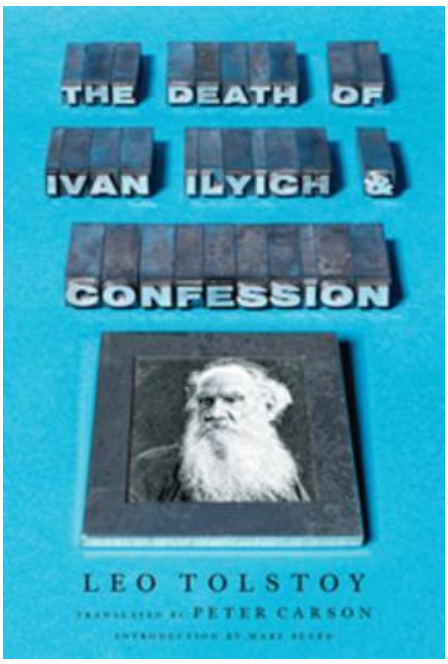

The Death of Ivan Ilyich and Confession

Leo Tolstoy , Peter Carson (Translation) , Mary Beard (Introduction)

The Death of Ivan Ilyich and Confession

Leo Tolstoy , Peter Carson (Translation) , Mary Beard (Introduction)

The Death of Ivan Ilyich and Confession Leo Tolstoy , Peter Carson (Translation) , Mary Beard (Introduction)
In the last two days of his own life, Peter Carson completed these new translations of *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* and *Confession* before he succumbed to cancer in January 2013. Carson, the eminent British publisher, editor, and translator who, in the words of his author Mary Beard, “had probably more influence on the literary landscape of [England] over the past fifty years than any other single person,” must have seen the irony of translating *Ilyich*, Tolstoy’s profound meditation on death and loss, “but he pressed on regardless, apparently refusing to be distracted by the parallel of literature and life.” In Carson’s shimmering prose, these two transcendent works are presented in their most faithful rendering in English. Unlike so many previous translations that have tried to smooth out Tolstoy’s rough edges, Carson presents a translation that captures the verisimilitude and psychological realism of the original Russian text.

The Death of Ivan Ilyich and Confession Details

Date	:	Published November 25th 2013 by Liveright
ISBN	:	9780871404268
Author	:	Leo Tolstoy , Peter Carson (Translation) , Mary Beard (Introduction)
Format	:	Hardcover 224 pages
Genre	:	Fiction, Classics, Literature, Philosophy, Religion, Cultural, Russia

From Reader Review The Death of Ivan Ilyich and Confession for online ebook

Megan Murray says

Have you ever watched a film and walked away feeling like it shattered your world view. You walk away kind of wounded and groggy like it took something out of you? For me, that normally only happens with really great, dramatic films, but this piece of writing did that to me. I threw my book across the couch and just let it all sink in. It blew me away.

Bruce says

Tolstoy explores the meaning of life and death in these two paired works, a novella and a spiritual memoir. For Ivan Ilyich, the gradual knowledge that he is dying is terrifying, but in the process he slowly comes to see it is his hollow life, consumed with appearance and decorum, that has made his dying so spiritually agonizing. There is no mention here of the consolation of faith, whereas in Confession this is an integral theme. Feeling the absurdity of life in the knowledge of the inevitability of death, Tolstoy, as a young man, rejects all religion, then returns to Orthodoxy, only to reject again most of it (sacraments, ritual, the arrogance of the position that Orthodox teaching has the whole truth), but believing in God and the example of Jesus. Dense and somewhat repetitive, Confession is Tolstoy's intellectual conversion story.

Nancy says

The Death of Ivan Ilyich: I sought this novella out because Atul Gawande refers to it several times in Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End and because I have wanted to take another stab at Tolstoy thinking something short might help. (I've started War and Peace several times but never finished it.) While this may be a good description of the experience of dying, I found it hard to engage and care. Perhaps I got off to a bad start by the way the deaths of several of Ilyich's children are mentioned in passing. It was as if that was some sort of inconvenience that made his wife crabby.

