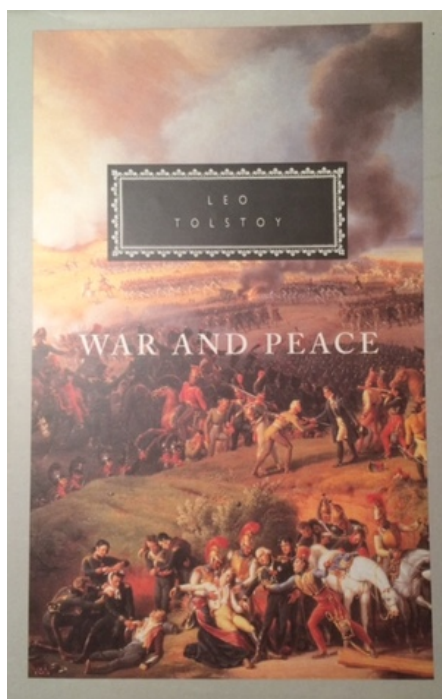




War and Peace

Leo Tolstoy , Aylmer Maude (Translator) , Louise Maude (Translator)

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War and Peace broadly focuses on Napoleon's invasion of Russia in 1812 and follows three of the most well-known characters in literature: Pierre Bezukhov, the illegitimate son of a count who is fighting for his inheritance and yearning for spiritual fulfillment; Prince Andrei Bolkonsky, who leaves his family behind to fight in the war against Napoleon; and Natasha Rostov, the beautiful young daughter of a nobleman who intrigues both men.

As Napoleon's army invades, Tolstoy brilliantly follows characters from diverse backgrounds—peasants and nobility, civilians and soldiers—as they struggle with the problems unique to their era, their history, and their culture. And as the novel progresses, these characters transcend their specificity, becoming some of the most moving—and human—figures in world literature.

War and Peace Details

Date : Published December 7th 1992 by Everyman's Library (first published 1867)

ISBN : 9780679405733

Author : Leo Tolstoy , Aylmer Maude (Translator) , Louise Maude (Translator)

Format : Hardcover 1615 pages

Genre : Classics, Fiction, Historical, Historical Fiction, Cultural, Russia

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From Reader Review War and Peace for online ebook

Kelly says

I tried for five months to write something more polished, less rambling. This is all I've got:

"While he is alive, the morning is still fresh and dewy, the vampires sleep. But if the sun sets, if father Tolstoy dies and the last genius leaves - what then?"

-Alexander Blok, as Tolstoy lay dying at Astapovo

"[War and Peace] is positively what might be called a Russian Illiad. Embracing the whole epoch, it is the grandiose literary event, showcasing the gallery of great men painted by a lively brush of the great master... This is one of the most, if not the most profound literary work ever.

-Ivan Goncharov

"Anna Karenina is sheer perfection as a work of art. No European work of fiction of our present day comes anywhere near it. Furthermore, the idea underlying it shows that it is ours, ours, something that belongs to us alone and that is our own property, our own national 'new word' or, at any rate, the beginning of it."

- Dostoyevsky

"[War and Peace] is the greatest ever war novel in the history of literature."

-Thomas Mann

And of course:

"If the world could write by itself, it would write like Tolstoy."

-Isaac Babel

Damn, right? Intense. These are just some of the glowing, adoring quotes that I have drawn from the absolutely glittering gallery of homages that have been written to Tolstoy. On the one hand, it's hard not to get caught up in the high, especially if you've experienced any of it first-hand yourself. But on the other hand... it kind of makes you want to kick back at it, doesn't it? It makes me understand muckraking tabloid journalism. This is definitely the sort of moment where we could all use a cooling off article about the tax fraud he committed for years or some pictures from a bar fight he started.

Here's the thing, the wonderful thing about Tolstoy: I think that he feels the same way.

One of the many reasons I love the movie version of *The Last Station* (which covers the last year of Tolstoy's life) is the way that it frames Tolstoy's struggle to control his own identity. The movie brilliantly explored the grand old man standing at the same crossroads over and over again as people tried to force him to take one path or another: either to buy into his own mythical propaganda, or at least to use it to some good purpose and become the sort of icon that Russia needed to begin to undertake serious reforms, that is, to act the part of the pure saint that he often wished that he was and live the way that others felt he owed it to them to live or whether he could simply be and live as the complicated, imperfect, sometimes silly, sometimes angry, loving man that he actually was. At that point, was his life really his own any longer to decide what to do with? What did he owe to the millions who knew his name and thought they knew what he stood for? Did he have the right to be less than what he was constantly told people needed him to be?

I think that Tolstoy struggled with the issue of Great Man syndrome long before he became the purported saint/icon that he was made into at the end of his life. War and Peace is, as so many have noted, about a lot of Serious Ideas and Movements. And here's the thing, he's really, really good at writing about them.

Although some of his ideas can seem silly from the vantage point of the 21st century, the process that is put into them does not seem so. And at the time, there seemed to be no one who could come up with the words to refute him in any satisfying way. I'm sure that his reputation had a lot to do with it, his place in the social-political fabric as much as his literary talents, his extraordinary position that seemingly allowed him to speak out under an autocratic government. But nonetheless, whatever you might say about the legitimacy of how he got there, it doesn't change what ultimately happened, which is that both Tolstoy and his ideas ended up elevated into a rarefied sphere where criticisms were fairly ineffectual or easily dismissed.

