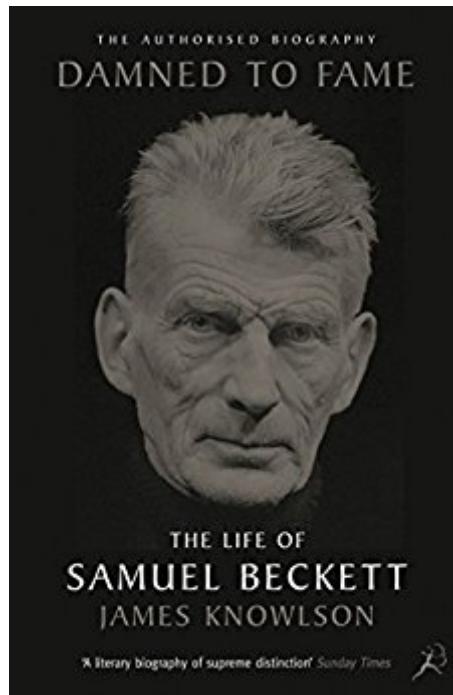


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Damned To Fame: The Life Of Samuel Beckett



Synopsis

Samuel Beckett's long-standing friend, James Knowlson, recreates Beckett's youth in Ireland, his studies at Trinity College, Dublin in the early 1920s and from there to the Continent, where he plunged into the multicultural literary society of late-1920s Paris. The biography throws new light on Beckett's stormy relationship with his mother, the psychotherapy he received after the death of his father and his crucial relationship with James Joyce. There is also material on Beckett's six-month visit to Germany as the Nazis tightened their grip.; The book includes unpublished material on Beckett's personal life after he chose to live in France, including his own account of his work for a Resistance cell during the war, his escape from the Gestapo and his retreat into hiding.; Obsessively private, Beckett was wholly committed to the work which eventually brought him public fame, beginning with the controversial success of "Waiting for Godot" in 1953, and culminating in the award of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1969.; James Knowlson is the general editor of "The Theatrical Notebook of Samuel Beckett".

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Customer Reviews

I am not sure where to start with this. I have spent well over one year going through this biography while trying to keep pace with Beckett's works as they are presented. This required some re-reads of many of his prose pieces as well as plays. Sam Beckett is not easy reading. It often (most often) requires contemplation as well as study. I don't think it is wise to take any of Beckett's work at first blush. It is often confusing, obscure and is rife with mental tongue-twisters. But when it hits home, it is as rewarding as literature gets. Often, the beauty is in the fact that you can read the work multiple times and get a different reaction each time. In that way, it is infinite. James Knowlson was the authorized biographer of Samuel Beckett and was intimately familiar with the man (as few were). This is a multifaceted story of a complex, intelligent, generous and very private man. The insight of Knowlson adds a level of illumination and understanding to Beckett's work that otherwise may be partially if not totally misinterpreted. The biography is also a keen source of Beckett the man; his agoraphobia, psychoanalysis, love of music, infidelities and quest for solitude is well documented here. I miss Beckett and I was quite sad that this book had to end. During two pilgrimages to Paris I visited some of his old haunts i.e., Closerie des Lilas, Les Deux Magots and the Select, and visited his gravesite at Montparnasse which only make me miss him more. Sam Beckett was a beautiful man. I have not read a tremendous amount of biographies, but this is far and away the best that I have read. Beckett was a 20th century man and a talent of magnitude. If you have more than a passing interest in Samuel Beckett, this cannot be missed. Easy five stars.

At the time I wrote my doctoral dissertation on Beckett's novels, back in the early '70s, there was no such thing as a biography of the man, only journalistic gossip and sidelong comments from scholars, such as Ruby Cohn, who had developed personal friendships with him in the course of their critical work. When Deirdre Bair's biography appeared in 1978, I read it with much interest, but soon with much disappointment. In addition to evident errors of fact (even in light of what little we otherwise knew at that point), the general level of analysis left much to be desired and rarely seemed to pull the writer and the work within hailing distance. After reading the first volume of Beckett's letters, which appeared recently, I was inspired (wrong word, Beckett would undoubtedly say) to pick up a copy of James Knowlson's "Damned to Fame" (1996). This is an absolutely excellent exercise, carefully supported by the evidence at every point, including material from extensive interviews conducted with Beckett during the last years of his life. One will even find notes correcting Bair's errors. If you want to know Beckett, with all the nuances, this is the biography to get--the writing is carefully crafted and, for the most part, highly readable (assuming one knows a bit

about Beckett, or is interested enough to learn), only marred occasionally by unnecessarily melodramatic passages.

Considering the voluminous experience garnered by his subject, James Knowlson does a good job in this depiction of a great writer and an even greater personality - a life that showed about as much integrity as is possible in this time on earth. Since Knowlson knew Beckett for many years, he was intimate with aspects of the life of Beckett that would elude other biographers. Yet, as good as this book is, it could have been better in that it gets awfully windy with inconsequential and petty details. Do we really need to know about Beckett's bouts with the flu, or the morbid details of so many friend's deaths over his eight decades? The fact that there are 125 (!) pages of footnotes makes one wonder where the copyeditor was on this book. Richard Ellman's "James Joyce" has but 65 pages, and that is way too many. Was Knowlson trying to outwrite Ellman on this bio or what? It sure is hard on the reader when footnoted material that should have been folded into the text is not. I suppose this is what is referred to as "exhaustive detail". In spite of my items of critique, this is still a good book and an invaluable resource for those interested in one of the 20th Century's literary giants. The bibliography is a valuable compilation in itself. As far as the Tepi review, it is overblown with false characterizations. Knowlson actually does depict the emotional struggle between Beckett and his domineering mother, while Beckett's life with Suzanne is adequately told. This is one review best ignored. Recommended reading.

Parataxis
The Cloud Reckoner
Extracts: A Field Guide for Iconoclasts
The Amplitude of Growlers, Part I
The Amplitude of Growlers - Part II

Detailed early life and education with clear links to Beckett's work, make it highly useful for the teacher of Beckett's work set for NSW HSC. Now I understand why the Irish intellectual diaspora bypassed England and went to France, leaving their priest addled country for a breath of creative fresh air, but not into the arms of the leprous class system of England.

This astonishing biography displays erudition, wit and the historical facts -thoroughly studied and analyzed- that every Beckett reader wants to know. Y enjoyed it very much indeed.

I am not qualified to judge biographies comparatively, and people sometimes have very vehement opinions on the relative merits of biographies, so here is my personal opinion of this biography. Unless Knowlson is an outrageous serial liar, you will get a lot of perspective on the surprising man Beckett was, plus reams of interesting facts, anecdotes, and so on. It is fascinating reading about

the man, and sheds a lot of light on his writings.

more than I hoped for.

Everything fine.

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