Confession: I finally got back to this section of the book after reading [book:Tolstoy's False Disciple: The Untold Story of Leo Tolstoy and Vladimir Chertkov|20729820. That got me wondering exactly what Tolstoy's religious beliefs were. Confession seems to be a history of his struggle to identify religious truth and understand how good people of strong faith could believe such different things. I wondered about this same issue in my early teens and eventually decided there is no "truth" in religion. I've been comfortable without a belief in an afterlife for nearly 50 years now so don't just don't have the struggle with belief that Tolstoy had. This essay would probably resonate much more to someone who, like Tolstoy, feels sure there is a religious truth and wants to find it.

Ann Marie says

Finished the year as I started it -with Tolstoy. “Anna Karenina” in the summer made it a nice set. So

interesting to read these four later books of his and learn about his faith and the change in his worldview. The memoir “Confession” mirrors what happens to Levin in “Anna”, and also explains the novel “Resurrection,” which started my year. Interesting to hear him refer to “War & Peace” and his other earlier novels as “vanity.” Brilliant, fascinating man.

Jay says

Leo Tolstoy, on his birthday August 28
"Joy can be real only if people look on their life as a service, and have a definite object in life outside themselves and their personal happiness."
"The truth is that the State is a conspiracy designed not only to exploit, but above all to corrupt its citizens ... Henceforth, I shall never serve any government anywhere" - Leo Tolstoy
An ethereal, otherworldly presence, whose later works are beatitudes and exemplars of the recognition and embrace of the Infinite within others, all of us reflections and images of the Being which connects and unites us; Leo Tolstoy's great work was to reveal and enact the conditions which will restore us to a state of grace in which we treat others as members of the same human family that we are.
One may begin as he did, with the Great Books of Realism War and Peace and Anna Karenina, though he would later repudiate them once he discovered his true mission to redeem the world.
Inspired by his reading of Schopenhauer's The World as Will and Representation, Leo Tolstoy's works A Confession, referntial to that of Augustine's, and The Kingdom of God is Within You together provide his major philosophical nonfiction, a pacifist-anarchist Christianity based on a literal reading of the Sermon on the Mount.
The Death of Ivan Ilyich presents the final form of his philosophy; this is the Leo Tolstoy who inspired both Gandhi and Martin Luther King to embrace nonviolent resistence.
The monastic quietude, reverential poverty, and charitable compassion of Leo Tolstoy made him a saintly figure who continues to inspire us today.
So entranced am I of the delighful short story by Elif Batuman chronicling his investigation of Tolstoy's murder, peopled with characters from Tolstoy's books, that I am compelled to include it in its entirety here, from Harper's Magazine.
Or, here is the link: https://harpers.org/archive/2009/02/t...
Clearly, Tolstoy died of atropine poisoning. But was his wife's confession to their daughter of having been the cause of his death a confession of murder? Or of concealing the actions of a daughter obsessed with revenge for his leaving them destitute? Or did her mother merely believe this, or was protecting someone else, and if so, who was the murderer? And what of Chertkov, the Devil Man to whom Tolstoy had left everything in a secret will?

Steven says

From *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*:

> *"How terrible and how stupid! It can't be! It can't be, but it is."* (80)

From *Confession*:

> *"My situation was terrible. I knew that I would find nothing on the path of rational knowledge*

> *but the denial of life, but there, in faith, nothing but the denial of reason, which was even more impossible than the denial of life. According to rational knowledge it turned out that life is evil and people know this, that not to live is something that depends on them, but they have lived and do live, and I myself was living although I had known for long before that life is meaningless and evil. According to faith it turned out that in order to understand the meaning of life I had to renounce reason, the very thing for which meaning is needed."* (166)

I had read *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* before, more than once, in fact, but not in the translation completed by Peter Carson—along with *Confession* (which I hadn't read before)—in the very last month of his life. The translation was wonderful and the experience of reading it especially poignant, given the facts—and the affinity in subject matter and approach (mainly in response to the question: Why live?) that Peter Carson perceived between the two clearly revealed itself in reading the two pieces back-to-back. In a sense, *Ivan Ilyich*—especially its ending—is a fictional representation of the question with which Tolstoy grapples non-fictionally in *Confession*: what is the meaning of (one's) life?

Toe says

Book 1: The Death of Ivan Ilyich

Objective Summary

Ivan Ilyich Golovin died on February 4, 1882. His coworkers, who were his closest “friends,” immediately thought of how his death would impact their careers. His wife immediately thought of how his death would impact the amount of money she could extract from the government. These responses give credence to Ivan’s fears late in life that he had lived his life “wrong.”