Under all the rage about Napoleons and Alexanders, it seemed to me that perhaps the major underlying theme of War and Peace was just this: The search for that Great Man (or equivalent idea) that could make Tolstoy stop seeking and asking and live content. It seemed to me that Tolstoy would give anything if he felt he could give up seeking and rest in full trust. This whole book has his thinly veiled author proxies searching for something to give themselves over to, wholeheartedly and without regrets. The read I got was that Tolstoy wanted to find this Great Man, be his servant, follow his dictates and trust that when the day comes that he questions them, the Great Man will be able to justify what he tells him in a way that admits of no argument. He wants to be able to go home satisfied and feel that when he comes back the next day the Great Man's next set of instructions will always be just as wise, just as inarguable, and just as moral in statement as well as action as they were the day before. More than this, he wants this Great Man to be able to change him and purify him of what he sees as his petty enjoyments, loves, hatreds and cynicisms, and make him into a perfect vessel of love and generosity to those around him, who is only inspired by the greatest of good-doings and rejects worldly pleasures.

So, you can see where this is going, right? Tolstoy isn't looking for a Great Man, or perfect human or amazing idea at all: he's looking for God, incarnate. This was the heartbreaking thing about this book for me, watching him try to find this impossible ideal, because it seems like he *really thought that this was possible*, in his heart of hearts. He never could get rid of the thought that The Ideal, the Utopia, the Perfect Heaven, existed somewhere and he was just missing out on it.

Tolstoy's two most direct author proxies, Pierre and Prince Andrei, spend this whole novel seeking what I can only call with a capital H, their Happiness, some platonic ideal of Heavenly Bliss in which their souls will no longer question or feel discontent or dissatisfaction. Between them, these two men place their hopes in, respectively: Napoleon, carousing and living for the moment, money and societal success, the quasi-Christian cult/society club that was the Russian Freemasons, and finally Love With That Girl Who Was Too Good For You (Pierre) and the army/war, the Emperor(s), familial obligations, meritocratic success and professional heroes, The Love of A Fresh, Pretty Young Girl, the Army Part II, and, finally, the forgiveness and redemption of Jesus (Andrei). Other members of the vast cast show up to take over the baton for a few moments and chime in about the glories of the Emperor(s), God, the brotherhood that can be found in the army or idea of The Fatherland, and, on the part of the women, religious obsessions, the love of children, and the perfections of a man who deigns to marry them.

It's rough to watch these people's hopes get shot down that many times. This book is a thousand pages long. It happens a lot of times, and to almost all the characters that we have any sympathy for. It's hard to watch these characters put their 110% into something or someone because we know that there's just nothing in this world that can withstand that sort of pressure. It's tragic, to think what some people expect of others, and, I think, one of the most powerful insights to come out of this book: there are no ideals, and those who spend their lives trying to find them will be inevitably disappointed.

This is something that Tolstoy clearly struggled a lot with. But God was always the out. It happened in W&P and in the "oh holy shit, I feel like a bad person," screeching brakes of an ending on Anna Karenina. But of course, this ideal is unknowable and insubstantial in many ways, it's mysteries therefore customizable and different for everyone who encounters them. God allowed him to hold onto the idea that the Ideal existed and allowed him a vessel into which to pour all his hopes after everything else, inevitably, disappointed him.

It's really unfair, of course, for Tolstoy to have expected mere humans to do anything different if he's going to put that kind of insane expectation on everyone and everything around him. It's almost laughably arrogant to expect that the world will live up to the way that *you* think that it should be and that it should change itself to suit you. Sometimes I felt like I was the Cary Grant character in *The Philadelphia Story*, wanting to face down Katherine Hepburn and tell her that she needed to have some regard for human frailty.

If Tolstoy was like that, it would be easy to dismiss him. His rage would have no power. It would be simply a delusion, not an ideal. But he does understand it, is the thing. To his great despair. Tolstoy is afraid of that frailty and spends this whole book running from it. This was some of the great power of *Anna Karenina* for me, as well as this book. He *can't* sustain that fire and brimstone condemnation of the sinful for long. He understands the flaws far too well. In the same way, he can't sustain his belief in a system, a person, or even a religion for too long. He keeps having to find something else to believe in, something new to try, in just the same way that his characters keep having to "renew" themselves after doing something that they feel is sinful. Tolstoy's protagonists are always too active in their minds and hearts to settle down to something forever, state their belief and call it good. They keep changing and evolving for a very specific reason: because they keep *living*. It reminded me of something something he wrote in *Anna Karenina* about the blissful period after Anna and Vronsky run away together:

He felt that the realization of his desire had given him only a grain of the mountain of happiness he had expected. It showed him the eternal error people make in imagining that happiness is the realization of desires. At first, after he had united with her and put on civilian clothes, he felt the enchantment of freedom in general ...but not for long. He soon felt arise in his soul a desire for desires, an anguish."

People who keep living don't get to live happily ever after. They *get to keep living*, and that is all. Tolstoy's metaphor for this in this novel is Natasha. Natasha, like Anna, is a unique female figure for this time period in literature in that she gets to live, think and love very much as a male protagonist would do. She gets her own inner soul and feelings and Tolstoy is very firm about protecting that, no matter what ideals the men want to project on her from the outside. Natasha is flighty, self-involved and changeable in her feelings depending on the moment or situation. Natasha loves acting the part of romance, but finds that she cannot sustain her feelings long enough to make it worth it. This puts her in sharp contrast to most of the other women in this novel: her childhood friend and cousin Sonya, who remains self-sacrificing and self-effacing and loyal as a dog to the man she declares she loves (in ways that are often humiliating), being one example, and the religious, blushing, pure Princess Marya being another. Natasha's joys and worries are the simple, straightforward, predictable and all-too-recognizable feelings of a teenage girl:

"Natasha was going to the first grand ball of her life. She had gotten up that day at eight o'clock in the morning and had spent the whole day in feverish anxiety and activity. Since the morning all her powers had been directed towards getting all of them-herself, mama, Sonya-dressed in the best possible way..."

