

From *The Brothers Karamazov*
to the *The Brothers K*: Dostoevsky's Last Novel
and Modern American Fiction

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The publication of Constance Garnett's translation of *The Brothers Karamazov* in 1912 was a momentous occasion in Anglo-American letters. Almost immediately, British readers showed tremendous interest in Dostoevsky's great saga of parricide and spiritual yearning, and heated opinions about the writer's genius were broadcast widely in the literary community. In 1916, John Middleton Murry published a rapturous monograph entitled *Fyodor Dostoevsky: A Critical Study*, in which he declared that in *The Brothers Karamazov* Dostoevsky gathered "all the thought, the doubt, and the faith of a lifetime, into one timeless survey of life itself" (*Dostoevsky*, 218). Yet Middleton's friend D. H. Lawrence refused to be persuaded by Murry's rapture. He wrote to Murry about his disdain: "Dostoevsky, like the rest, can nicely stick his head between the feet of Christ, and waggle his behind in the air. And though the behind-wagglings are a revelation, I don't think much even of the feet of Christ as a bluff for the cowards to hide their eyes against" (August 28, 1916; Lawrence 369). As much excitement as Dostoevsky's work generated in England, however, the impact of his art on American literature was perhaps even more pronounced. In the present essay, I would like to discuss the enduring significance of *The Brothers Karamazov* in American literature, beginning with a brief overview of the novel's reception by writers in the first half of the twentieth century and then focusing on two

more recent works of American literature, David James Duncan's novel *The Brothers K* (1991) and Dinaw Mengestu's novel *The Beautiful Things that Heaven Bears* (2007).

Critics have found Dostoevsky admirers among numerous American authors, including Theodore Dreiser, Sherwood Anderson, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Richard Wright, but it was among writers from the American South that Dostoevsky's work received its greatest resonance. In her insightful article on this topic, Maria Bloshteyn has argued that Dostoevsky's metaphysical orientation, his depictions of the struggle between faith and doubt, his interest in suffering as a potential path to redemption, and his belief that Russia was a special land misunderstood and often denigrated by outsiders, played a major role in the Southerner's appreciation of his work (6-11). Then too, Dostoevsky's late work revealed his interest in the relationship between masters and servants during a time of social transformation, as well as his enduring fascination with the dynamics of unsettled families.

Several Southern writers have singled out Dostoevsky's significance to them. Carson McCullers, for one, wrote that she read Dostoevsky with a "shock" that she would never forget. His works "opened the door to an immense and marvelous new world" (121). William Faulkner was another writer who confessed great admiration for Dostoevsky. In 1957 he acknowledged that Dostoevsky "is one who has not only influenced me a lot, but that I have got a great deal of pleasure out of reading, and I still read him again every year or so" (qtd. in Gwynn and Blotner, 69). What is more, Faulkner owned three copies of *The Brothers Karamazov* when he died (Kinney 51).

Jean Weisgerber has detailed the Faulkner-Dostoevsky relationship, and we do need to not retrace that discussion here. However, to give just one example of the ways in which Dostoevsky's influence (and particularly that of *The Brothers Karamazov*) can be felt in Faulkner's work, I would like to note in brief some significant parallels to *The Brothers Karamazov* that crop up in Faulkner's *The Wild Palms* [*If I Forget Thee Jerusalem*], published in 1939, that have not been analyzed previously. The tale follows an ill-fated love affair between a young medical school graduate and a married woman who leaves her husband and her children for her new lover. At one point, the young man, Harry Wilbourne, soberly evaluates the coldness of the modern world in terms that remind one of Ivan Karamazov's tale about the Grand Inquisitor's confrontation with Christ. Wilbourne declares: "we have got rid of love at

last just as we have got rid of Christ . . . If Jesus returned today we would have to crucify him quick in our own defense, to justify and preserve the civilization we have worked and suffered and died shrieking and cursing in rage and impotence and terror for two thousand years to create and perfect in man's own image" (Faulkner 115).

