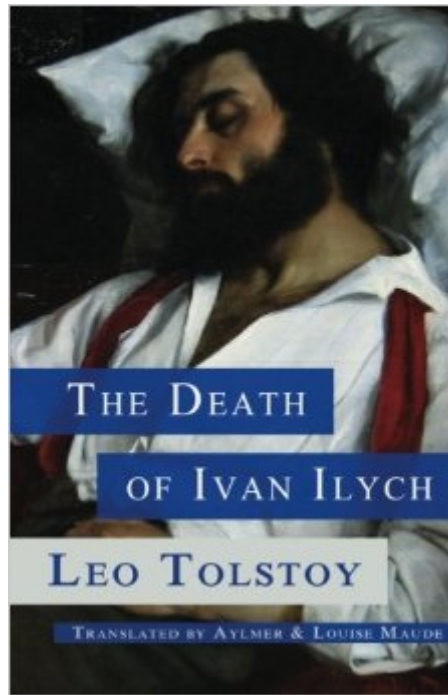


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The Death Of Ivan Ilych



Synopsis

Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910), author of *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*, was foremost among the great Russian novelists of the nineteenth century, and is widely considered one of the greatest writers of prose fiction in world history. In his perceptive and moving depiction of Ivan Ilych, a worldly careerist facing his own mortality in the midst of a self-absorbed family and indifferent colleagues, Tolstoy provides one of literature's greatest and most memorable reflections on the meaning of the good life and on life as preparation for death. This edition features the classic Oxford translation of Aylmer and Louise Maude, of whom Tolstoy himself said, "Better translators, both for knowledge of the two languages and for penetration into the very meaning of the matter translated, could not be invented."

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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 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.

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