"Natasha was interested neither in the sovereign nor in any of the important persons that Mme Peronsky pointed out-she had one thought: "Can it be that no one will come up to me, can it be that I won't dance among the first, can it be that all these men won't notice me, who now don't even seem to see me, and if they look at me, it's with such an expression as if they were saying: 'Ah! it's not her, there's no point in looking!' No, it can't be!" she thought. "They must know how well I dance, and what fun it will be for them to dance with me."

Natasha hasn't a single thought about the greater good of Russia, God, or, really, her family. Natasha wants to be young and admired and have a wonderful time every day of her life. It makes her selfish (she doesn't want to hear ANYONE's opinion if they contradict a desire of hers). It makes her heedless and reckless. It also makes her at least the temporary desire or deep love of almost every man that comes into contact with her in this novel. She is another one who throws herself into every moment of her life 110%. But she's just much more honest about the fact that what makes her happy changes frequently. People judge her for this

constantly, which gradually gives her a self-conscious complex which I think has a lot to do with why she agrees to marry Prince Andrei under the worst idea-ever-in-the-world circumstances.

Is anyone surprised when the engagement fails? Anyone? You can say what you want about the repentance afterwards, but the way that Tolstoy sets it up, it is difficult to judge Natasha for the way things go down. She's sixteen and has been abandoned by her much older fiancé for reasons she hasn't a prayer of understanding involving the passive aggressive fights of fathers and sons that never end. As far as she knows, she's been told not to live or love for a year, and girl does not play like that. Natasha tries her best, but she's living proof that we keep on living and being people and having to get through the day no matter how many oaths we swear or how many good intentions lie on that road paved to hell. This is like people who think that Bluebeard's wife should be condemned for going inside the secret room or that Pandora is the worst for opening the box. You put her in a situation that was completely incompatible to her temperament and personality, made her undergo a test to prove something that you don't really want her to be anyway and all because YOU got cold feet and realized that maybe you weren't ready for the reality of marrying a beautiful, passionate sixteen year old who loves society and is probably being set up for Anna the Sequel to happen, especially if you are going to insist on your tortured, strong-and-silent thing continuing, which I am fully sure it would have.

Natasha is loved and adored because she symbolizes passionate, uninhibited, it-goes-on- *Life*. She hasn't got a single complex to speak of. Natasha is almost the only one in this book who deals with her feelings honestly and doesn't hide behind philosophies or false generosity to make herself feel better. She even throws herself fully into the passion of the guy she's cheating on Andrei with. If she feels bad afterwards, it's because of pure, human guilt, not because Jesus told her that doing that was bad. She doesn't like hurting people, especially not the person that she had made her Romantic mind up that she was going to marry and live happily ever after with. Again, human love. When she collapses when she finds out the guy she loves is already married, it's not out of a feeling of sin, it's out of grief for the love she feels.

Like every other protagonist, she wants forgiveness and purification for her sins before she is able to be well again. But she wants forgiveness from a *man*, from Prince Andrei, not from a philosophy or a religion or a government. She wants to be able to love and have her love be worth something in her eyes and anyone else's. Love is at the center of her own sense of self, and if she is not allowed to give love she feels that her life is not worth anything.

Natasha's erstwhile fiancé, Andrei, is allowed to find peace and purity before he dies. He is allowed to give himself entirely over to Jesus and find the serenity that he has always lacked. But here's the thing, he only does it through feeling *inhuman*:

"Yes, love.. but not the love that loves for something, for some purpose, or for some reason, but the love I experienced for the first time when, as I lay dying, I saw my enemy and loved him all the same. I experienced the feeling of love, which is the very essence of my soul and needs no object... To love everything- to love God in all His manifestations. You can love a person dear to you with a human love, but an enemy can only be loved with divine love."

All this and martyrdom too so that he can somehow find a way to express and get over what he feels is his unacceptable anger at a woman who betrayed him. But she's around and he suddenly starts to feel human, not God-like love again. He starts thinking about the man who she cheated with and how he wanted to kill him. He thinks constantly about how near she is in the room. He starts to hope and negotiate with death. But life is too scary for him to do that. He ends up retreating away from confusion into death.

Seriously, screw the men in this novel. If there's a hero here, I think it is Natasha. I would argue that the gauntlet thrown down to all these characters at the start of the novel is to find their way to honesty and peace. Natasha is the only character who consistently tackles the world with honesty, so she is the only one who can

lead us to peace. Draw your wider metaphors for the implications for world affairs.

Which, you will notice, I did not touch on in this review. This is because they could not possibly matter less, except as a manifestation of everything else I am talking about here, just on a bigger and more impersonal scale, for those who can only recognize Truth when it is stated to them in a titanic voice with pomp and circumstance attached.

Partway through the novel, Tolstoy puts these words into the mouth of the Freemason who converts Pierre:

"Look at your inner man with spiritual eyes and ask if you are pleased with yourself. What have you achieved, being guided by reason alone? What are you? You are young, you are rich, you are educated, my dear sir. What have you done with all these good things that have been given to you? Are you content with yourself and your life?"

Tolstoy's never done asking these questions, which is why he was never able to find that Great Man in reality and lay down his burdens. It's sad, in a way. From reading his two great works of fiction, it seemed like the one thing he always wanted. But on the other hand, he already told us, implicitly, that if he ever found the ideal he always said he was seeking, he would be dead inside. He would no longer be human. He would be God. Nirvana. Whatever you want to call it.

Is this really what he wanted? Or did he want to want it? Did he want that feeling of wanting it... that intense passion that only a *human* could feel? That *desire for desires* that never went away. There's no way to know.

But for God's sake, if these thousands of pages have taught me anything, it's this: We're pretty much stuck with being human. So we'd better make the best of it.