We can compare this to what the Grand Inquisitor tells a silent Christ in Ivan's Karamazov's "poem." The Grand Inquisitor is upset that Christ has returned to earth in the sixteenth century and he orders Christ arrested. Now he reproaches Christ for threatening to disrupt the equilibrium that he and the Catholic Church have been working centuries to achieve: "For fifteen centuries we have been wrestling with Thy freedom, but now it is ended and over for good" (Dostoevsky 218); "Oh, the work is only beginning, but it has begun. It has long to await completion and the earth has yet much to suffer, but we shall triumph and shall be Caesars, and then we shall plan the universal happiness of man" (224); "And all will be happy, all the millions of beings except the hundred thousand who rule over them. For only we, we who guard the mystery, shall be unhappy" (225). While delivering his diatribe, the Grand Inquisitor tells Christ that he will be burned at the stake the next day, but after Christ kisses him, the Inquisitor releases Christ with the injunction to come no more.

The conclusion of Faulkner's short novel has affinities with the ending of *The Brothers Karamazov* as well. After Wilbourne's lover dies from the consequences of an abortion she had asked him to perform on her, he is arrested and, while in jail, faces a choice similar to one confronted by Dmitry Karamazov after his arrest for the supposed murder of his father. Wilbourne is offered a chance to escape by the dead woman's husband, but he declines the offer. Dmitry Karamazov too is offered the possibility of escape from his sentence of exile to Siberia, but he is reluctant to choose what he fears would be a renunciation of the opportunity for penitence and redemption, and his fate is unresolved at the end of the novel. Similarly, after he is convicted of manslaughter, Wilbourne spurns the opportunity to commit suicide, preferring to suffer for his crime and to remain alive with his grief, rather than choose what he sees as an easy way out.

When surveying the impact of *The Brothers Karamazov* on American literature, one is struck by how often the novel's final scene captured the imagination of the American writer. In that final scene, the young child Ilyusha Snegiryov has died, leaving behind a devastated father and a set of grieving school companions. The youngest Karamazov brother, Alyosha, gathers the boys and delivers a stirring speech in which he calls

on the boys to remember Ilyusha as they grow older (one good memory may save them from sin) and predicts an eventual reunion with Ilyusha in the world to come after resurrection day. Thomas Wolfe refers to this scene in his novel *The Web and the Rock*, which was published after his death in 1939. The protagonist of the novel is George Webber, whose father had led a “lecherous, godless, and immoral life” (9), rather like that of the patriarch of the Karamazov family. Webber’s father had been unfaithful to his wife (like Fyodor Karamazov), and after her death, George was taken away to be raised by relatives, as were Ivan and Alyosha Karamazov after the death of their mother. Years later, when George is in college, he defends Dostoevsky’s art against a fellow student who argues that Dickens was far superior to the Russian writer. George delivers a passionate defense of *The Brothers Karamazov*, and he singles out Alyosha’s speech to the boys as particularly meritorious. After summarizing the speech and its invocation to preserve one good memory of someone, George asserts: “And these simple words move us more than the most elaborate rhetoric could do, because suddenly we know we have been told something true and everlasting about life, and that the man who told it to us was right” (213).

Another Southern writer, Walker Percy, also paid homage to the final scene of *The Brothers Karamazov* in his short novel *The Moviegoer* (1961). A child, the half-brother of the narrator, Binx Bolling, lies dying in a hospital, while outside, one of the other siblings asks Binx: “When Our Lord raises us up on the last day, will Lonnie still be in a wheelchair or will he be like us?” Binx responds: “He’ll be like you.” When Binx goes on to assure the children that Lonnie will even be able to ski, the children cry “Hurray!” (190), a clear echo of the final words of Dostoevsky’s novel. “Hurrah for Karamazov!” one boy shouts, and then he asks: “can it really be true what religion says, that we shall all rise from the dead, and shall live, and see each other again, everyone, and Ilyushechka?”; “Certainly we shall all rise again, certainly we shall see each other” (Dostoevsky 646). Percy himself asserted that the last two pages of *The Moviegoer* “were meant as a subconscious salute to Dostoevsky, in particular to the last few pages of *The Brothers Karamazov*” (qtd. in Lawson, 75).

