



## Isaiah Berlin: A Life

*Michael Ignatieff*

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Isaiah Berlin refused to write an autobiography, but he agreed to talk about himself - and so for ten years, he allowed Michael Ignatieff to interview him. Isaiah Berlin (1909-97) was one of the greatest and most humane of modern philosophers; historian of the Russian intelligentsia biographer of Marx, pioneering scholar of the Romantic movement and defender of the liberal idea of freedom. His own life was caught up in the most powerful currents of the century. The son of a Riga timber merchant, he witnessed the Russian Revolution, was plunged into suburban school life and the ferment of 1930s Oxford; he became part of the British intellectual establishment. During the war, he was at the heart of Anglo-American diplomacy in Washington; afterwards in Moscow he saw the grim despair of Stalinism. The book is full of memorable meetings - with Virginia Woolf and Sigmund Freud, with Churchill, with Boris Pasternak and Anna Akhmatova. Yet Ignatieff is not afraid to delve into Berlin's conflicts: his Jewish idealism, his deep aspirations. This is a work of great subtlety and penetration, exhilarating and intimate, powerful and profound.

## Isaiah Berlin: A Life Details

Date : Published January 6th 2000 by Vintage (first published September 17th 1991)

ISBN : 9780099577317

Author : Michael Ignatieff

Format : Paperback 384 pages

Genre : Biography, Philosophy, History, Politics, Nonfiction, Biography Memoir, Academic, European Literature, British Literature, Cultural, Russia

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# From Reader Review Isaiah Berlin: A Life for online ebook

## Sydney Goggins says

A thorough biography of one of the 20th century's premier liberal thinkers. Ignatieff provides a detailed account of Berlin's life, from his childhood in Riga and Petrograd during the Bolshevik revolution to his years at Oxford and Princeton as a renowned philosopher. We learn that Berlin had three interconnecting identities, Russian, Jewish and English; that he celebrated Seder and Yom Kippur despite being an atheist, and that he viewed Britain's open political system as an embodiment of pluralism at its best.

But along with discussing his life, Ignatieff also strives to explain Berlin's key ideas- his realization that not all human values are compatible, and that politics often involves a painful choice between values; his distinction between positive and negative liberty; and his lifelong opposition to totalitarianism. We learn about his personality as a brilliant conversationalist; his Stuart Hampshire and other prominent English academics; and his meetings with Akhmatova and Pasternak, which further strengthened his lifelong, visceral opposition to totalitarianism.

Ignatieff is a sympathetic biographer, his own political convictions strongly influenced by Berlin's, and the book itself the product of hours of interviews with Berlin.

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## Jarno Mehtiö says

Hyvä elämäkerta mielenkiintoisesta elämästä ja ajattelijasta. Kettua ja siiliä, positiivista ja negatiivista vapautta yksinkertaisempia ja toimivampia tiivistyksiä on vaikea ylittää.

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## Sean says

"We are doomed to choose and every choice may entail an irreparable loss. The world we encounter in ordinary experience is one in which we are faced with choices between ends equally ultimate and claims equally absolute, the realization of some of which must inevitably involve the sacrifice of others...If, as I believe, the ends of men are many, and not all of them are in principle compatible with each other, then the possibility of conflict — and of tragedy — can never wholly be eliminated from human life, either personal or social. The necessity of choosing between absolute claims is then an inescapable characteristic of the human condition. This gives its value to freedom as Acton conceived of it — as an end in itself, and not as a temporary need, arising out of our confused notions and irrational and disordered lives, a predicament which a panacea could one day put right."

-- Isaiah Berlin

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## April says

Okay, I'm only a hundred or so pages into this book, but I love it love it love it.

I like Berlin's and Ignatieff's writing - each of them, so I figured I'd enjoy something that merged both their thinking...and it is wonderful.

Ignatieff has a wonderful forward where he links Berlin's personality to his philosophy and values....absolutely fascinating idea, and once you think about it, it makes a lot of sense.

More to come!

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## Joseph Sales says

Is it too much to ask that America be more like Canada, where people like Trudeau, Charles Taylor, Michael Ignatieff can create good public policy and also be serious thinkers? Do you see Bachmann writing a biography of Kant?

