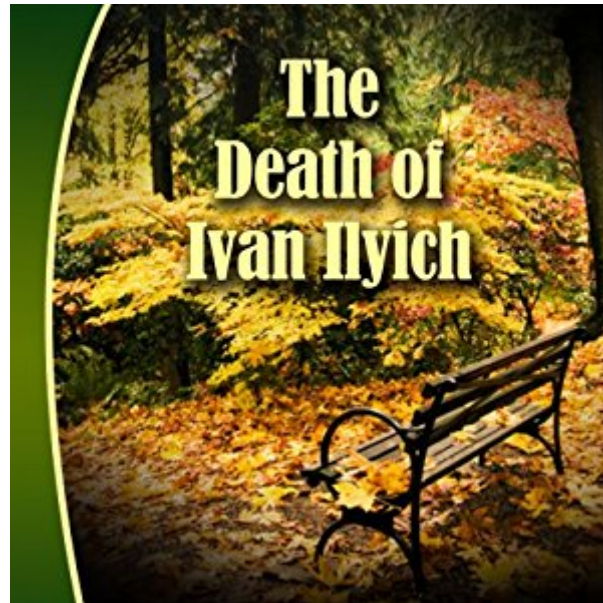


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The Death Of Ivan Ilyich



Synopsis

This famous work by Leo Tolstoy was one of the masterpieces of his late fiction, written shortly after his religious conversion of the late 1870s. Such is the power of this novel that it was acclaimed by both Vladimir Nabokov and Mahatma Gandhi as the greatest in the whole of Russian literature. The novel tells the story of the life and death, at the age of 45, of a high-court judge in 19th-century Russia - a miserable husband, proud father, and upwardly-mobile member of Russia's professional class, the object of Tolstoy's unremitting satire. Living what seems to be a good life, his dreadful relationship with his wife notwithstanding, Ivan Ilyich Golovin bangs his side while putting up curtains in a new apartment intended to reflect his family's superior status in society. Within weeks, he has developed a strange taste in his mouth and a pain that will not go away. Numerous expensive doctors - friends of friends of friends - are visited in their surgeries or called to the judge's bedside, but beyond muttering about blind gut and floating kidneys, they can neither explain nor treat his condition, and it soon becomes clear that Ivan Ilyich is dying. The second half of the novel records his terror as he battles with the idea of his own death. "I have been here. Now I am going there. Where?... No, I won't have it!" Oppressed by the length of the process, his wife, daughter, and colleagues - even the physicians - decide not to speak of it, but advise him to stay calm and follow doctors' orders, leaving him to wrestle with how this terrible thing could befall a man who has lived so well. The remarkable ending is something that will stay with you forever.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

There are so many levels upon which this story can be read, yet they are woven so inextricably into this masterpiece that the complexity is staggering. The premise sounds simple: a man who is about to die realizes he has never fully lived. We've all heard this before--in fact, Hollywood likes to drum such messages into our heads on a regular basis. But rarely, if ever, is it portrayed with the exquisite mastery which Tolstoy employed upon writing "The Death of Ivan Ilyich". Paradoxically, this story is just as much about the life of Ivan Ilyich as it is about his death. This is in order to fully appreciate who he is and the man he has made of himself before disaster strikes. It is also to highlight both the tragic deterioration of his life and the gradual enlightenment of his inmost soul. In portraying Ivan Ilyich's character, Tolstoy's subtle but inexorable condemnation is devastating. Not a detail is gratuitous: every point further serves to illustrate what is essentially a life without ideals and without purpose. Yet the author does not beat us over the head with this, rather than allowing the clear and unembellished facts to speak for themselves. And the way Tolstoy knew exactly which facts to accentuate creates a psychological depth which is unparalleled. Many seem to be under the impression that Ivan Ilyich was some sort of villain, and that the story is a warning against corruption and bad behavior. My personal view is that Ivan Ilyich is no worse--although no better--than many people. Perhaps he is of a slightly lesser moral calibre than most, but that does not make him completely evil. To believe that he is evil is to miss the whole point, for this story was meant to be universal, to depict a reality which exists for us all. This is obvious from the way the story begins, with Ivan Ilyich's friends' and relatives' reactions to his death. Like him, they see death as something that can never happen to them, and like him they lead lives which are shallow and superficial in an attempt to avoid the unpleasant realities of life. By the time he dies, Ivan Ilyich has risen above these people by at last coming to the realization of the worthlessness of his life. This has elevated him above the common man, who avoids the reality of death and the effort it takes to make life worthwhile. In Tolstoy's own words, "Ivan Ilyich's life had been...most ordinary and therefore most terrible." Therein lies the impact of this story: Ivan Ilyich is Everyman, and the message he represents is applicable at every moment in our lives.

This book changed my life. No kidding. After reading it, I realized I was trapped in a loveless marriage, slave to a meaningless job, and listing towards a dark oblivion. In other words, I was your average middle-class, middle-aged married white guy. This book is a terrifying wake-up call to such guys--and I suppose to their female counterparts--to the life-not-well-lived, alas, the path most-taken. The premise is simple. A solid career guy with all the trappings of 'success'--secure job,

nice house, presentable wife--lifts his arm one day and feels something go 'twang' inside him. No big deal, he thinks. Probably tweaked a muscle or something. Except the little pain doesn't go away. Its not ever going away. It's a message--a message of mortality. The Grim Reaper is at the door. Time's up. Now this is bad enough news, for sure. But that's only the beginning of this novel of existential horror. For as our hero lies a-dying he sees the life around him--the carefully tended garden of his years--as if for the first time. That is, he sees how bitter, fraudulent, and full of decay and vermin it truly is. From his fair-weather friends and business associates to his vain and self-centered wife who fritters about the inconvenience attendant upon her husband's impending death as if it were a personal affront and the greatest of injustices--to her, *The Death of Ivan Ilych* offers a bedside view of the cruel absurdity of the inhuman comedy. For as the protagonist lies suffering on his deathbed and reviews his life and how it has--and hasn't--added up, he endures a torment that is almost Christ-like in its intensity and resulting in a revelation as immense in its profundity. But whether one of heaven or hell, truth or pacifying illusion is up to each reader to decide. Said to be the result of Tolstoy's own middle-aged spiritual crisis, *The Death of Ivan Ilych* manages to say in a scant 100 pages what most novels don't begin to say in 500. Timeless and archetypal, this novel reads with the power of a myth--a cautionary myth to wake up this very moment and begin to live an authentic life before it's too late. Because at any moment, it may suddenly be too late.

I am so sorry only 9 other people have reviewed this book for . If it were up to me, I'd place a copy in every hotel and motel room in America, right next to Gideon. I realize that some books just hit us the right way at certain times in our lives, and I once had a hard time trying to persuade 18- and 19-year-olds to appreciate this one. But when I was around 30, I read the title novella, and it changed my life by changing my outlook on life and enabling me to make some decisions I'd never have taken seriously if I hadn't read it. But I don't want to scare you off. Tolstoy is perfectly accessible, the title character's dilemma is heartrending (the title gives you a clue), the characters universal, and the effect upon closing the cover after the last page indelible. If one person reads it after reading these 10 reviews, I'll be happy.

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