

7 Lists for Reading Kierkegaard

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When I am asked for direction on good books about Kierkegaard, or how to break in and start reading Kierkegaard for one's own self, it's always a pleasure. But it's also rarely a straightforward answer. No surprise, much depends on both a person's background and his or her initial interest in Kierkegaard. Add to this a long and glorious tradition of rampantly divergent interpretations of the dear Dane, which stem as far back as when the author was himself alive (1813-1855; Kierkegaard often bemoans in his personal journals how misunderstood he felt by his contemporaries), and you can see how an advisor might pause.

I have followed an 'only 5 titles' rule in compiling these lists (at least, when applicable), as it keeps them from becoming too cumbersome. It helps hone the advice, too—what's *truly* the best to prioritize, given the limited time most of us have? I have categorized the lists under the headings "Books on Kierkegaard" and "Reading Kierkegaard," with some of the lists serving as advice and others serving as guides to empower one's own reading.

I will consider this post a "living" one, and might edit, add, or make changes as time goes by. I realize too that some of these titles or editions are harder to get than others, and can also be expensive. It is my hope that between your local library's participation in InterLibrary loans, the Internet Archive (many of Kierkegaard's works appear there for free), Abebooks and BookFinder.com, you will be able to find what you are looking for.

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### **The List of Lists—What You Will Find Below**

1. Best Entry Level Introductions to Kierkegaard's Life and Thought
2. Best Intermediate-Advanced Introductions to Kierkegaard's Life and Thought
3. Kierkegaard's Core Theological Writings
4. Kierkegaard's Core Philosophical Writings
5. Interpreting Kierkegaard, According to Kierkegaard
6. Kierkegaard's Main Publications and Notable Writings in Chronological Order
7. Translations of Kierkegaard in English

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Books on Kierkegaard

The definitive biography on Kierkegaard has yet to be written, which is owing mainly to a biographer's own reasons for approaching Kierkegaard in the first place. Kierkegaard's relationship with Christendom and his (sometimes contested) Christian faith divides biographers. Myths about Kierkegaard, some of which were started by contemporary enemies of Kierkegaard's, have also been slow and difficult for biographers to recognize, in part due to the limited number of scholars who command 19th century Danish.

Though numbered, these two lists are not presented in a descending order of recommendation; they are just "top 5" lists.

1. Best Entry Level Introductions to Kierkegaard's Life and Thought:

1. *Kierkegaard: A Single Life*, by Stephen Backhouse (Zondervan, 2016)
2. *Kierkegaard: An Introduction*, by C. Stephen Evans (Cambridge UP, 2009)
3. *A Short Life of Kierkegaard*, by Walter Lowrie (reprinted by Princeton University Press, 2013; original was published in 1942, based off of Lowrie's original *Kierkegaard* (Oxford 1938), which contained long excerpts from Kierkegaard's writing).
4. *Kierkegaard and the Crisis of Faith*, by George Pattison (Wipf & Stock, 2013 – admittedly, it's medium difficulty rather than true beginner)
5. any and all of the introductions to translations of Kierkegaard's work, especially Alistair Hannay's, Howard and Edna Hong's, Sylvia Walsh's, and M.G. Piety's translations of Kierkegaard

2. Best Intermediate-Advanced Introductions to Kierkegaard's Life and Thought:

1. *The Joy of Kierkegaard*, by Hugh Pyper (Equinox, 2011)
2. *The Freedom to Become a Christian*, by Andrew B. Torrance (T&T Clark, 2016)
3. *Kierkegaard on the Truth*, by Paul L. Holmer (Wipf & Stock, 2012)
4. *Søren Kierkegaard: Subjectivity, Irony, and the Crisis of Modernity*, by Jon Stewart (Oxford University Press, 2015)
5. *Meditations from Kierkegaard*, ed by T.H. Croxall (Plimpton Press, 1955 — this is on the advanced list because it is an obscure, out-of-print book. But Croxall is little remembered, and I think was one of the first to strike the right balance with Kierkegaard in the English speaking world. It's a gem, if you can get your hands on it!)