Ivan was a 45-year-old Russian judge. He left a wife and two kids, a boy and a girl. His life was “very simple and ordinary and very awful.” He always chased “decorum” and social standing. He sought to rise through the ranks of his government job with a moderate amount of success. He married his wife because it was a sensible match. They were happy for about one year in the beginning. But then she became unhappy, controlling, and nagging. They fought and grew cold and distant toward each other, though they maintained appearances during parties and social gatherings. He buried himself in his work as a source of pride and happiness. But Ivan’s greatest joy in life was the Russian card game similar to bridge called vint.

After a promotion at work, Ivan fell while hanging a curtain in his home, injuring his side. He deteriorated over the course of several (4?) months. Doctors did not agree on a diagnosis, and it is unclear what he had (a floating kidney, appendicitis, cancer, or something else). Ivan oscillated between hope of recovery and fear of death. He wanted to live and could not grasp the overwhelming finality of death. He suffered immense physical pain.

Most of all, Ivan hated how everyone around him indulged in the “lie” that he was merely ill and would recover. By pretending that his death was equivalent to a simple unpleasantness, those around him refused to acknowledge the impending doom he faced and that they would one day face. Only one person, Gerasim, a peasant and Ivan’s manservant, acknowledged that Ivan was dying. Gerasim sympathized with Ivan’s suffering and did everything he could to alleviate it.

Ivan eventually admits to himself that he lived his life “wrong” in that his worldly ambitions and interests were pointless. The immediacy of his end revealed to him that decorum and superficiality did not provide

him a meaningful life. The ending is ambiguous. Ivan takes communion. Later, “some kind of force str[ikes] him in the chest and on the side.” He falls into a black hole and sees a light. He gains pity for his wife and daughter, both of whom continue to strive for the superficial. He realizes that his death will be a relief to them. His fear of death disappears. Death is no more, and he is filled with joy.

Subjective Thoughts

This is my third book in a row dealing with life and death; the other two were Siddhartha by Hesse and The Stranger by Camus. This one is probably the most unsettling. Siddhartha gives hope of peace through the eternal cycle. The Stranger gives hope of peace through absurdity and nothingness. The Death of Ivan Ilyich doesn’t give hope, at least not clearly. It seems to be a warning to find meaning in life before it’s too late. If it’s already too late for you, tough shit. We’re all going to die, and it will be very painful for at least some of us. In addition to the physical suffering, which can be extended and intense, there is a commensurate mental anguish that is as unescapable as death itself. So, in the words of Robert De Niro from Meet the Parents, “We’ll look forward to that Greg.”

And Tolstoy doesn’t provide much hint at how to approach this fateful journey. The ending is ambiguous and shrouded in mystery. I guess it has to be that way, since none of us really know what to expect. We don’t know what force struck Ivan, or what he realized at the end. Did he actually love his wife and kids in the end? Did he realize he had lived a fine life? What was the light? Did he find God? Was his mental suffering because of the unknown and his unwillingness to accept his fate, or is it inevitable? Was acceptance his relief? Or was he just delusional from pain, and his mind succumbed to senseless synaptic firings?

And what does a good, meaningful life consist of or look like? The best we can get out of Tolstoy is to be like Gerasim: Understand everyone is suffering and dying, comfort them when you can.

Memorable Quotes

“So on hearing of Ivan Ilyich’s death the first thought of each of the gentlemen meeting in the room was the significance the death might have for the transfer or promotion of the members themselves or their friends.”

“So—he’s dead; but here I am still, each thought or felt. At this point his closer acquaintances, the so-called friends of Ivan Ilyich, involuntarily thought that they now needed to carry out the very tedious requirements of etiquette and go to the requiem service and pay a visit of condolence to the widow.”

“Three days of terrible suffering and death. That can happen to me too, now, any minute, he thought, and for a moment he became frightened. But right away, he didn’t know how, there came to his aid the ordinary thought that this had happened to Ivan Ilyich and not to him, and this ought not and could not happen to him . . . .”

“[S]he talked away and unburdened herself of what was clearly her main business with him—how on her husband’s death she could get money from the treasury.”

