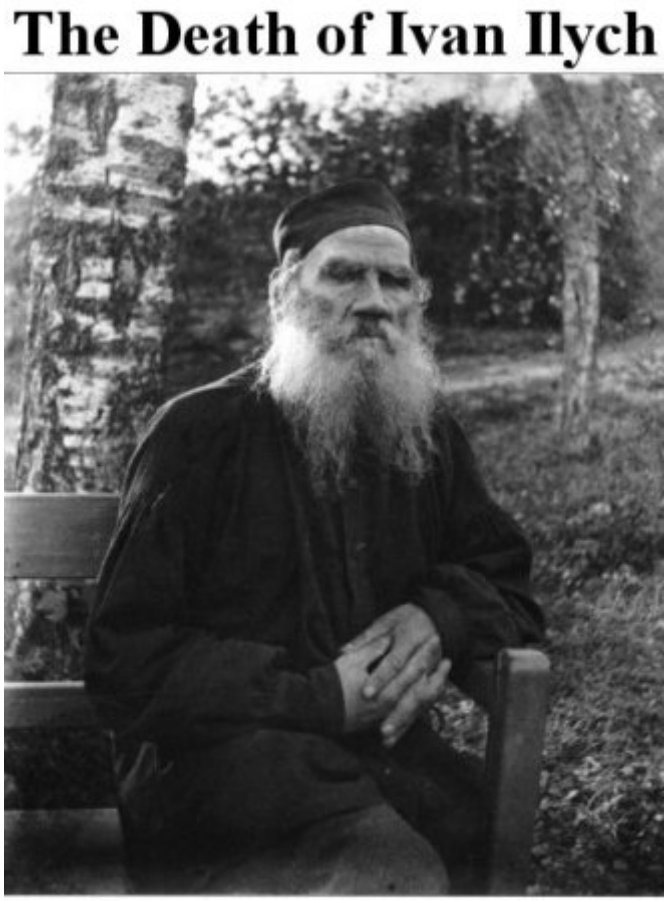
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The Death Of Ivan Ilych



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Synopsis

"Ivan Ilych's life had been most simple and most ordinary and therefore most terrible." Written shortly after his conversion to Christianity, The Death of Ivan Ilyich is one of Tolstoy's masterpieces in fiction. A man facing death is forced to reconcile the contradictions of his own existence and his fear of the unknown in what may or may not exist after life. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

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Customer Reviews

NOTE: This review is of the Richard Pevear/Larissa Volokhonsky translation.One thing that Leo Tolstoy could never be accused of was being a minimalist. He is best known for the massive novel 'Anna Karenina' and the even more massive 'War and Peace'. Almost all of his fiction seems to be an attempt to pack in as much panoramic life as possible. This characteristic applies to his shorter

pieces as well as his novels.This new translation (2009) assembles his best known stories as well as some lesser known ones as well and is presented chronologically, from the earliest, "The Prisoner of the Caucassus", written between the composition of 'War and Peace' and 'Anna Karenina', to his final novella, "Hadji Murat," written over the last two decades of his life and published posthumously a few years after his death. All of the stories deal with the themes familiar in his other worksÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â •how can a man lead a moral life, what should his attitude be toward the pleasures of the flesh, honor in the midst of war and equality among the classes."The Prisoner of the Caucassus" deals with a young soldier who has obtained leave from his regiment to visit his ailing mother and perhaps marry before she dies. On his way through the mountain passes he takes a wrong turn and is pursued by Tartars. His bafflement as to why these people would want to kill him is similar to young Nicolai Rostov in 'War and Peace', who had grown up in the bosom of family love and could not conceive that anyone would wish him harm. The naivetÃƒÂ© quickly disappears as a steely resolve to survive takes its place. Tolstoy is a master at depicting wartime action and the campaigns of pursuit, capture or killing which are inherent in war."The Death of Ivan Ilyich", "The Kreutzer Sonata" and "The Devil" are largely concerned with the subjective evolutions of individual consciousness in relation to external perceived challenges. My early exposure to the psychologically penetrating tales of Henry James has made me predisposed to be more comfortable in these subjective realms where specific characters undergo psychological/spiritual journeys. "The Death of Ivan Ilyich" depicts the life of an attorney/judge who has gone through all the right steps and played by the societal rules for reaching success and prosperity in life. He believes that his life has obtained a stability and order and that he has reached the pinnacle of success, until a random accident resulting in a bruise in his side, seemingly inconsequential but escalating to severe internal pain disrupts all of his sense of order. His selfish wife now seems self-absorbed and irritable with Ivan's health crisis as it presents an inconvenience in her life. His escalating illness, never named but presumably cancer, forces Ivan to reevaluate his life and question all his previous judgments. He goes through all the stages of dying to the point of ultimate acceptance. He reaches that point which always fascinated Tolstoy and compelled him to contemplate the process to the ultimate last step of consciousness that he also depicted in 'War and Peace', as if he wanted to venture as close as possible to the 'final frontier' and still be able to return to tell the tale. Ivan's serenity precedes his physical death and achieves the ultimate transformation.The character in 'The Kreutzer Sonata" seems like he just stepped out of the pages of one of Dostoevsky's intense novels and wandered into Tolstoy's universe. Like Raskolnikov, he is a killer and, also like Raskolnikov, he needs to make a complete, thorough confession to another