Reading Kierkegaard

3. Kierkegaard's Core Theological Writings

For Kierkegaard's most explicit theological and religious works, read:

1. *Works of Love* (medium difficulty)
2. *Practice in Christianity* (medium/easy level of difficulty)
3. *Sickness Unto Death* (high level of difficulty)
4. *Christian Discourses* (medium/easy level of difficulty)
5. *For Self-Examination* and *Judge for Yourself!* (easier level of difficulty. Both were written and completed around the same time)

(*also of theological import):

- *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*
- *The Unchangeableness of God* (delivered as a sermon in 1851; published in 1855)
- *Discourses at the Communion on Fridays* (found in one binding by translator Sylvia Walsh)

For Kierkegaard's philosophical theology, read:

1. *Philosophical Fragments* (medium difficulty)
2. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments* (high level of difficulty)
3. *Fear and Trembling* (medium difficulty)
4. *Two Ethical-Religious Essays* (easy/medium level of difficulty)
5. *Sickness Unto Death* (high level of difficulty)

4. Kierkegaard's Core Philosophical Writings

This list's title is in truth a trick statement, as all of Kierkegaard's writings cover philosophical subjects, and most engage in some form of philosophy themselves. Yet oftentimes when speaking of Kierkegaard's "philosophical" writings, many think of the books he wrote towards the beginning of his writing career (1843-1846), half of which are called "the pseudonymous works" in Kierkegaard scholarship. The pseudonymous works were, you guessed it, written by creatively named pseudonyms whose names were designed to contribute to the literary experience and interpretation of each book. The pseudonymous works are therefore perhaps the most layered (and most fun?) of all of Kierkegaard's writing, while also being some of the most difficult. It must always be remembered when reading Kierkegaard that he was not a conventional author, desiring (quite idealistically) that people would read his books in relationship to

one other. This was in order to present the possibility of undergoing a philosophical experience for the individual reader—to help him or her realize that one is subject to the dangers of living in a world of crowd opinion and ‘group think,’ and yet must nevertheless exist and participate in society as an individual who actively loves one’s neighbor. Kierkegaard tried to design his entire authorship to hang together as such a whole, but especially did so with the works published between 1843-1846.

Given this, I have presented Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous works with the correlating addendums he would have wished his readers to be aware of (called his “signed” writings in scholarship). These books deal with ontology, anthropology, ethics, aesthetics, divine revelation, and what it means to be an existing, living human being, to name just a few.

1. *Either/Or* alongside *Two Upbuilding Discourses* (1843)
2. *Fear and Trembling* alongside *Three Upbuilding Discourses* (1843)
3. *The Concept of Anxiety* alongside *Three and Four Upbuilding Discourses* (1844)
4. *Stages on Life’s Way* alongside *Three Discourses on Imagined Occasions*
5. *Philosophical Fragments* and/or *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (PF can pair with *Two* and *Three Upbuilding Discourses* (1844); CUP is the capstone to the entire authorship at the time, and can be read as a stand-alone, even though it is designed as a postscript to PF)

5. Interpreting Kierkegaard, According to Kierkegaard

Kierkegaard provided explanations and clarification to his writing over the course of his life, which I thought would be helpful to list here. While nothing should discourage someone from picking up Kierkegaard and just reading him, these resources might help clarify what Kierkegaard is getting on about. They do stand as material that scholars must contend with, acting as delineations between “what Kierkegaard thinks” and what is “Kierkegaardian.”

1. read the front matter, especially the prefaces and introductions, to whatever book of Kierkegaard’s you are reading
2. read *On My Work as an Author*, which is Kierkegaard’s clearest, most succinct, stand-alone key to his writings (found most easily in Princeton’s comprehensive edition, *The Point of View*)
3. read Kierkegaard’s “First and Last Explanation” found at the end of *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. This is an earlier, and shorter, account of how Kierkegaard regards his authorship.
4. read Kierkegaard’s finished but unpublished *The Point of View for My Work as an Author*, which is the longest accounting Kierkegaard wrote of himself, and therefore provides the most detail.

