

Stop the Presses!

By [John Freedman](#)

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Artist Ivan Nikolayev's mosaic portrait of Fyodor Dostoevsky looks over metro riders as they come and go from the Dostoevskaya metro station. **John Freedman**

The first thing that came to mind when I saw it was a writer of a very different kind, time and place.

“It” is the relatively new Dostoevskaya metro station in Moscow on the Green Line. What leaped into my mind was Ernest Hemingway and his story “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place.”

For the record, and for all you newshounds, this isn’t new news. I googled “Dostoevskaya metro Moscow” and got a list of over 77,000 links.

You see, the Dostoevskaya metro station, named after the great novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky, opened while I was not in Moscow last summer. I saw the flap on a couple of websites, including [The Moscow Times](#), but I didn’t think much about it. The stories sounded pretty silly to me. Silly enough that by the time I got back to Moscow, it never occurred to me to make a special trip to see the place.

A few days ago my life and work led me to the now-infamous subway station. I had to stop by the Ten Theater, which is located about a three-minute walk from this very place.

And I was astonished — by the taste, the beauty, the intelligence, the subtlety and, yes, the humor, of the artwork in the station.

So amazed was I that I resolved to come home and revisit some of those articles I skimmed over last summer. I flipped on my computer, went to the search engine and — voila! — there they were, in all their lurid splendor: thousands of journalistic Cassandras prophesying death and doom because of a couple of mosaics on a few public walls.

Here are just a few of the 77,000 headlines:

[“Dostoevsky Murals Deemed Suicide Magnet”](#) — Psychology Today

[“Moscow’s Dostoevsky Station Could be ‘Suicide Mecca’”](#) — The Telegraph

[“Dostoevsky Images on Metro ‘Could Cause Suicides’”](#) — The Independent

Unfortunately, I could go on forever with these dubious headlines and the non-stories that follow them. But I won’t. Still, let me add one more, my favorite of all: [“Fyodor Dostoevsky Station Sparks Suicide Frenzy On Moscow Underground”](#) — Anorak News.

Let me say this plainly: These are the moments that give journalism and journalists a bad name. Some — read “too many” — editors, writers and interviewees are willing to write or say any damn thing as long as they think it might grab someone’s straying attention.

In truth, Ivan Nikolayev’s designs for the platforms, the stairwells and the landings in the station are attractive and smart. The lighting in the station is quite spectacular, with long rows of rounded niches up high spreading soft but ample light throughout the space. The pristine white ceilings and the glossy marble walls and floors reflect the light, creating refracted patterns everywhere. The portrait of Dostoevsky on the landing of the entrance from the street is powerful and imposing.

Dostoevsky didn’t write Harry Potter-like pulp. There is no reason to depict him in a way that would suggest that he did. He wrote about people stepping over the line, about people caught in the dark corners of life, about people challenging God and struggling with the gap between what their intelligence tells them and what the world tries to foist on them. You see all of that in Nikolayev’s mosaic portrait.

Dostoevsky could also be a very funny writer, and Nikolayev captured a bit of his whimsy with a lovely little detail on the wall along the stairwell leading to the platform. Here a caped figure appears to hurry down the steps with far more purpose than the real people making their way up or down the stairs.

As for depictions of Dostoevsky’s novel “Crime and Punishment” down on the station platform, I found this to be done with economy and sensitivity. Along the long wall of one column we see various scenes from the novel, including Raskolnikov murdering the pawn broker and her niece, and Sonya lecturing Raskolnikov on the need to surrender to God. Around the corner of the column on one side we see Raskolnikov bowed repentantly on his

knees, while on the opposite side around the other corner we see Svidrigailov holding a gun to his head moments before committing suicide. Thus, two of life's most difficult and common extremes — contrition and violence — stand as bookends to the scenes of the play depicted on the wall. All of this, like the entire station, is done in large swathes of blacks, whites and grays, creating stark, clear images.

This is literature and this is art, after all. And it occurs to me that Hemingway in his story of cleanliness and light also wrote about the dark moments of despair that men and women confront probably with the same frequency that they step down into a metro station to get wherever they are going next. My hat is off to Nikolayev for being serious about his commission to design a public place honoring a complex and challenging writer. And my hat is off to the administration of the Moscow metro for not bowing to a few scandal-mongers who stirred a tempest in a teapot by protesting the integrity of Nikolayev's work.

I find the atmosphere in the Dostoevskaya station as uplifting and inspiring as any in the entire Moscow metro system. This will now be the new highlight on all those metro tours for tourists. For those of us just getting from one place to another, this station will make our journey a little bit richer.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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