Bought this on liquidation at Borders. They're selling even the fixtures, counters, and shelves. What an abject ending.

"That summer he paid a visit to the most famous refugee from Nazi Europe, Sigmund Freud. Freud's wife was a relative of a family friend, Oscar Phillip. Through his intermediary, Isaiah arranged a call at Maresfield Gardens one Friday afternoon in October 1938. Freud himself answered the door-bell and ushered Berlin into the famous study with the Egyptian and Greek statuettes and figurines already displayed on every free space of the desks, cabinets, and bookcases. When Freud asked Berlin what he did, and Isaiah replied in German that he attempted to teach philosophy, Freud replied sardonically, 'Then you must think me a charlatan.'. This was close to the mark but Berlin protested, 'Dr. Freud, how can you think such a thing?'. Freud then pointed to a figurine on the mantelpiece. 'Can you guess where it is from?'. When Berlin said he had no idea, Freud replied, 'It comes from Megara. I see you are not pretentious.'. Then he explained he had reached London thanks to the intercession of Princess Marie Bonaparte and asked whether Isaiah was familiar with other members of the Greek royal family. When Berlin said he wasn't, Freud replied, 'I see you are not a snob.'.

This part of the interrogation completed, Freud began musing aloud about whether he might set up practice in Oxford. Berlin said there was bound to be a lot of demand for his services in a place like Oxford and in his mind's

eye imagined a burnished brass plaque in an Oxford doorway reading 'Dr. Freud, 2pm-4pm', and a queue of neurotics stretching back a mile."

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Berlin had a liberal temperament and an expansive, independent cast of mind that's very appealing. He could criticize the "technocratic busy bodying" foibles of left progressivism, and find an "adamantine firmness of purpose" admirable in Churchill, but still put into circulation ideas from neglected controversial writers like Holbach or Sorel .

What makes Berlin particularly attractive in Ignatieff's description is that he never believed in the consolations of philosophy and was deeply skeptical about reaching for ultimate questions, of grasping the meaning of life in ten easy steps. "If history had no libretto why should an ordinary life have one?"

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## Bettie? says

Description: *Isaiah Berlin refused to write an autobiography, but he agreed to talk about himself - and so for ten years, he allowed Michael Ignatieff to interview him. Isaiah Berlin (1909-97) was one of the greatest and most humane of modern philosophers; historian of the Russian intelligentsia biographer of Marx, pioneering scholar of the Romantic movement and defender of the liberal idea of freedom. His own life was caught up in the most powerful currents of the century. The son of a Riga timber merchant, he witnessed the Russian Revolution, was plunged into suburban school life and the ferment of 1930s Oxford; he became part of the British intellectual establishment During the war, he as at the heart of Anglo-American diplomacy in Washington; afterwards in Moscow he saw the grim despair of Stalinism. The book is full of memorable meetings - with Virginia Woolf and Sigmund Freud, with Churchill, with Boris Pasternak and Anna Akhmatova. Yet Ignatieff is not afraid to delve into Berlin's conflicts: his jewish idealism, his deep aspirations. This is a work of great subtlety and penetration, exhilarating and intimate, powerful and profound.*

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## Barak says

A very interesting exposure of Berlin's life and thought, done delicately by Mr. Ignatieff.  
I feel like re-reading some of Berlin's essays now that I learned more about his personal life.

This reading only came to reaffirm the congruence of my own views in relation to those of Berlin's, a middle-way, rational liberal, but not an over-rational capitalist, a social socialist, but not an over-socialist, and above all a true humanist.

I also liked his connection with and admiration of the Russian intelligentsia of soviet times, since I also read many writers and poets of this period, finding them fascinating.

I was pleasantly surprised to discover he really liked Turgenev (and even translated to English one of his plays), since I also, after recently reading one of Turgenev's books, have chosen to place him as an author in front of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky.

All in all, had our personal histories been different, I genuinely believe Berlin and I would have been able to become fast friends and talk about philosophy, history, poetry, literature and ideas in general for hours on end...