Dostoevsky’s appeal in the United States reached beyond the South, of course. Kurt Vonnegut had one of his characters in *Slaughterhouse Five* (1969) utter the memorable declaration that “everything there was to know about life was in *The Brothers Karamazov*, by Feodor Dostoevsky.” “But,” the character continues, “that isn’t *enough* anymore” (129).

Beyond this assertion, however, Vonnegut's novel evinces only a few echoes of Dostoevsky's final work. The American writer shares Dostoevsky's concern with inexplicable and seemingly gratuitous suffering, and he subtitled his novel "The Children's Crusade." One character displays the vicious temperament of Fyodor Karamazov's illegitimate son, Pavel Smerdyakov. He proudly relates how he got revenge on a dog that bit him by putting metal shards in a piece of steak and feeding it to the dog. This is a pointed reminder of the nasty trick that Smerdyakov suggested to young Ilyusha. Smerdyakov had told Ilyusha to "take a piece of bread, to stick a pin in it, and throw it to one of those hungry dogs who snap up anything without biting it, and then to watch and see what would happen" (Dostoevsky 451). In Dostoevsky's novel, Ilyusha is immediately stricken with remorse, believing that his cruel act had killed the dog that ate the tainted bread. But, as events unfold, it turns out that the dog had spat out the bread, and the suffering child and the happy dog are finally reunited in an emotionally charged scene. In Vonnegut's novel, however, the dog swallowed the steak entirely, and it ripped up its insides. Vonnegut's novel, indeed, lacks the religious faith of Dostoevsky's work, and the most comforting message it is able to offer is for one to try to ignore the awful times and "concentrate on the good ones" (150).

Dostoevsky's *Brothers Karamazov* continues to make a deep impression on American writers working in the present. One of the most unusual settings in which *The Brothers Karamazov* makes an appearance in modern American literature is Dinaw Mengestu's debut novel, *The Beautiful Things that Heaven Bears*, which came out in 2007. Mengestu's work traces the efforts of an Ethiopian immigrant to make a career and a home for himself in a Washington D. C. neighborhood that is in the early stages of gentrification. Sepha Stephanos, the narrator and leading character in the novel, runs a small grocery store in a poor neighborhood while trying to fight off loneliness and depression. When two new people arrive in the neighborhood, Judith and her young daughter Naomi, Sepha takes an immediate interest in them. While his awkward attempts at getting close to Judith sadly go awry, he becomes a person of great interest to Naomi, and she insists that he read *The Brothers Karamazov* aloud to her in his store. Eventually Judith takes her daughter away, and Sepha is left to finish reading the novel alone. He notes that he kept coming back to the final pages of *The Brothers Karamazov*, "with Alyosha and the young boys gathered around him, the death of the innocent Illusha adding a

certain touching sentimentality to the scene, which continued to bring a few tears to the corners of my eyes regardless of how often I read it” (Mengestu 187-88). He read aloud to the shelves and empty aisles of his store his “favorite passage”:

People talk to you a great deal about your education, but some good, sacred memory, preserved from childhood, is perhaps the best education. If a man carries many such memories with him into life, he is safe to the end of his days, and if one has only one good memory left in one’s heart, even that may sometime be the means of saving us. (188)

Sepha confesses that he “memorized the passage” by reciting it on his way to work, and highlighted it in the book for Naomi: “*Remember this*, I wrote in the margins” (188). Unfortunately, Naomi never returns, and Sepha never passes on his beloved quotation to his young friend. The book ends on a bittersweet note, with Sepha returning to his store alone once again. Alyosha’s affirmative words linger as one of the few bright rays of hope in an uncertain world.