“Ivan Ilyich’s past life had been very simple and ordinary and very awful.”

“[H]is life which had faltered was again taking on its true and natural character of cheerful pleasantness and decorum.”

“His official pleasures were pleasures of pride; his social pleasures were pleasures of vanity; but Ivan Ilyich’s real pleasures were the pleasures of playing vint [i.e., Russian card game similar to bridge].”

“Ivan Ilyich’s chief torment was the lie—that lie, for some reason recognized by everyone, that he was only ill but not dying, and that he only needed rest and treatment and then there would be some very good outcome. But he knew that whatever they did, there would be no outcome except even more painful suffering and death.”

“The terrible, horrific act of dying, he saw, had been brought down by all those surrounding him to the level of a casual unpleasantness, some breach of decorum . . . .”

“He wept for his helplessness, for his horrible loneliness, for people’s cruelty, for God’s cruelty, for God’s absence. ‘Why have you done all this? Why have you brought me here? Why, why do you torment me so horribly?’ He didn’t expect an answer, but he also wept because there wasn’t and couldn’t be an answer.”

“But what if in actual fact all my life, my conscious life, has been ‘wrong’? It occurred to him that the notion that had previously seemed to him a complete impossibility—that he had not lived his life as he should have done—could be the truth. It occurred to him that his barely noticeable attempts at struggling against what was considered good by those in high positions above him, those barely noticeable attempts which he had immediately rejected, could be genuine, and everything else wrong. His work and the structure of his life and his family and his social and professional interests—all that could be wrong. He tried to defend all that to himself. And suddenly he felt the fragility of what he was defending. And there was nothing to defend.”

“He searched for his old habitual fear of death and didn’t find it. Where was death? What death? There was no fear, because there was no death. Instead of death there was light. ‘So that’s it!’ he suddenly said aloud. ‘Such joy!’”

Book 2: Confession

Objective Summary

Confession is the story of Tolstoy’s (1828-1910) spiritual journey. Born into an aristocratic Russian family, he was raised in the Eastern Orthodox Christian faith. He followed what his elders told him as a young boy. But he developed doubts as a teenager, during his formal schooling, and as he witnessed his brother suffer and die in agony over the course of a year. He fought in the Crimean War and then wandered as an unbeliever for decades, writing, indulging his lusts, and tending to his 16,000-acre estate.

Despite ascending the heights of material comfort, fame, and social standing, Tolstoy remained unhappy as an unbeliever. He saw no escape from suffering, aging, and dying. He viewed life as an oriental fable about a traveler who dives down a well to escape a rampaging beast above. The traveler catches onto a branch halfway through the well. The branch has some drops of honey the traveler can lick. Below the traveler at the bottom of the well is a hungry dragon waiting to devour him. The traveler can neither climb up and out because of the rampaging beast, nor drop to the bottom because of the dragon. Meanwhile, one white mouse and one black mouse (representing night and day) are slowly gnawing on the base of the branch to which he clings.

Tolstoy reasoned himself into believing that life was meaningless and the only rational response was suicide. Neither the hard sciences, such as math and physics, nor philosophy could give him satisfactory answers to

his biggest questions: “Is there any meaning in my life that wouldn’t be destroyed by the death that inevitably awaits me?” The sciences told him that in infinite time and space, an infinite number of particles arranged themselves in infinite combinations. One such “ephemeral causal connection of particles” was his body and what he perceived as his life. Eventually, those particles will separate, and his life will end. Similarly, philosophy gave no respite to the apparent meaninglessness of existence insofar as the best philosophers (Buddha, Solomon, Socrates, Schopenhauer) all said that life is suffering and death is freedom. Tolstoy’s reasoning on the matter boiled down to the simple identity that o = o, meaning existence is existence, which he found true but unhelpful. He was looking for—no, required—a reason for continuing his existence.

Tolstoy found people responded to this frightening fate in four ways. First, they were ignorant of it; they just didn’t know it was a problem or didn’t think about it. They did not know they were in a well. Second, they embraced Epicureanism, meaning they enjoyed the parts of life they could. As Solomon said, “Eat, drink, and be merry.” For tomorrow we die. They lick the honey on the branch. Third, with strength and energy, they could kill themselves. They could choose to let go of the branch and fall. Fourth, they could be weak by continuing to drag out life. They could fearfully hold on to the branch, hoping their situation would change.