6. Kierkegaard’s Main Publications and Notable Writings in Chronological Order

1. *Either/Or*, by the pseudonym Victor Eremita (February 20, 1843)
2. *Two Upbuilding Discourses* (May 16, 1843)
3. *Repetition*, by the pseudonym Constantin Constantius (October 16, 1843)

4. *Fear and Trembling*, by the pseudonym Johannes de silentio (October 16, 1843)
5. *Three Upbuilding Discourses* (October 16, 1843)
6. *Four Upbuilding Discourses* (December 6, 1843)
7. *Two Upbuilding Discourses* (March 5, 1844)
8. *Philosophical Fragments*, by the pseudonym Johannes Climacus (June 13, 1844)
9. *Three Upbuilding Discourses* (June 8, 1844)
10. *The Concept of Anxiety*, by the pseudonym Vigilius Haufniensis (June 17, 1844)
11. *Prefaces*, by the pseudonym Nicolaus Notabene (June 17, 1844)
12. *Four Upbuilding Discourses* (August 31, 1844)
13. *Three Discourses on Imagined Occasions* (April 29, 1845)
14. *Stages on Life's Way*, published by the pseudonym Hilarius Bookbinder (April 30, 1845)
15. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, by the pseudonym Johannes Climacus (February 28, 1846)
16. *Two Ages: A Literary Review* (March 30, 1846)
17. *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits* (March 13, 1847)
18. *Works of Love* (September 29, 1847)
19. *Christian Discourses* (April 26, 1848)
20. *The Lily in the Field and the Bird of the Air* (May 14, 1849)
21. *Two Ethical-Religious Essays*, by the pseudonym H.H. (May 19, 1849)
22. *The Sickness Unto Death*, by the pseudonym Anti-Climacus (July 30, 1849)
23. *Three Discourses at the Communion on Fridays: "The High Priest," "The Tax Collector," "The Woman Who Was a Sinner"* (November 14, 1849)
24. *Practice in Christianity*, by the pseudonym Anti-Climacus (September 25, 1850)
25. *An Upbuilding Discourse* (December 20, 1850)
26. *Two Discourses at the Communion on Fridays* (August 7, 1851)
27. *On My Work as An Author* (August 7, 1851)
28. *For Self-Examination* (September 10, 1851)
29. *The Unchangeableness of God* (September 3, 1855)
30. *The Point of View for My Work as an Author* (published posthumously in 1859, written primarily in 1848)
31. *The Book on Adler* (published posthumously in 1872)
32. *Judge for Yourself!* published posthumously in 1876)

7. Translations of Kierkegaard in English

Just as there is no "definitive" biography of Kierkegaard, there is no "definitive" translation of him either,

even though scholars justifiably use the Hongs' translation of Kierkegaard's complete works, published by Princeton University Press, almost exclusively in their work. For 'the best' translation of Kierkegaard, much depends upon the work in question, and the motivations that drove the translator. For example, the Hongs prioritized literal word accuracy for Kierkegaard's Danish, while the Swensons prioritized Kierkegaard's flow and syntax; the Hongs approached Kierkegaard as a genius philosopher, while the Swensons approached Kierkegaard as a literary master with devotional aims.

For a reader who wishes simply to enjoy Kierkegaard, any of these translations will serve as a start. For a more motivated reader of Kierkegaard, I recommend having at least two translations on hand to compare against—oftentimes an obscure passage in one rendering will be clearer, or at least different enough, to help make out Kierkegaard's meaning. And for the budding Kierkegaard scholar, I direct you to M.G. Piety's resource page for untangling translations (if not for her many posts on translating Kierkegaard, too — <https://pietyonkierkegaard.com/resources/>).

1. Kierkegaard's first appearance into English became a collected effort between many publishers (and was interrupted by WWII). The bulk of Kierkegaard's total works first appeared between these publishers, from 1937-1958:

- Oxford University Press (translators Alexander Dru, Robert Payne, Walter Lowrie)
 1. *The Journals of Søren Kierkegaard* (selections)
 2. *Fear and Trembling*
 3. *The Concept of Dread*
 4. *The Present Age and Two Minor Ethico-Religious Treatises*
 5. *Christian Discourses*, along with *Three Discourses at the Communion on Fridays* and *Discourses about the Lilies and the Birds*
 6. *The Point of View for My Work as an Author*
 7. *Training in Christianity* and *An Edifying Discourse*
 8. in one volume: *For Self-Examination*, *Two Discourses at the Communion on Fridays*, *Judge for Yourself*, and *The Unchangeableness of God*
- Augsburg Publishing House (translators David and Lillian Swenson, Howard and Edna Hong)
 1. *Edifying Discourses, Vols I-IV*
 2. *Three Discourses on Imagined Occasions*
 3. *The Gospel of Suffering* and *The Lilies of the Field* (Parts III and II of *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*)
 4. *For Self-Examination*
- The American Scandinavian Society (translators David and Lillian Swenson, Walter Lowrie)
 1. *Philosophical Fragments*
 2. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*
- Princeton University Press (translators Walter Lowrie, David and Lillian Swenson)
 1. *Either/Or, Volume I*
 2. *Either/Or, Volume II*
 3. *Repetition*
 4. *Fear and Trembling*
 5. *Stages on Life's Way*
 6. *Sickness Unto Death*