If Mengestu’s novel refers to *The Brothers Karamazov* only in a few select episodes, David James Duncan’s novel *The Brothers K*, published in 1992, engages Dostoevsky’s masterpiece on multiple levels. Like Dostoevsky’s novel, Duncan’s work wrestles with troubled family dynamics as well as struggles between faith and doubt, but it does so in an entirely different social and historical context: the US Northwest during the Vietnam War era. Nonetheless, Duncan foregrounds his interest in Dostoevsky through several layers of narration and plot. We can begin with the large number of chapters that open with epigraphs from *The Brothers Karamazov*. One chapter, for example, opens with this quotation from Ivan Karamazov’s remark to Alyosha when they met at a tavern for a momentous conversation in Book Five: “*It may be different for other people, but we in our green youth have to settle the eternal questions first*” (Duncan 174). Another chapter begins with a quotation from the devil who visited Ivan in Book Eleven: “*My dear fellow, intelligence isn’t the only thing. I have a kind and happy heart. I also write vaudeville skits of all sorts...*” (305).¹ Duncan even includes a false Karamazovian epigraph. A

¹ See also pages 269, 356, and 394. Duncan refers to a different work by Dostoevsky in the ironic section title “Shoats from the Underground” (371).

section entitled “Cards” begins with the following quotation: “*You got to know when to hold ‘em, know when to fold ‘em, know when to walk away, know when to run*” (369). The source of the quote is listed as “Dostoevsky, *The Gambler*.” But a footnote quickly and humorously informs the reader: “Just kidding. It was really Kenny Rogers’ ‘The Gambler’” (369). Duncan later declared in a phone interview that he reread *The Brothers Karamazov* when he was writing his novel, and decided to use his novel “to poke fun at the similarities” (qtd. in Kent). Duncan’s lightly dismissive claim is belied, however, by the deep affinities one discovers between his creation and Dostoevsky’s.

The plot of Duncan’s novel centers on the Chance family. The father was a promising baseball pitcher who crushed his thumb in an industrial accident, but who succeeded in attaining modest success in the minor leagues anyway. (This provides the alternate explanation for the letter “K” in the novel’s title. “K” is baseball shorthand for a strikeout.) Hugh Chance is married to Laura, a devout Seventh Day Adventist, and they have four sons and two daughters. The personalities of the three eldest sons have clear parallels with the personalities of the three legitimate Karamazov brothers. Everett, the eldest, is hotheaded and rebellious. Like Dmitry, the eldest Karamazov son, Everett went through a period of womanizing, and he led an unruly or disorderly life. Like Dmitry, he has a fundamental conflict with one of his parents, but in Duncan’s novel, it is the mother with whom he clashes, not the father. We shall return to this shortly. Analogous to Ivan, the second Karamazov son, the second Chance son—Peter—is the intellectual of the family. He is called by his youngest brother Kincaid, the main narrator of the novel, “the Perfect Scholar” and “immodestly bright” (221). From an early age, Peter adopts a skeptical approach to authority. As a boy, he told Everett that if Christians had any “horse sense” they would write themselves a new Bible, “sticking some evolution in there this time” (33). He gave his Sabbath School teachers “ulcers of the brain” by being as fond of Buddha and Krishna and Odin One-Eye as of the Adventists’ God (60). He later declares that crosses are “not just decorations on steeples. They’re murder weapons . . . the same as guns, or gas chambers, or electric chairs” (97). His incisive theorizing evokes Ivan’s theological ruminations. The third Chance son, Irwin, is by far the most devout follower of the religious teachings of his mother’s church, and in this he recalls the spiritual orientation of the third Karamazov brother, Alyosha. Duncan himself underscores this association by drawing the epigraph to Chapter Three of Book Four, which deals with

Irwin, from a passage in *The Brothers Karamazov* that states that Alyosha's religious path was "a means of escape for his soul from darkness to light" and that Alyosha belonged to a generation that was "seeking for immediate action, and ready to sacrifice anything, even life itself" (Duncan 356; Dostoevsky 28).