Out of a longing for God, and perhaps cowardice, Tolstoy avoided suicide by choosing the fourth option. He continued his contemplations, and eventually discovered faith in God as the reason for living. He consciously set aside reason as a closed avenue for providing meaning to his life. Religion, for him, provided answers to all his biggest questions. “How should I live?” “By God’s law.” “What that is real will come out of my life?” “Eternal suffering or eternal bliss.” “What meaning of life is there that is not destroyed by death?” “Union with the infinity of God, paradise.”

He attended to church and applauded the simple lives and struggles of peasants. Tolstoy found that faith, unlike science, can reconcile the finite life with the infinite universe and an infinite God. He acknowledges that he could not buy into all religious teachings, particularly the ritual and dogma, but they contained truth that he believed. He ends his confession by describing his faith in God through a dream in which he is at first struggling and falling after wriggling free of ropes. But then he looks up at the light, and he is firmly held by a pillar that he does not understand but knows is strong.

Subjective Thoughts

Tolstoy’s spiritual journey is interesting and mercifully short. He was a thoughtful and intelligent man exploring eternal concepts. But I found his explanation (argument?) for faith incomplete. Or perhaps I just need more time to turn it over in my mind. He spent more time describing the meaningless of life than providing his answer to it, which boiled down to: Go to church. It’s unclear to me how the fact of millions of Russian peasants attending church bolsters the argument that life is actually meaningful, or there actually is a God. Yes, it can give poor peasants meaning. It is effective for many people. But how does its efficacy weigh in the calculus of the truth of the matter? Are we to set aside truth for meaning or efficacy? Is it not just a variation of his option number 1, ignorance, by pretending you’re not in a well, or there is no rampaging beast up top? And, to the extent Tolstoy champions an idyllic life of manual labor, I find it unconvincing coming from an aristocrat who, as far as I can tell, never actually engaged in hard manual labor himself for any considerable period. But maybe there is something to the idea that reason is not the way to God, or to happiness.

Memorable Quotes

“I didn’t know myself what I wanted: I was afraid of life; I rushed away from it and at the same time I still hoped for something from it.”

“‘You are a lump of something stuck together by chance. The lump decays. The lump calls this decay its life. The lump will disintegrate and the decay and all its questions will come to an end.’ That is the answer given by the bright side of science, and it cannot give any other if it just strictly follows its principles.”

“So those are the direct answers human wisdom gives when it answers the question of life.
‘The life of the body is evil and a lie. And therefore the destruction of this life of the body is something good, and we must desire it,’ says Socrates.
‘Life is that which ought not to be—an evil—and the going into nothingness is the sole good of life,’ says Schopenhauer.
‘Everything in the world—folly and wisdom and riches and poverty and happiness and grief—all is vanity and nonsense. Man will die and nothing will remain. And that is foolish,’ says Solomon.
‘One must not live with the awareness of the inevitability of suffering, weakness, old age, and death—one must free oneself from life, from all possibility of life,’ says Buddha.”

“Whatever the faith and whatever the answers and to whomever it might give them, every answer from faith gives the finite existence of man a meaning of the infinite—a meaning that is not destroyed by suffering, privations and death.”

“[F]aith is the knowledge of the meaning of man’s life, as a result of which man does not destroy himself but lives. Faith is the life force. If a man lives, then he believes in something. If he didn’t believe that one must live for something, then he wouldn’t live.”

Ivan L. says

this is by far my favorite book of all time. while tolstoy isn't known for his easy-reads, this book is the personification of a well thought-out metaphor laced in layman's terms. while the answer of christianity (or, capital R religion)) at the end is nothing short but expected from a man who found himself in religion towards the latter half of his life, that particular quality (which i'm not too much of a fan of) is overshadowed by his outright perfect analysis of man and their reflections on death through peter, and falling into the ease of being One of Them through ivan.

i hope i read this book until i die. and, i guess, find heaven.