- Harper Torchbooks (translators Douglas V. Steere, Howard and Edna Hong)
 1. *Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing* (Part I of *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*)
 2. *Works of Love*
- Stanford University Press (translator T.H. Croxall)
 1. *Johannes Climacus: De Omnibus Dubitandum Est* and *A Sermon*
- The C. W. Daniel Company, London (translators A.S. Aldworth and W.S. Ferrie)
 1. *Purify Your Hearts! A Discourse for a Special Occasion*, the first of three parts in *Edifying Discourses in a Different Vein*
 2. *Consider the Lilies*, the second part in *Edifying Discourses in a Different Vein*
 3. *The Gospel of Sufferings*, the third part in *Edifying Discourses in a Different Vein*

2. Kierkegaard's Second Full Appearance into English: Princeton University Press (translators Howard and Edna Hong, Julia Watkin, Todd Nichol, Reidar Thomte, Albert Anderson, and Henrik Rosenmeier)

3. Other translations of Kierkegaard, published during or after the publication of Princeton's editions, up to the present day:

- Penguin Classics (all translated by Alistair Hannay):
 1. *Either/Or*
 2. *Fear and Trembling*
 3. *Two Ages: A Literary Review*
 4. *Sickness Unto Death*
 5. *Papers and Journals: A Selection*
- Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy:
 1. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, translated by Alistair Hannay
 2. *Fear and Trembling*, translated by C. Stephen Evans and Sylvia Walsh
- Oxford World Classics:
 1. *Repetition and Philosophical Crumbs*, translated by M.G. Piety
- Liveright Publishing:
 1. *Fear and Trembling*, translated by Bruce H. Kirmmse
 2. *The Sickness Unto Death*, translated by Bruce H. Kirmmse
- Indiana University Press:
 1. *Discourses at the Communion on Fridays*, translated by Sylvia Walsh. Walsh takes every discourse Kierkegaard wrote for Friday church communions and presents them together in this volume: the first part of *Christian Discourses*, *Three Discourses at the Communion on Fridays* (1849), *No. III* from the third part of *Practice in Christianity*, and *Two Discourses at the Communion on Fridays* (1851).
- Harper Press:
 1. *Spiritual Writings: Gift, Creation, Love—Selections from the Upbuilding Discourses*, translated and selected by George Pattison. Pattison presents six discourses from *Eighteen Upbuilding*

Discourses, two from *Christian Discourses*, all of the second part of *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, the entirety of *The Lily of the Field and the Bird of the Air* (1849), one communion discourse from *Three Discourses at the Communion on Fridays* (1849), *An Upbuilding Discourse* (1850), and the entirety of *Two Discourses at the Communion on Fridays* (1851).

- Paulist Press:

1. *Søren Kierkegaard: Discourses and Writings on Spirituality*, translated and selected by Christopher Barnett. Barnett presents the sermon pseudonym Judge William appends to his letters in *Either/Or* (entitled “The Upbuilding That Lies in the Thought That Compared to God We are Always in the Wrong”), the upbuilding discourse “Every Good and Perfect Gift is from Above” from *Two Upbuilding Discourses* (1843), *The Unchangeableness of God* (1855), the upbuilding discourse “To Need God is The Human Being’s Highest Perfection” from *Four Upbuilding Discourses* (1844), “What We Learn from the Lilies in the Field and from the Birds of the Air” from *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, “But Love Upbuilds” from the beginning of *Works of Love*, a portion from *Sickness Unto Death*, the beginning of *The Gospel of Sufferings* in *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, a part of the first and second sections of *Practice in Christianity*, “What Christ Judges of Official Christianity” from Kierkegaard’s later essays published in *The Moment*, “Watch Your Step When You Go to the House of the Lord” from the third part of *Christian Discourses*, and a portion from the third part of *Practice in Christianity*.