What makes Duncan's novel so interesting, though, is not the parallels he creates between his characters and those of Dostoevsky, but rather the idiosyncratic variations and twists he works on these parallels. These variations can already be seen in his treatment of the parents. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, the patriarch of the family is a religious skeptic. He mocks the idea of material punishment for sinners in the afterlife, and he agrees with Ivan that there is no God and no immortality (Dostoevsky 27, 120). Fyodor's wife, however, is deeply religious, and she becomes hysterical when Fyodor threatens to spit on her icon (123). Duncan takes Dostoevsky's concept of a father's religious skepticism and a mother's devout religiosity and tweaks it significantly. Laura Chance is not just a devout Christian; she is fanatic in her faith. She clings to religion as a refuge and potential path to salvation because of the sexual abuse she suffered at the hands of her father when she was just a child: the Church helped her escape the man's clutches.

As the novel unfolds, though, it appears that her faith has more in common with the stern dogma of Dostoevsky's ascetic monk, Father Ferapont, than with the compassion, forgiveness, and love preached by the central religious figure in *The Brothers Karamazov*, the saintly Father Zosima. In the narrator's words, Laura Chance believes herself "to be at war with Satan" (226), and her spiritual mentor, Elder Babcock, is quick to condemn those who challenge his authority and his religion. In his mind, the name "Everett Chance" was virtually synonymous with "Satan's Minion" (330), and he cried out "that on the day Everett and all his brothers tumbled down into the Lake of Unquenchable Fire, he would praise and thank his Just Lord and Savior and weep copious tears of joy" (330-31). Later, he would tell Irwin that the men of the Chance family were "hell-spawn" and that they would all "burn in the hell of blasphemers" (360). This focus on the demonic recalls Father Ferapont's stories of casting out devils in the other monks' rooms, and his exultation over the thought of the sinners being punished echoes the joy Ferapont displayed when he learned that Zosima's body had begun to decay at what seemed to be an unnaturally rapid pace. Regarding this as a sign of God's judgment, Ferapont screams "My God has conquered! Christ has

conquered with the setting sun!” and falls to the ground to weep like a frenzied child (Dostoevsky 290).

In Duncan’s novel, the conflict between a parent and the eldest child is not triggered by sexual rivalry or a dispute over financial matters as in *The Brothers Karamazov*, but rather over the very different issue of religious belief and practice. And it is not the father who is in direct conflict with his eldest son, but the mother. Like Dmitry Karamazov, Everett Chance stands at the center of the plot of *The Brothers K*. He clashes with his mother early in the novel when he launches into an irreverent form of saying grace before dinner. When he begins “Dear God, if there is One,” his mother immediately tries to silence him. When he persists, she begins crying out: “*Satan, get behind me!*” and attempts to drown him out by reciting a psalm (168-69). Finally, she is so outraged by his persistence that she slaps him repeatedly, and then she drags her two daughters into her bedroom where she continues to chant prayers of protection and supplication.

Later that night, Everett is disconsolate over the rift that has opened up between himself and his mother, but he continues to voice skepticism about the idea that the Lord will somehow make it all turn out well, as his brother Irwin insists. Sounding now like Ivan Karamazov (who delivered a scathing attack on the righteousness of God’s universe by citing examples of the vicious abuse of innocent children), Everett challenges the notion of God’s beneficent power by bringing up the Holocaust and child abuse: “Explain six million dead Jews . . . Explain that woman up in the Tri-Cities last week who didn’t like the sound of her baby crying so she threw it down on the kitchen floor and stomped it to death?” (175).² He concludes by asserting: “God either made everything there is, Satan included, or He didn’t make anything, because He isn’t there . . . He’s in charge of *all* of it, or *none* of it” (177).