Find joy where you can. And realize, in a quote by Stoppard that I will never tire of repeating, "*It's the wanting to know that makes us matter.*" I wish Tolstoy could have found God in *that* ideal, if he had to have one. I feel sure that that is perhaps the one way he could have avoided being disappointed.

Tolstoy is two for two on breaking my heart with words. And yet I feel sure that I'll be back again for him to break my heart a third time.

Lyn says

One commentator of War and Peace wryly remarked," war and peace ... that about covers everything."

That is as succinct a book report as can be given to a work of this magnitude. This novel does contain just about everything; war and peace, battles, hospitals, military strategy, love and romance, marriage, estrangement and divorce, death, birth, families, relationships, friends, enemies, hatred, jealousy, fear, gambling, dueling, hunting, dances, music, religion and politics, mysticism, philosophy, economics, aristocracy, nobility, peasantry and farming, merchants, horses and cavalry, traveling and most all things Russian, European and universal.

A critic could cynically remark, with some truth, that if you put enough words on enough pages, you can talk about everything, but to do so in this epic, historic narrative is an extraordinary accomplishment. About a third of the way through it occurred to me that I had never read a book like this, at once on an epic, grand scale and yet at the same time personal and with great attention to detail. Of course the truth is that I never have read another book like this because there probably is not another book like this, it is unique, even among other literary masterpieces.

Tolstoy may indeed have created the greatest novel ever, because I've never before read such a complete work on such a grand scale. Tolstoy uses an abundance of literary devices and techniques, from irony to metaphor and simile, analogy, imagery and symbolism, foreshadowing, epiphany, characterization and all under the very approachable omnipresent, omniscient realism of the author's voice. There are even elements of surrealism, absurdism and humor. Himself a veteran of the Crimean War, Tolstoy has an adept ability to describe life in the army and to detail military scenes. And it's a good story.

What is it about? Four families living in the time of the Napoleonic Wars and the invasions of Russia. Just as many people today regard the WWII generation, my grandparents' generation, as our greatest, Tolstoy wrote about these events as Russia's greatest generation, his grandparents' generation. These were the people, after all, that had defeated Napoleon.

Many historic personages are present in the story, including Napoleon and Alexander, and also a whole populace of counts and countesses, princes and princesses, generals, officers, sergeants and soldiers, statesmen, freemasons, servants and serfs. Tolstoy has a rare gift, akin to Dickens, at characterization, painting most all characters in a realistic, multi-dimensional brush. The leading protagonists are almost all dynamic, evolving and complex and the inter-relationships are rich.

Finally, this is a vehicle for Tolstoy to expound on his philosophic and theological views, commenting on the inherent irrationality of man and at the same time man's small place, even as an emperor, in history.

Ahmad Sharabiani says

857. War and Peace, Leo Tolstoy

War and Peace is a novel by the Russian author Leo Tolstoy, which is regarded as a central work of world literature and one of Tolstoy's finest literary achievements.

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Cait • A Page with a View says

Decemer 2017 update:

well, look at that... this is still my favorite book.

Original review:

Yeah, this is my new all-time favorite book. I can't even begin to write a review for it without falling apart

BUT OK THIS SERIOUSLY *IS* THE BEST BOOK EVER WRITTEN. People are not exaggerating. And it really doesn't even feel that long because the writing is so mesmerizing. I know there are a ton of characters and everyone & their cousin is a prince, but if you watch the BBC miniseries first that might help keep everyone straight!

Anyways, the humanity in this book is incredible and everything is heartbreakingly beautiful. It made me want to read a few of Tolstoy's other books on religion or philosophy and I totally recommend those as well.

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I read this in tandem with the spectacular BBC adaptation and I will say now that my enjoyment of this piece of literature has been heavily influenced by that wonderful piece of televisual art. It just has. It's the same story, just told a different way. I will refrain from telling you to get over it.

Now, the book. It was written well, very well, in terms of all the stuff that should be done well: punctuation, spelling, grammar, and all that. There were some typos but that will be down to the publisher and not the writer.

However, we'll deal with the negatives first: it had some of the most tedious moments in a book I've ever come across. I realise the war was a very important thing, but my gosh Tolstoy was dire at writing of soldiers and fighting. I didn't enjoy those sections nearly half as much as I could have, which directly contributes to it not being-and never becoming-a perfect story. He was also well versed in tangents: I understand his intention of the book was exactly what he produced, but we can say that every writer produces their intention when they write a book so in this case I will say that I don't care about the authors intentions at all here. There were also far too many characters. It's a nice idea to give everyone-including someone randomly delivering a letter-a name and a story, a background and a face, but for the reader it is too much.

But, that ending. I loved the ending (I preferred the BBC ending, but that's just me being all romantic) and I thought it was so fitting. I was happy-in a very understanding and moral way-with all of the deaths and thought they were all completely relevant to the whole piece. Perhaps they all came a little too at once and suddenly, but altogether they settled the whole affair so nicely. I found the romance of Princess Mary and the one of Pierre to both be very pleasing.

And I shall speak of Pierre now. How I love Pierre. He was, forgive me for saying this, quite English in his manner and that was delightful. I will refrain from going on about him, but I thought every description of him was just so wonderful: I very rarely get so clear a picture of a character in my mind (whilst I thought Paul Dano played him well, he did not embody the exact physical nature of Pierre that was conjured from the reading) and my favourite moment will always be when Prince Andrew looks out and sees Pierre trip and stumble.

I also loved it for teaching me more of history than I ever knew. To be very frank, I never even knew that Napoleon had invaded or even fought Russia: I suppose that is the curse of being English. We learn of our splendid Nelson but not much else. I find that literature fills in the gaps that education leaves, gaping wide and hollow.

