in sports games. One psychologist declared that children should not have a "best friend" because it is exclusionary. All races (in people) are equal; none have detriments or advantages, IQ tests be damned. Persons who are rich should have their wealth "distributed" to those who don't have enough. Wealthy countries have A MORAL RESPONSIBILITY to bleed themselves dry economically to uplift pigsty countries. Etc.

In the book's dystopia, this philosophy is taken to its logical extreme. It is the triumph of the lowest common denominator: a leftist's dream. For example, persons who are ugly are coerced to have a neutral face. Persons who are beautiful are coerced to have the same neutral face. That way, aesthetically, everyone is equal. In the novel, though, a beautiful woman rebels against the rule of mediocrity.

### **Drudge Work** by Argo Simms

Unlike the above, well-known works, *Drudge Work* has flown under the radar and is practically unknown, which is a shame.

To use a well-worn cliché, I couldn't put this book down. First of all, don't let the cover art turn you off (usually covers have cutesy/appealing images); the asymmetrical, distorted creature is important to the plot and helps to visualize the creature.

Merrick, the hero of the story, is a grossly overweight, advanced magical apprentice (usually, the protagonists tend to be an idealized alter ego of the author; the only other work I know of where the hero is overweight is *Confederacy of Dunces*, another good book). He is a student at a university for mages

in a university town. Beginner magical apprentices, however, have a tendency to blow up, or melt, when they attempt spells. Oh, and elves tend to get drunk in pubs on olive oil.

Anyway, the story begins with a plate of delicious sausages magically appearing for breakfast. Spooked, he requests the help of Tobe, a thin classmate. Together, they make an ambulatory "10."

In a matter of days, Merrick's life becomes increasingly complicated—and deadlier—as a teenybopper cousin from a land where the undead are a common occurrence crashes at his pad. Then, Tobe has a brainstorm for an invention that will supposedly make them both rich. Then, a couple of very polite assassins/thieves want to collect a debt from him. They are followed by a murdering hideous creature out to kill him—as agonizingly as possible.

There is a lot of humor throughout the story that makes the story better (it reminded me of *The Last Unicorn* in that respect). It will definitely make you laugh—long and hard.

To be or not to be . . . that is the question.

### **Metro 2033** by Dmitry Glukhovsky

In this very popular Russian version of a nuclear apocalypse, the world has been devastated by nuclear war (of course). Numerous repulsive mutations, all of them predatory abound. Humans are an endangered species existing under the extensive Moscow subway system, and are under sporadic attack. Travel from one station to the next is dangerous. Each station has a different type of society; one is a capitalist and prosperous, another is fascist and brutal, another is communist (but curiously undescribed), another is run by Jehova's Witnesses, another by cannibalistic snake worshippers. Instead of banding together in order to survive, the remaining humans seem to be particularly stupid even engaging in wars between stations. There are no female characters in the story of any importance

and the overall mood is brutal and doomed.

The main character is given a crucial message to deliver to another, far, station by one of the pan-metro heroes which will help save the Metro. In doing so, he samples the different types of metros.

As with most apocalyptic stories, it was depressing. However, I also felt that the story itself dragged on and on at times. Maybe it's the translation, but I could not feel the horror that the author was trying to convey. Another shortcoming was the lack of even a rudimentary map for someone who has never been on the Moscow metro (although I know it is supposed to be gargantuan). Even an unfinished map would have helped to ground the reader.

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