



# Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett

*By James R. Knowlson*

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**Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett** By James R. Knowlson

Damned to Fame is the brilliant and insightful portrait of Nobel Prize-winning author Samuel Beckett, mysterious and reclusive master of twentieth-century literature. Professor James Knowlson, Beckett's chosen biographer and a leading authority on Beckett, vividly recreates Beckett's life from his birth in a rural suburb of Dublin in 1906 to his death in Paris in 1989, revealing the real man behind the literary giant. Scrupulously researched and filled with previously unknown information garnered from interviews with the author and his friends, family, and contemporaries, Knowlson's unparalleled work is the definitive Beckett biography of our time.

Nearing the end of his life, Samuel Beckett chose James Knowlson to be his biographer because he "knows my work best." One of the world's leading authorities on Beckett, Knowlson has drawn on his twenty-year friendship with the Nobel Prize winner, more than one hundred interviews, and research in dozens of archival collections-many previously untapped by scholars-to produce this definitive biography of one of the century's leading writers in both English and French.

Damned to Fame follows the reclusive literary giant's life from his birth in Foxrock, a rural suburb of Dublin, in 1906 to his death in Paris in 1989. Knowlson brilliantly re-creates Beckett's early years as a struggling author in Paris, his travels through Germany in 1936-37 as the Nazis were consolidating their power, his service in the French Resistance during World War II, and the years of literary fame and financial success that followed the first performance of his controversial *Waiting For Godot* (1953).

Paris between the wars was a city vibrant with experimentation, both in the arts and in personal lifestyle, and Knowlson introduces us to the writers and painters who, along with the young Beckett, populated his bohemian community. Most notable was James Joyce, a fellow Irishman who became Beckett's friend and mentor and influenced him to devote his life to writing. We also meet the women in Beckett's life-his domineering mother, May; his cousin Peggy Sinclair, who died at a tragically young age; Ethna McCarthy, his first love, whom he immortalized in his poetry and prose; Peggy Guggenheim, the American heiress and patron of the arts; and the strong and independent Suzanne Deschevaux-

Dumesnil, whom he met in the late 1930s and married in 1961. Beyond recounting many previously unknown aspects of the writer's life, including his strong support for human rights and other political causes, Knowlson explores in fascinating detail the roots of Beckett's works. He shows not only how the relationship between Beckett's own experiences and his work became more oblique over time, but also how his startling postmodern images were inspired by the paintings of the Old Masters, such as Antonello da Messina, Durer, Rembrandt, and Caravaggio.

Perhaps most striking of all is Knowlson's portrait of Beckett's complex personality. Although Beckett is often depicted as melancholic, self-critical, and intensely preoccupied with his work, his own letters reveal him to have been also a witty, resilient, and compassionate man who could respond to adversity with humor and who inspired deep affection in his friends.



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## **Editorial Review**

### Amazon.com Review

Samuel Beckett, a talent so exceptional that he created masterpieces in both French and English, shied away from the limelight for much of his life. However James Knowlson, in this amazing biography, shows Beckett wasn't entirely hesitant to talk about himself; the book relies heavily on interviews with Beckett to reconstruct the writer's dizzying career. Knowlson fills the pages with exhaustive detail--some major, some minor. In addition, he analyzes the influences on and evolution of Beckett's work. Through it all a larger picture emerges, one of the artist at work and in life. **Damned to Fame** is a necessary addition to any study of Beckett.

### From Publishers Weekly

In his preface, Knowlson alerts readers that Beckett had notified his British publisher that this work was to be "his sole authorized biography." And Knowlson, the author or editor of 10 previous books on Beckett, leaves no stone unturned in his intricate biography of the Irish writer. Beckett was born in Dublin on April 13, 1906, a Good Friday. He grew up in the affluent suburb of Foxrock, where he enjoyed a loving though sometimes rigid Protestant childhood. Away at boarding school for much of the Irish Uprising, he returned to Dublin in 1923 to enter Trinity College, excelling in English Literature and French. On a visit to Paris he met James Joyce and became his companion and secretary. Back in Dublin in 1930 he became a lecturer in French at Trinity, but found the academic life not to his liking. He left his position and began a 10-year period of drifting as he tried to become a writer. Knowlson probes Beckett's romantic entanglements, including his platonic relationship with Joyce's daughter Lucia, an affair with his first cousin and his long relationship with his eventual wife, Suzanne. During the war Beckett was a member of the French resistance, using his expertise in language to translate documents for the British government. He fled Paris just before the Gestapo closed in on him. With the end of the war came his most productive period. Between 1946 and 1953 he wrote his trilogy of novels, plus *Waiting for Godot*. Knowlson goes on to look at Beckett's growing fame as his plays were produced around the world; examines his relationship with the likes of painter Jack B. Yeats (the poet's brother) and Irish actor Jack MacGowran, the foremost Beckett actor. Also examined are Beckett's work with Amnesty International, his refusal to allow his plays to be staged in South Africa because of apartheid and the philosophical underpinnings to Beckett's extraordinary art. Knowlson has compiled a meticulously annotated and valuable biography that belongs in the library of every Beckett aficionado.

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### From Library Journal

Dissatisfied with previous portrayals of Beckett (for example, Deirdre Bair's controversial first biography, *Samuel Beckett*, LJ 6/15/78), scholars of the Irish novelist, playwright, and winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1969 will be champing at the bit for this fondly painstaking sift through Beckett's life and work. Chosen by Beckett as his biographer because of a critical grounding in his writing, Knowlson, the founder of the Beckett Archive in Reading, England, was able to meet with the writer over several months before he died, at age 83, in 1989. Knowlson also recouped a windfall of material from Beckett's family and friends, such as the "unknown diaries 1937-38," in which Beckett recorded his art tour of Germany. Knowlson concentrates on three somewhat unscrutinized facets of the playwright's life: his studied passion for art and music; his later support of those oppressed or imprisoned, such as Vaclav Havel; and his iron loyalty to friends and respected colleagues. If Knowlson errs, it's on the side of understatement. An immensely sympathetic portrait emerges of a deeply erudite, fiercely dedicated artist bewildered by all the fuss over

him. An essential work for all libraries.?Amy Boaz, "Library Journal"  
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## **Users Review**

### **From reader reviews:**

#### **Rebecca Morales:**

The book *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* gives you the sense of being enjoy for your spare time. You can use to make your capable far more increase. Book can being your best friend when you getting anxiety or having big problem together with your subject. If you can make examining a book *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* to be your habit, you can get a lot more advantages, like add your personal capable, increase your knowledge about many or all subjects. You can know everything if you like wide open and read a guide *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett*. Kinds of book are several. It means that, science e-book or encyclopedia or other individuals. So , how do you think about this reserve?

#### **Patrick Myers:**

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#### **Lucy Broussard:**

The ability that you get from *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* could be the more deep you excavating the information that hide within the words the more you get enthusiastic about reading it. It doesn't mean that this book is hard to know but *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* giving you thrill feeling of reading. The article writer conveys their point in certain way that can be understood by simply anyone who read this because the author of this e-book is well-known enough. This particular book also makes your current vocabulary increase well. That makes it easy to understand then can go to you, both in printed or e-book style are available. We propose you for having this particular *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* instantly.

#### **Christopher Palmer:**

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