If you've ever had any misgivings about this book purely based on length, please refrain from those thoughts. It is divided nicely in to chapters, books and parts that you can easily place it down for a while, leave it and come back very happily. It doesn't take all that long to get through, either. It is one of those myths that precedes, unfairly, on the work.

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Hossam Arafat says

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So... I did it. I finally convinced myself to read War and Peace, partly because it's just something everyone wants to say they've done, and partly because one always needs a good excuse to procrastinate during the exam period when I should have been studying. And, you know what, I really enjoyed most of it. The novel is far less taxing than I imagined, I don't know if that's because the English translation goes easy on us non-Russians or because Tolstoy wrote it in a quite light-hearted fashion. I suspect I shall never find that out for myself.

However, Tolstoy may or may not consider himself liberal, forward-thinking, a humanist, and I wouldn't state that he is any of those things. But I think his perception of the human condition in the nineteenth century shows he is somewhat before his time in his ability to see almost every character as flawed, confusing but ultimately human. He manages to construct a comprehensive view of humanity and Russian culture at the time in question, complete with betrayals and scandals and affairs. But though the characters may place blame on one another - like calling Natasha a hussy - Tolstoy appears to remain impartial. Those who stray from the conservative path of the nineteenth century do not do so without reason.

And oddly enough, it was the real wars in War and Peace that interested me least of all. They were probably the reason this book got four stars instead of five - and because goodreads rating system is about personal enjoyment rather than literary merit. I felt much more entertained by the soap opera that was the lives of the Russian nobles than by the tedious and repetitive battle scenes. There were guns and canons and horses - *riveting*. But thankfully, like I said, Tolstoy's masterpiece is more about people than anything else and this is the reason that I saw this book through and enjoyed the journey.

Love

That was the one thing I thought was missing from Leo Tolstoy's title, *War and Peace*. I was wrong. Love is in the title, you just have to look for it.

Certainly there is love in peace. It is the time of children, serenity, growth. The mother peacefully raising her children. The farmer lovingly tending his fields. The elderly passing their final days in comfort surrounded by family.

But there is love in war as well. The love for one's country. Such is a person's violent attachment to their motherland that they will die for it. To give up your own life so another should live, that is love indeed.

What is this preoccupation with love? Well, the Leo Tolstoy I've read is incomplete without this aspect within his writing. I knew this book would be about war, specifically Russia's involvement in the Napoleonic Wars, but I didn't right off see where the love would come in. It arrived in spades. There are peace-loving characters and there are those who are uber patriotic. Then there is man's love for the good he sees in another man's actions. And then there is the love that weds a couple for life.

Tolstoy's genius as a writer lies in his ability to dash his pen across all this with the same level of integrity regardless of whether his subject is a gallant officer in love with death or the daisy-fresh, springy step of a blossoming girl smitten by good looks and dash. Tolstoy transcends himself to become these hearty or hapless creatures. Then he marries them to our soul. Over these seemingly effortless hundreds upon hundreds of pages, these characters become family to us. We love them like brothers. We root for them. We are annoyed by them. We hate a few of them, but after all, they are family and therefore we must abide by them at least to a certain degree.

And when you step back from the book and see your attachment to these characters, it amazes you...and then it disheartens you, for you realize they are nothing but Tolstoy's puppets used in a grand way so that he may slash and burn the icon of his hatred, Napoleon Bonaparte.

Tolstoy seethes with loathing for this man. In large spurts through out, he devotes half the book to lampooning the man and his military deeds, and then as if that weren't enough, he piles on an average-sized book's worth of epilogue on essentially the same topic. In an effort to portray fairness, he also fillets his own. The Russian military leaders of the day come in for their share of condemnation. At times Tolstoy pours so much vitriol upon his own that you have to stop to recall who "the enemy" is.

Why is this a 5 star book? After all, it's not perfect, being neither fully a novel nor a military treatise, but rather both and not always successfully joined. For all its many pages, there was only a small handful of moments where I felt my heart fly or crash. Perhaps it is the vast scope of it all and the effortless way in which it is carried off. So much happens. Tolstoy gives us many rare experiences, puts us in battle after battle - whether it's upon the field amidst cannon and rifle fire, within the home during a dangerous pregnancy, or between an embattled couple bereft of love. Each of these scenes rings true, ringing to their own tune and yet all combining into one beautiful symphony.

PS: Here's my video review of this book: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3gfPf...>

Michael says

This is one of those books that can be life-changing. I read this as a teenager and I remember exactly where I was (sitting on my bed, in my grandmother's house, in southern Germany) when I finished it. I must have

spent an hour just staring out the window, in awe of the lives I'd just led, the experiences I'd just had.

I'm now re-reading this, enjoying it immensely and no doubt appreciating it much more than I did the first time. Tolstoy has the most amazing ability to make us feel, when he zooms out and examines historical events, that the individual is nothing--and then when he zooms in and paints intimate portraits of his characters, that the individual is everything. Breathtaking.

By the way, I'm reading the Anthony Briggs translation (Penguin Classics), and it's marvelous. I'm quite picky when it comes to translations and this is one of the best I've read.

It's in the sweeping battle scenes that Tolstoy shows how insignificant the individual really is--how even generals and emperors are at the mercy of random and unpredictable events. Then when Tolstoy switches to the intimate drawing room scenes, the entire perspective shifts, and nothing matters more than the individual consciousness that he depicts. The juxtaposition of these two feelings is just, well, genius!

I'd forgotten how mystical Tolstoy gets with respect to Pierre's "conversion" or "enlightenment" or "getting religion." It's fascinating how Pierre becomes animated by these great ideas and that's a sign of his maturity, whereas Prince Andrey matures in an almost opposite way: by eschewing his former great ideas regarding military heroism and focusing instead (at this point in the narrative) on his baby son.