Everett continues his rebellion against authority when he goes to college, where he leads protests against the military during the Vietnam War. Here, however, he finds himself bowled over by an encounter with a beautiful student named Natasha. Natasha’s original name was Laurel, but she changed it to Natasha after reading Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* (338).

² We can compare this with Ivan’s story about the five-year-old girl who was punished by her parents for failing to ask to be taken to the outhouse: the parents “smeared her face with her excrement and made her eat that excrement” and locked her in the outhouse overnight (Dostoevsky 209). It is because of stories such as this that Ivan hastens to “return [his] entrance ticket” to heaven.

She subsequently became a Russian literature major. Everett ends up burning his draft card and moving to Canada, thus giving rise to a chapter entitled “The Kwakiutl Karamazov,” which begins with a quotation from Dmitry Karamazov’s explanation to Alyosha about how he will escape from Siberian exile and flee to America with his beloved Grushenka in order to work the land “in solitude, somewhere very remote, with wild bears” (394). Once Everett moves to Canada, Natasha does indeed join him there, but then she suddenly abandons him one day. As it turns out, she had discovered she was pregnant (with a child she subsequently names Myshkin, after the protagonist of Dostoevsky’s novel *The Idiot*), and she was worried about how Everett would react when he found out. In her farewell note to Everett, she pastes an excerpt from *The Brothers Karamazov*, again a quotation from Dmitry as he explains his feelings about running away to America: “If I run away . . . I will be cheered by the thought that I am not running away for pleasure, not for happiness, but to another exile as bad, perhaps, as Siberia. It is bad, Alyosha, it is! I hate America, damn it . . .” (415). Of course, Everett is totally distraught over her disappearance, and in the drug-influenced note he writes his brother Kincaid, he identifies the source of the quotation as a conversation between “dumkopf and alleyoopa karamazov” (that is, between Dmitry and Alyosha Karamazov) (416).

Plunged into despair, Everett has an epiphanic experience that bears a certain affinity with Dmitry Karamazov’s dream after he is apprehended at Mokroe and interrogated about his possible role in the murder of his father Fyodor. In Dmitry’s dream, he sees a village with half of the peasant huts burned down, and he takes note of a tall, bony woman with a crying baby in her arms. “Why are they crying? Why are they crying?” he asks. Then his questions multiply: “why are people poor, why is the babe poor, why is the steppe barren,” and so on. He now feels a surge of pity “such as he had never known before,” and he has the urge to “do something for them all . . . at once, at once, regardless of all obstacles” (Dostoevsky 428).

Like Dmitry, Everett’s experience occurs at night. He is driving his car when he sees an otter lying in the roadway, barely alive after having been hit by a car. Examining the otter more closely, he notes that it is a female, a mother. As he continues his drive, he becomes aware of sorrows that transcend his own:

he felt himself fall through a kind of false bottom, felt he was driving

now, down, into a vast, dark pool. A pool of sorrows, it seemed at first. And not just his own . . . The stuff of small and large losses, and of recent and ancient ones—poxed Kwakiutl and napalmed Asians, leveled cities and leveled minds . . . Immense sadness on all sides . . . No matter how much he saw, more kept coming. Sorrows were endless. (Duncan 529)

Upon recovering from this vision, Everett, like Dmitry, pledges to try to help those who are suffering, and in this case, it is his brother Irwin who needs his help.

Irwin, a deeply devout Christian, had tried to obtain Conscientious Objector status and avoid becoming a combatant in the Vietnam War, but because of the bitter rancor of Elder Babcock his attempt failed, and he was sent to Vietnam. There he ended up striking his commanding officer after the latter had ordered the cold-blooded execution (without trial) of a supposed enemy bomber who was just a young boy. As a consequence of his epiphanic experience, Everett, like Dmitry, is willing to accept the possibility of punishment and jail for the sake of a higher cause. He returns to the United States and sparks the effort to free Irwin from a military hospital. Although this effort is ultimately successful, Everett himself must go to jail and serve his time for draft evasion.