John McDonald says

THE DEATH OF IVAN ILYICH:
"Death is finished, it is no more," says Ivan Ilyich as he passes from the world. "He breathed in, stopped halfway, stretched himself,and died." Profoundly, he had not answered the question his final days posed, namely what did he live for? indeed, what do we all live for? It seems that, like Hamlet, Ilyich only understood his life in terms of his own death and that from the moment of birth, only death is certain.

Ilyich was that person who did every thing he was told, did it by the book, seized opportunities, and became

predictable in his habits, his goals, his marriage and his security. As colleagues at the court died, retired, or left for other reasons, he calculated with reasonable certainty his chances of getting that colleague's better job, or promotion. At his death, his wife, for whom he had little love, sought ways to have the court for whom he was employed as a judge, pay for his funeral. His life was so predictable that it never occurred to him that a fall from a ladder which continued to cause pain could reflect the beginning of his end, which it was and which it became.

He resented that his wife and his doctors were telling him that he would recover, but he looked at them and saw in their faces that they pitied him. He saw that he was being treated differently even though they were telling him that he'd be just as he was. But he knew differently:

"It's not a case of the appendix or of the kidney, but of life and death. Yes, I had life and now it's passing, and I can't hold it back. That's it. Why deceive oneself? Isn't it obvious to everyone but myself that I am dying, and it's only a question of the number of weeks, days--maybe now."

His chief torment was "the lie" and he despised both it and those who promulgated it, including his wife who had already indicated that he wanted to leave him, before he fell and began to die. "The lie" poisoned his life, made him bitter and angry, and convinced him that he had been lied to throughout his life about how life really should be lived. In this sense, Ivan sought the same understanding that Tolstoy searched for in "Confession," asking himself, "what if, in actual fact, all my life, my conscious life, had been 'wrong'?

CONFESSION: Written as an introduction to an unpublished work and translated by Peter Carson, Confession is an invasion deep into the mind of someone very troubled by death and even more troubled by the meaninglessness of life underscored by religious faith or one punctuated by reason but wholly unsatisfying as evident in the lives lived by elites, well educated and sophisticated in matters of reason, art, literature, money, and the professions, but fundamentally unhappy chasing ephemeral goals.

His inquiries, or explorations of his own mind and manner of thinking, are torturous and bring him in a circle about the meaning of his life with the practice of religious faith or without it. His premise--what he and Solomon both concluded--is that "vanity of vanity, all is vanity. One generation passeth away; and another generation cometh but the earth abides forever. . . . As it happeneth to the fool, so it happeneth even to me; and why was I then more wise? Then, I said in my heart, this also is vanity. For, there is no remembrance of the wise more than of the fool forever, seeing that which now is in the days to come shall all be forgotten. And how dieth the wise man? As the fool. . . ." He asserts that "Happy is he who was not born; death is better than life; one needs to be rid of life. I interpreted this as a reflection of the attitude of Shakyamuni, the prince who when venturing from his castle is exposed for the first time to toothless, sick men and women who die and when they do, begin to stink and rot. It is the Buddha's version of virtue which says, "one must not live with the inevitability of suffering, weakness, old age, and death--one must free oneself from life, from all possibility of life."

This seems to be a proposition Tolstoy can live with, but finds that to do so, he must essentially come to accept what Ivan Ilyich accepted, that all seeking or experiencing contributes nothing if not pursued or experienced to the core purpose of "creating" good, done through virtue.

Tolstoy searches, it seems, to find a place for faith in his journey through life. He remains uncertain, except that he knows that the only rational approach to bring faith into his way of living is to live a life that seeks to do good for himself and those around him. As he says, all else is vanity and we die with nothing more than that unless we make life better for someone else, or as he put it, eschew all pleasures in life, and "submit, endure, be merciful."

Confessions and Ivan Ilych were so profound in their sentiments that I am likely to buy a copy for my own, and like many of my favorite books which leave me confounded, read and re-read it, since it really is that good.

Tom says

The death of Ivan Ilyich is about the fictional death of a Russian businessman; Confession is about Tolstoy's search for meaning in his life.

Paul says

A little disappointed at the end where it still isn't explicitly clear what he regretted in his life (poor marriage, pursuit of material pleasures, something else?).