The contrapuntal movement of Pierre and Andrey's development is only highlighted when they're together, debating whether one ought to try to improve people's lives (Pierre) or just focus on one's own happiness and leave the world alone (Andrey). It's actually a profound debate, which then ends when Andrey beholds the vast sky again and something stirs inside him, something long dormant, and we as readers can't help anticipating that Andrey will be "back."

One of the great glories of reading War and Peace is to encounter, in a novel, characters struggling with serious philosophical issues--not as airy abstractions but rather in terms of how they ought to live. Pierre and Prince Andrey are the prime examples of this. I kept thinking, as I read the sections in which they struggle earnestly with such questions, that contemporary American fiction has precious little of this. I wonder if it's because we've all drunk the kool-aid that says "show, don't tell," making contemporary novelists shy away from such material. But this little mantra, while seemingly objective, renders entire realms of fiction off-limits. Tolstoy is constantly "telling" us what Pierre and Andrey are thinking, and the novel is so much better for it.

Tolstoy's "peace" is of course anything but: it's full of anticipation and intrigue and philosophical yearning, from the bursting bewildering sallies of youth (Natasha) to the resigned feeling that life isn't what you dreamed when you were young, and perhaps you aren't either (Pierre). The deftness and sheer range of human drama is staggering.

And the war, when it returns, is no abstract matter. Everywhere there are people caught up in this great event, bewildered by it. Here's Rostov on seeing the French officer he's brought down: "This pale, mud-stained face of a fair-haired young man with a dimple on his chin and bright blue eyes had no business with battlefields; it was not the face of an enemy; it was a domestic, indoor face." Rostov can't help seeing him as a human being, and in that moment his "enthusiasm suddenly drained away."

It's interesting how, when Rostov chases the French officer on horseback, he thinks about the wolf hunt he was recently on. When I read the scene of the hunt, where the hunters capture the old She-Wolf and her cubs, I couldn't help feeling sorry for those animals, for that animal family hunted for pure sport. I wondered how that scene would come back into the narrative because of the obvious symbolic weight of it, and here it is, in the scene of war. The characters hadn't empathized with the She-Wolf in the same way that Rostov does with the French officer, but I wonder if we're meant to anyway, or at least be made somewhat uncomfortable (as I was) by such sport-killing, perhaps seeing it as a prelude to another kind of sport-killing altogether: namely war.

Tolstoy can't help wearing his patriotism on his sleeve a bit, as he describes Napoleon's advance and the rival Moscow social circles, one of which has eschewed anything French while the other clings to its Francophile ways. Of course the French-speaking social circle is that of Helene, who's cold and manipulative and whose brother schemed to snatch away Natasha in such, well, French fashion. But this is no bald tale of Russian virtue and French perfidy. Tolstoy is finely attuned to the chaos of war and to the humans that engage in it, so much more alike than not as everyone tries simply to survive and perhaps claim a little glory in the end.

I love how Tolstoy peppers his narrative with keen insights into human nature. Here he is, when describing the attitude of Muscovites on the approach of Napoleon: "At the first approach of danger two voices always speak out with equal force in a man's heart: one tells him very sensibly to consider the exact extent of the danger and any means of avoiding it; the other says even more sensibly that it's too wearisome and agonizing to contemplate the danger, since it is not in a man's power to anticipate future events and avoid the general run of things, so you might as well turn away from the nastiness until it hits you, and dwell on things that are pleasant."

Tolstoy describes the cavalcade of human affairs as well as anyone, and the evacuation of Moscow is a great example of it: so many little stories described with the deftest brushstrokes. The irony and humor also shine through when he describes Berg's ridiculous recitation of war stories or Count Rostov's childlike diffidence when it comes to the issue of whether they should empty their wagons of belongings in order to make room for wounded soldiers.

Hurting toward the end now, and Tolstoy is hammering his theme that the individual is a slave to fate and mysterious forces. This adds much irony to his tale, and some biting commentary as well, as when he says: "These man, carried away by their passions, were nothing more than the blind executors of the saddest law of necessity; but they saw themselves as heroes, and mistook their doings for achievements of the highest virtue and honour."

In the final pages the scenes return to domestic life full of family, as the war generation ages and their children are born. So many mixed emotions in the characters and in me, the reader, as our story ebbs to a close, as this towering and monumental work of art draws ever nearer to silence. "Memento mori," the characters are described as feeling in the face of an old countess, and the same can be said of this entire work, which is a testament to the fragility and beauty and fleetingness of life itself.

And then, finally, we see Pierre and Natasha together, but the last lines of the dramatic narrative belong to young Nikolay, Prince Andrey's son, who thinks: "Father! Father! Yes, I'm going to do something even he would have been pleased with."

Tolstoy then delves more directly into a philosophical treatise on free will, capping his narrative with the final summation that "it is no less essential to get away from a false sensation of freedom and accept a dependence that we cannot feel."

With that, the book closes, and I feel again what a monumental work I've just encountered. I'll spend many days and weeks pondering these pages, recalling little scenes and thinking about Tolstoy's grand arguments. The scope is breathtaking and profound, yet on every page you feel the frantic beating of the human heart. Despite all its spiritual claims, it's a deeply humanistic work.

Jessica says

So, I know you've all been on edge these past two months, and since I should be studying for the social work licensing exam tonight, it seems like the perfect time to put an end to your suspense.

After all my agonizing and the thoughtful suggestions below about whether I should mutilate my gorgeous hardcover Pevear and Volokhonsky translation in the interest of less hazardous subway toting.... Readers, I carried him. All 1272 pages. Every day, across five boroughs and three states, for nearly two months....

So the burning question on your mind is, "Should *I* risk misalignment and a redislocated shoulder in the interest of preserving a pristine edition that's inevitably going to get all banged up anyway, as I lug it across battlefields and through trenches, for what seems an eternity? Which is more important: the book's spine, or my own?"