human. His jealousy and ambivalence to his wife’s beauty and seductiveness has culminated in murder. The character repents of the murder, but not, as Tolstoy later made clear, of his aversion to sexual pleasure. Tolstoy’s own revulsion toward sexual pleasure in his later life made explicit his own attitude. Despite this obvious bias, the story can be read as a compelling psychological fable without knowing the feelings of the author."Master and Man" is one of Tolstoy’s most evocative tales. A greedy landowner, Brekhunov, takes his servant, Nikita, with him to a neighboring landowner in order to purchase a valuable piece of land. In his haste to reach his destination before other prospective buyers, he speeds his horse and servant on through a snowstorm, gets lost and, as night approaches, appears to be stranded through the frigid night. The horse is pushed beyond endurance and dies and he abandons his servant, who is succumbing to hypothermia, to find his way, gets lost and ends up back at his sleigh. He undergoes a radical spiritual transformation from self-obsessed aristocrat, willing to sacrifice anyone in behalf of reaching his goal to resignation. This predicament is no one else’s doing but his own. He has refused a previous offer to stay with a family overnight and resume his journey in the morning. He realizes too late that he should have accepted that offer. Left with no one else to hold responsible but himself, he decides to cover his dying servant with his own body in the back of the carriage, dying in the process but enabling his servant to survive. Like Ivan Ilyich, he travels through different stages before reaching a spiritual epiphany and considering the worth of someone other than himself. The nocturnal cold and the slow, inevitable acquiescence to the harshness of the environment is reminiscent of the equally chilling Jack London tale, "To Build a Fire".The final story in the collection, the novella "Hadji Murat," take us full circle back to the Caucassus and tells the story of real life Chechen rebel Hadji Murat who, through a chain of circumstances, felt forced to retain his honor by defying the more militant rebel Shamil, who has held Murat’s mother, wife and son captive, and defecting to the Russian forces. Murat is constantly aware that he may be placing himself in an untenable situation in which he is not fully trusted by either the Russians or the Chechens. Against this foundation, Tolstoy wanders into the minds of various rebels and Russians, even launching into a tirade against the lecherous and cruel Tsar Nicholas I who prided himself on being against the death penalty while also condemning prisoners to run gauntlets of thousands of blows resulting in certain fatality. Tolstoy lost none of his descriptive powers in the final years of his life. ’Hadji Murat" is as compellingly cinematic as anything he had written previously. My only reservation with the story, as for most of the others in this collection, is that they could all benefit from being fleshed out in greater length. He has the material for several novels here and, while I’m not advocating expanding them to the sizes of his magnum opuses, I feel that they could have been improved by more intensive exploration of the characters

and circumstances. The tales race by through successions of characters we don't have enough time to get to know thoroughly before being thrust into another setting. In my view, Tolstoy never reigned in his maximalist tendencies, even in his shorter works. Nonetheless, what we have are still vital and indispensable contributions to a titanic literary career.

Have been meaning to read this classic novella for years and finally did. The outcome is foretold at the very beginning. It is a harrowing read. Ivan Ilyich is a character who you feel you may well have known -- a bright and motivated young man who works hard but doesn't spend a lot of thinking about what his values and needs really are. He achieves success in his career, which becomes the most central focus of his life, while personal relationships and virtually every other pursuit take a back seat. Only near the end of his life does he question his choices.I have not read much fiction in recent years but I could not put this book down, and I have been thinking about it a great deal since I finished it.

Tolstoy has never been short with his works, just looking at his more famous novels, Anna Karenina and War and Peace will show you that, though The Death of Ivan Ilych is the exception. Despite it's length, it's a compelling read and the tale Tolstoy tells is a great one. He delves into the meaning of life, the introspection of what lies beyond that final drift of consciousness, the reevaluation of past choices, and the ultimate acceptance of death. Truly, a must read for all Tolstoy fans, and even for those searching for a hidden gem.As for the details of the physical book itself... I purchased the paperback version. It's tall and thin with large words. Perfect for someone that has trouble reading small letters, but if you're looking to purchase a nice copy to add to a collection, there are better ones out there. The cover looks cheaply made and the format bothers me a lot more than it should, though I should've expected that for the price. Still, I was expecting something nicer. I've included a few pictures to give you all a better idea.

I've previously posted on one long piece in this book - Hadji Murat - on my blog, Gridley Fires The remainder of this book is a collection of short stories selected by the book's translators, Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky, no doubt to show off the diversity in Tolstoy's story structure and subject matter. But in doing this, they've perhaps inadvertently selected stories that, except for a pair, depict Tolstoy's project of using story to demonstrate his views on morality and ethics.Some of his moral depictions here (and almost all literature trifles with ethical dilemmas of the author's times, to one degree or another) are as subtly put as those modern by a hundred years. On the other

hand, others are actually quite ham-handed. But more on this subject below.The translators made these stories entertaining - not only by showing us the more timeless aspects of Tolstoy's literary thinking - but in herding them ever so gracefully into modern times via a more contemporary language that refuses to betray Tolstoy and the language of that time. As I've implied previously, these two translators are likely without peer in doing so.Possibly since I'm a blue collar dude by sensibility, my favorite story (besides Hadji Murat) is Master and Man, in which a man of means, Vassily Andreich and a servant, Nikita, an older muzhik, or peasant, take off on a winter trip to another town with a snowstorm looming. The story is a masterwork of the dynamics between the two men, how they both complement one another and manage inherent class conflicts. As well, it depicts as deftly as any modern work might the ways in which Nikita belongs to nature, in which he understands, despite his usual drunken state, how to navigate nature in such times and how to yield to it in order to survive. Vassily, on the other hand, is headstrong to a fault, which proves his undoing in this Jack London-style story of man versus the elements.

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