

# **BOOK CLUB To Go!**

## **The Death of Ivan Ilyich**

### **By Leo Tolstoy**

#### **Introduction**

*The Death of Ivan Ilyich* transports the reader to nineteenth-century Russia, a world that may seem remote to twenty first-century Americans. Certainly Tolstoy grounds his novella in a particular social, political, and religious context. But the universal questions transcend time and place: What provides true happiness? What does it mean to live a good life? Does God exist? If so, why would He allow suffering? What is one's responsibility to other human beings? Perhaps most of all, Ivan's "commonplace" and "horrifying" life challenges us to consider our mortality, for whether by disease, disaster, or an accidental fall, we all – like him – will die. Tolstoy doesn't prescribe an answer for Ivan, or for us. But he does offer a work of art that he intended as "a means of communion among people." In this way, his novella can illuminate even the darkest human truths.

([neabigread.org](http://neabigread.org))

#### **About the Author**

Count Leo Tolstoy was born on September 9, 1828, in Yasnaya Polyana, Russia. Orphaned at nine, he was brought up by an elderly aunt and educated by French tutors until he matriculated at Kazan University in 1844. In 1847, he gave up his studies and, after several aimless years, volunteered for military duty in the army, serving as a junior officer in the Crimean War before retiring in 1857. In 1862, Tolstoy married Sophie Behrs, a marriage that was to become, for him, bitterly unhappy. His diary, started in 1847, was used for self-study and self-criticism; it served as the source from which he drew much of the material that appeared not only in his great novels *War and Peace* (1869) and *Anna Karenina* (1877), but also in his shorter works. Seeking religious justification for his life, Tolstoy evolved a new Christianity based upon his own interpretation of the Gospels. Yasnaya Polyana became a mecca for his many converts. At the age of eighty-two, while away from home, the writer suffered a break down in his health in Astapovo, Riazan, and he died there on November 20, 1910.

([Penguin Group.com](http://Penguin Group.com))

#### **Reviews**

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Tolstoy's prose is majestic, his pace measured, his characters unflinchingly true to life, his message bleak. If you've never read any Tolstoy, best not start with this one – you might top yourself before you get round to *Anna Karenina* – *The Guardian*

Written more than a century ago, Tolstoy's work still retains the power of a contemporary novel – *Publisher's Weekly*

### **Further Reading**

*An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge* by Peyton Farquhar

*The Story of an Hour* by Kate Chopin

*The Metamorphosis* by Franz Kafka

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#### **Possible Discussion Questions**

1. Why might Tolstoy begin *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* with the funeral of the main character? How would the effect differ if it were told chronologically?
2. What are the comic elements in the opening chapter, and how do they function?
3. What is your initial impression of Ivan's wife? Does your opinion of her change as the story progresses?
4. Chapter Two begins with an important claim: "Ivan Ilyich's life had been most simple and commonplace – and most horrifying." Why might Tolstoy consider Ivan's "simple and commonplace" life to be "horrifying"?
5. As Ivan rises in his career, he fails in his personal life. What might Tolstoy be suggesting here? Why does Ivan find so much pleasure in playing bridge?
6. Why does Ivan marry Praskovya Fedorovna? Why does their marriage deteriorate? Does either husband or wife receive your sympathy?
7. Why do you think Ivan is comforted by the presence of the peasant boy, Gerasim? How does his attitude contrast with Ivan's other visitors, especially the doctors?
8. Compare the conduct of Ivan's daughter with Ivan's son. Why is this thirteen-year-old boy crucial to the novella's final chapter?
9. After three days of excruciating physical and mental pain, Ivan realizes that despite a futile life, he can still make amends. Is he right? Does he accomplish this?
10. How do you interpret the light that Ivan sees at the very end? What might this light symbolize or suggest?
11. Writer Cynthia Ozick says, "This novella is about learning, finally, that you have been living a lie, that you've failed to be true to yourself, that you've failed to be true to others around you, and that you failed. And it is about exploring the rupture of the lie." Do you agree? Why or why not?

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