In addition to the Chance brothers' broad affinities with the Karamazov brothers, there is even a figure in Duncan's novel who recalls a tormented girl in *The Brothers Karamazov*, Liza Khokhlakova. This is Bet, one of the Chance sisters. She is plagued with horrible dreams that expose deep emotional division and turmoil. As she describes it:

sometimes in my dreams I'm a Nazi. And I *hate* Nazis, Kincaid, *hate* them, *hate* them. But in my dreams I have this uniform, all gray and black and perfect, with two little silver swastikas, right here at the throat. And I love my swastikas. I love them so much it makes me sick, it makes me sweat. But it also makes me feel like doing every single thing that Nazis do, just to keep them. (390)

Bet's dreams echo the dreams and fantasies that Liza Khokhlakova confesses to Alyosha. In one dream, she alternately summons and repels demons to and from her side, and in her most appalling fantasy she imagines she has crucified a child and watches the child suffer while eating pineapple compote: "I shook with sobs all night. I kept imagining how the

little child cried and moaned (little boys of four understand, you know) and all the while the thought of pineapple compote haunted me” (Dostoevsky 492). Just as Liza calls herself a wretch, so too does Bet call herself “a worm” and “scum” (Duncan 607). At one point, albeit in a different context, Duncan begins a chapter with an epigraph that quotes a comment from Liza’s mother, Madame Khoklakova, about “aberrations”: “*Who isn’t suffering from aberration nowadays? You, I, all of us are in a state of aberration*” (269). However, Bet’s inner turmoil too is eventually resolved, and it is she who tries to offer consolation to others after the death of her father by quoting the Gospel passage that serves as the epigraph to *The Brothers Karamazov*: “Unless a grain of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone; but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit” (620).

Duncan’s novel comes to an end somewhat like *The Brothers Karamazov*, with a focus on a new generation. As Dostoevsky’s novel ends with Alyosha surrounded by boys and talking about the promise of resurrection and reunion in the future, Duncan’s work ends with the Chance brother who is closest to Alyosha in his spiritual orientation—Irwin—cradling his youngest son in his lap. This scene reminds the reader of the opening of Duncan’s novel, and provides a comforting image of regeneration and renewal. It is clear that Duncan was deeply impressed by *The Brothers Karamazov*, and sought to rework its central characters and themes by giving them new life in a new socio-political setting. Although *The Brothers K* does not match the philosophical reach and depth of Dostoevsky’s great work, it has a power and sweep of its own.

As we have seen from this brief survey of the enduring legacy of Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov* in modern American literature, Dostoevsky’s rich exploration of the human experience retains its capacity to inspire the creative imagination over a century after it was written and some 4500 miles from its home soil. While during the first half of the twentieth century *The Brothers Karamazov* seems to have held a special fascination for writers predominantly associated with the American South (including William Faulkner and Thomas Wolfe), in more recent times its impact has gone beyond this base to inform the work of writers from different parts of the country (and, in the case of Dinaw Mengestu, from another country of origin altogether). What emerges from a study of recent American literature with echoes of *The Brothers Karamazov* is an appreciation for the breadth of the novel’s emotional and philosophical appeal. Although Dostoevsky’s treatment of intense conflict—both

spiritual and familial—certainly made an impression on David James Duncan’s novel *The Brothers K*, it was Dostoevsky’s aspiration toward reconciliation and ultimate community that emerges as perhaps the most powerful element of his legacy. Dostoevsky’s hopeful vision of the possibilities of new communities built upon love and the memory of others shines through the dark ironies of both Mengestu’s and Duncan’s fictions. Their evident appreciation for this great writer’s greatest novel bears vivid testimony to the lasting power of his creative word.

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