Inspiring story that he seems to start from a middle-class upbringing but is educated, performs well and enjoys an impressive career. Sharp commentary on thoughts we all have at some point regarding the self-important feelings of surrounding ourselves with the 'right' people, how the 'wrong' people seem to stop coming about, building a life surrounded by the 'right' entertainment, dining, housing, social circles, etc. Wish I

Eleanor Levine says

Tolstoy, while you put me to sleep with "Confession," "The Death of Ivan Ilyich," transported me to the spidery aristocracy and their insufferable crankiness. What a great translation, though it is my first read of this novella. I've read Anna K and War and Peace, but never this depressing micro-tome, which I thoroughly enjoyed. I tried, truly, to read Tolstoy's "Confession," where he professes, at least in the first fifty pages, to being a tortured soul, though he owns an estate, has a big family and is a successful author from a commercial and literary standpoint. Still, I didn't find any engaging and stressful moments in "Confession," and if I really want existential angst, I'll try Friedrich N or Mr. Sartre. "The Death of Ivan Ilyich," however, is the vivisection of the presumptuous magistrate whose body/soul falls apart in the midst of his grandeur and wealth. This is the essence of all that rhetoric that is taking up room in "Confession."

Stephen McDonald says

Good study of the process of death from the inner thoughts of the dying. I was lead to this book from Atul Gawande's new book.

Josh Friedlander says

"The Tolstoyan formula," writes Nabokov, "is: Ivan lived a bad life. Since the bad life is nothing but the

death of the soul, then Ivan lived a living death; and since beyond death is God's living light, then Ivan died into a new life – Life with a capital L." Which is to say, this is a book about the Meaning of Life, and since it was written late in life - by the mystical, pacifist, Tolstoy - the conclusion is preordained. But Tolstoy also knows how to craft a message that is sincere and urgent rather than preachy. What is this malaise of the modern, materialist, world? Ivan Ilyich is clueless about it, until his final moment when he embraces his death. That there's more to life than this is clear, but what exactly that is only hinted here. But that's dealt with more at length in other books (q.v. the end of *Anna Karenina*).

John says

Flannery O'Connor once commented about her audience: “My audience are the people who think God is dead. . . . To the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures.”

I thought of Flannery O'Connor as I was reading "The Death of Ivan Ilyich" because in this short novel, Leo Tolstoy is going to hold us by the scruff of the neck and force us to face the reality of (our own) death. Ivan Ilyich is a normal Russian guy, who has a normal Russian life, until in middle age he gets cancer. During the cancer his life falls apart. His wife and daughter are basically annoyed with him because his illness is getting in the way of their lives. After his diagnosis Ivan sits down to explain things to his wife. Tolstoy writes:

"His wife listened, but in the middle of his account his daughter came in wearing a hat: she and her mother were going out. She sat down for a moment to listen to this boring stuff but she couldn't stand it for long, and her mother didn't listen to the end."

Brutal.

Ivan is confronted--we may say slapped in the face--with his own mortality. Tolstoy:

"All his life the example of a syllogism he had studied in Kiesewetter's logic--Caius is a man, men are mortal, therefore Caius is mortal--had seemed to be true only in relation to Caius the man, man in general, and it was quite justified, but he wasn't Caius and he wasn't man in general, and he had always been something quite, quite special apart from all other beings."

Ivan has a general belief in death, but when applied to him specifically, he does not like the idea at all. Quite contemporary, Ivan turns out to be, for our culture is one that seeks to hide death and run from it as best we can. Leo Tolstoy is not going to allow us to run. He is going to force us to confront our own mortality.

We see it in Ivan's plaintive cry as he gets ever nearer to death, suffering in deep and never ending pain: "There's no explanation! Torment, death...Why?"

Why indeed.

The end is oddly hopeful, although Tolstoy doesn't belabor the hope. I guess he wants us to figure it out for ourselves.

The second half of this book is Tolstoy's own writing on his discovery of the meaning of life and it's a good companion to Ivan Ilyich. Tolstoy will basically answer the questions that he has raised (but not really answered) in Ivan Ilyich. Tolstoy eventually became a follower of Jesus because he could see no other

logical explanation of any ultimate meaning in life.

He writes: "I understood the truth I later found in the Gospels, that people loved darkness rather than light because their actions were evil."

Tolstoy begins what he calls "a search for God," he writes: "This search did not come out of my way of thinking--it was even directly opposed to it--but it came out of my heart."