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## Ahmad Abolfathi says

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<https://www.instagram.com/p/BJGMwYVBScY/>

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## Bob Breckwoldt says

A book of two halves. The first is fascinating and absorbing from early childhood to just after the Second World War. From Riga to London to Oxford then Washington and Russia to the formation of the state of Israel. The people he meets and the lives they and he lead. The time in Stalin's USSR and the terrible strain of those who had survived the purges is gripping in how those who lived in fear attempted to be true to their artistic convictions.

The second half is taken up with marriage, contentment and the glittering prizes, but is not nearly as interesting. Well worth reading.

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## ????????? ?????????????? says

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## James Smith says

Isaiah Berlin was the Forrest Gump of 20th century geopolitics. A child during the Russian revolution, serving the British Foreign Service in WWII, intimately involved in the formation of the state of Israel, etc, etc. Ignatieff writes a compelling narrative of his life while also doing justice to the ideas. Ignatieff's pacing is very good (the middle chapters on Berlin's return to Russia and the importance of Russian literature to his life are the best in the book). My only serious concern is the limitations of his methodology: this is very close to being an "as-told-to" biography. The story is very dependent on Berlin's recounting. But perhaps the critical distance is for the second biography. In the meantime, Ignatieff has crafted a fine testament to the work of a philosopher in public who, no doubt, was a model for the trajectory of his own career.

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## Marco den Ouden says

I became interested in Isaiah Berlin's thought in 2013 and read his essay on Two Concepts of Liberty and followed that up with Political Ideas in the Romantic Age which I found very interesting and compelling reading. I knew that former Canadian Liberal leader Michael Ignatieff had been a student of Berlin's and wrote a biography of him so I picked this up. Ignatieff is a better biographer than a politician, that's for sure. This is a brilliant biography. A fascinating story of a fascinating man. It gives a lot of insight into Berlin's thinking as well as his life.

I emailed Ignatieff after reading it telling him how much I enjoyed it and asking if he would autograph a copy. He graciously agreed he would. But I have it in digital format and have yet to get a hard copy. Someday maybe.

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## Russel Henderson says

Warm, personal literary biography of a fascinating man. Ignatieff brings Berlin to life and expertly addresses the life experiences and influences that helped engender in him his unique perspective on the past and the present.

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## Nicholas Whyte says

<https://nwhyte.livejournal.com/2916495.html>

This biography was published in 1998, the year after Berlin's death, many years before Ignatieff took the Canadian Liberal Party to their worst result ever. I confess that although I have been involved with politics for most of my adult life, I've had very little time for political philosophy. After reading this biography, I'm willing to concede that I may have missed out. Berlin's work on liberal political philosophy in an age of political extremes was of crucial importance to steer between different brands of totalitarianism in the years leading up to the Second World War, and to give the West friendly criticism during the Cold War. His life as an academic was not particularly interesting, but his life as a Russian emigrant who became a loyal British subject (yet always conscious of his origins) it fascinating. The relationship he had with Russian literature was crucial to his philosophy, and his most famous phrase, "The Hedgehog and the Fox" comes from an essay on Tolstoy. His November 1945 meeting with Anna Akhmatova in Moscow had profound effects on them both. Ignatieff clearly admired and loved Berlin, but is not uncritical of his political philosophy which he says looked more at the negative case of illiberalism than the positive case for liberalism; I don't feel qualified to judge.

There is one truly hilarious anecdote which I had not heard before. In the later stages of the Second World War, Berlin was posted to the British Embassy in Washington D.C. and wrote detailed and insightful reports back to Whitehall. Winston Churchill, hearing that Mr Berlin was in London for a few days, invited him for lunch with the Chief of the General Staff and others. But the lunch guest, surprisingly to Churchill, had a strong American accent and yet was only able to give vague and disappointing answers to Churchill's questions about the political and economic situation across the Atlantic. It turned out that there had been a mistake; Churchill had invited not Isaiah Berlin, but the composer Irving Berlin, author of "White Christmas". It seems too good to be true, but it's well documented.

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## ????????? ?????????????? says

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What a mind, what a life, what a book!

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