Bookster, I am here to put an end to all this wondering! Here is what you must do: simply take a keen exacto knife (you might ask a helpful Cossack to sharpen it for you), and slice out the final "Epilogue" portion of this burdensome tome. You will do no damage to the book -- the epilogue's like an appendix (and hey, what the hell, cut that out too) -- as this part is not necessary, and in fact though it's *theoretically* only about 7% of the book, this portion is *actually* responsible for at least 63% of its weight. So slice that bitch out, and throw it away! Your vertebrae will thank you later.

Another advantage to getting rid of the Epilogue is that it will save you from having to read what is conceivably the most deadly dull and deflating ending to a vast and magnificently readable book, ever written. As a particularly exacting size queen, I demand that the glory of a huge novel's ending be proportional to its length. I feel this is only fair: I was loyal and patient, and devoted many hours to reading the author's story, and at the end I should be rewarded for my fortitude with a glorious finale. That's always been my philosophy, anyway. Apparently, though, it's not Tolstoy's.

What *is* Tolstoy's philosophy, you ask? In particular, what's his philosophy of *history*? Well, let me tell you! Or better, let *him* tell you. Cause he will. Over and over. And then again. And then, in case you were interested and wanted to know more, let him REALLY tell you.... and keep telling you.... and tell you some more.... and some more.... no, let him get into it finally now, in great *detail*.

Yeah, Tolstoy's that perfect house guest who crashed on your couch for nearly two months and you're just thrilled as hell the whole time to have him visiting, because he's just such a smart and great and interesting and heartfelt guy. *Quel raconteur!* Oh, sure, sometimes he gets a bit dull and wonky with his policy ramblings, but that stuff's basically okay. And then yeah, he's got these *idees fixes* about history that are fine, you guess, but it's a bit weird how he's always repeating them and focusing on the same points over and over, and he will corner your roommate's friend or a classmate you run into at the supermarket, or an old lady waiting for the bus, to explain yet again why he thinks Napoleon really isn't that great at ALL, yeah, that's odd, but basically Leo is just super, and you're thrilled to have him -- even for such an extended visit -- because he really is so brilliant and diverting and nearly truly worth his weight in gold.... You are sad to know he's going to leave, but then his plane is delayed and you're happy you'll have him there just one more night, but somehow that's the night that he suddenly decides to come back to your house, completely high on cocaine. Leo then proceeds to stay up for hours drinking all your expensive scotch and talking your EAR off about his goddamn PHILOSOPHY of HISTORY that you really just could not care LESS about, and he WILL not leave and let you go to bed, he keeps TALKING, and it's BORING, and apparently he thinks your catatonic stare signals rapt interest, because he just keeps on going, explaining, on and on -- He WILL NOT SHUT UP! It is almost just like being physically tortured, by this guy who you'd thought was the best houseguest in the whole wide world. And so when Leo finally leaves again the next morning -- ragged and bleary and too dazed still to be properly sheepish -- you're not sorry to see him go, in fact you're very glad. And does one annoying night cancel out two months of the great times you had together? Of course it doesn't, and you remember him fondly, and tell anyone who asks how nice it was when he stayed. But the night does carry a special weight because it was the last, and when you remember dear Leo, your wonderful houseguest, your affection will not be totally untainted by the memory of his dull, egotistical, coked-out rantings, the night before he left for real.

By which I mean to say, the rest of this book was totally great! As my Great Aunt Dot (who's read this twice) commented, "It's really not a difficult read at all; there's a chapter about War, and then a chapter about Peace, so it never gets boring." *War and Peace* is hugely entertaining, and largely readable. Plus, it's enormously educational, as you will be forced to learn more than you ever wanted to know about the great Napoleon! (According to Tolstoy, he wasn't that great. No, I mean really, he wasn't that great.) *War and Peace* is a terrific date book, because it's got lots of bloody action and also tons of romance, plus you can make out during the dull parts where Tolstoy's talking for like twelve pages about various generals and strategies and his nineteenth-century out opinions about history.

If there's a standard I value more highly than my long-book-great-ending demand, it's the one that I call "Make Me Cry." I don't really think a book's that great unless it makes me cry. (No, this doesn't work in the other direction -- just because a book makes me cry doesn't mean it's great. I've cried at really silly movies before, and I used to cry regularly whenever I read the newspaper, which is one reason I stopped.) *War and Peace* made me cry like a colicky baby that's been speared with a bayonet, THREE TIMES! I don't mean I misted up or got a little chokey -- I mean I sobbed, wept, and groaned, thoroughly broke down and lost my shit on a very cathartic and soul-rending level. Hooray! I can't guarantee that *War and Peace* will also make you cry, but I bet if you're prone to that sort of thing, you've got a good shot.

GOD this book is good. See, you should really skip the Epilogue, because besides being crushingly dull, it's also very depressing (in the wrong way), and in addition to making you vow never to marry could make you forget how GREAT and AMAZING the rest of this is. What a GREAT and AMAZING book! Holy shit! I'm flipping through now, and it's all coming back to me. This was totally *The Wire* of 1868: If you like serious character development and plotting that unfolds over a long period of time, you should seriously read this book. I really didn't know much about this book before I read it, but I think I remember someone -- Jane Smiley? -- writing that *War and Peace* is about everything. I wouldn't go along with that (I'm not sure if she would either), but it is about most of the things that really matter. If you are someone who thinks at all about life or death, you might like this book. Here is a passage, from a character who's a POW marching barefoot through Russia in October:

In captivity in the shed, [he] had learned, not with his mind, but with his whole being, his life, that man is created for happiness, that happiness is within him, in the satisfying of human needs, and that all unhappiness comes not from lack, but from superfluity; but now, in these last three weeks of the march, he had learned a new and more comforting truth -- he had learned that there is nothing frightening in the world. He had learned that, as there is no situation in the world in which a man can be happy and perfectly free, so there is no situation in which he can be perfectly unhappy and unfree. He had learned that there is a limit to suffering and a limit to freedom, and that those limits are very close; that the man who suffers because one leaf is askew in his bed of roses, suffers as much as he now suffered falling asleep on the bare, damp ground, one side getting cold as the other warmed up; that when he used to put on his tight ballroom shoes, he suffered just as much as now, when he walked quite barefoot (his shoes had long since worn out) and his feet were covered with sores. (p. 1060)

I just think that's great. Maybe it's not, out of context.... Anyway, one of the best things about reading this is how much of it is so strange -- Russia! 1812! OMFG! all so different! -- and how much is the same. The nuance, specificity, and instant recognizability of the characters in here is pretty amazing. I know this sounds dumb, but you really feel like you know these people, and in a way it's the minor characters -- Sonya, Anatole, Dolokhov (my favorite!) -- who are so perfectly drawn, and make you go, "Man! I know these people! Woah!"

I did appreciate having to think about war while reading this, because that's something I've never really done before. At the beginning I'd hoped that this would help me understand more about why wars happen, but it didn't. That might have been what Tolstoy was trying to explain in his Epilogue, but I have to confess that at that point, I wasn't really listening.

Anyway, I liked this book. It is long, though.

Dolors says

Before I turned the last page of this massive volume, which had been neglected in my bookshelves for more than six years, *War and Peace* was a pending task in my mental reading universe knowing it to be one of the greatest Russian or maybe simply one of the greatest novels of all times.

Well, in fact, it was something else.

I have a selective memory, I don't know whether it comes as a blessing or as a curse, that enables me to remember the most insignificant details like for instance, where and when I bought my books, which are often second hand copies. When I pull one of them off my shelves it usually comes loaded with recollections of a certain moment of my life that add up to the mute history of their usually worn and yellow pages.

So, *War and Peace* was also a memory. This one had to do with an unusual cloudless and shiny afternoon spent in Greenwich Park eating the greatest take-away noodles I had ever tasted and browsing through my newest literary purchases, recently bought in one of those typical British second-hand bookshops, where I spent hours besotted with that particular scent of moldy ancient paper.

That's what *War and Peace* meant to me until I finally shook my sloth off and decided to read it. It turns out I rather lived than read it, or maybe the book read me, but in any case, I curse my lazy self for not having taken the plunge much sooner.

This book is an electroshock for the soul. There is no division between Tolstoy's art and his philosophy, just as there is no way to separate fiction from discussions about history in this novel. Without a unifying theme, without so much a plot or a clear ending, *War and Peace* is a challenge to the genre of the novel and to narrative in history. Tolstoy groped toward a different truth- one that would capture the totality of history, as it was experienced, and teach people how to live with its burden.

Who am I?, What do I live for?, Why was I born? These are existential questions on the meaning of life that restlessly impregnate this “novel”, which also deals with the responsibility of the individual, who has to strive against the dichotomy of free will as opposed to the influence of the external world, in the course of history. Fictional and historical characters blend naturally in the narration, which occasionally turns into a reasoned philosophical digression, exploring the way individual lives affect the progress of history, challenging the nature of truth accepted by modern historians.

Tostoy’s syntax is unconventional. He frequently ignores the rules of grammar and word order, deliberately reiterating mannerisms or physical details to identify his characters, suggesting their moral qualities. He uses several languages gradually changing their sense, especially with French, which eventually emerges as the language of artifice and insincerity, the language of the theater and deceit whereas Russian appears as the language of honesty and seriousness and the reader becomes a privileged witness of the formation of a community and national consciousness.

In repeating words and phrases, a rhythm and rhetorical effect is achieved, strengthening the philosophical pondering of the characters. I was emotionally enraptured by the scene in which Count Bezukhov asks himself what’s the meaning of love when he glances at the smiling face of Natasha or when Prince Andrey lies wounded in Austerlitz battlefield looking up at the endless firmament, welcoming the mystery of death and mourning for his hapless and already fading life. The book is full of memorable scenes which will remain imprinted in my retina, eternal flashing images transfixing me quite: the beauty of Natasha’s uncovered shoulders emerging from her golden dress, the glow of bonfires lit by kid-soldiers in the night before a battle, the agony of men taken prisoners and the absent faces of circumstantial executioners while shooting their fellowmen, the unbearable pain of a mother when she learns of her son’s death, a silent declaration of love in a dancing embrace full of youth and promise...

War and Peace is much more than a novel. It is a vast, detailed account - maybe even a sort of diary or a confession- of a world about to explode in constant contradiction where two ways of being coexist: war and peace. Peace understood not only as the absence of war, but mainly as the so much coveted state in which the individual gets hold of the key to his identity and happiness, achieving harmonious communion with others along the way.

Now that I have finally read this masterpiece, I think I can better grasp what this “novel” represents among all the great works of art created by men throughout our venturesome existence: the Sistine Chapel or the 9th Symphony of Literature, an absolute triumph of the creative mind, of the spirit of humankind and a virtuous affirmation of human life in all its richness and complexity.

My battered copy of *War and Peace* and I have fought many battles together, hand in hand. We have been gently soaked by the descent of moist beads in the misty drizzle at dawn in Paracas. We have been splashed by the salty waves of the Pacific Ocean only to be dried off later by the sandy wind blowing from the dunes of the Huacachina Desert. We have been blessed by the limpid droplets dripping down from branches of Eucalyptus Trees in the Sacred Valley of the Incas and scorched by the blinding sunbeams in Nazca. Particles of ourselves were left behind, dissolved into the damp shroud of grey mist falling from the melting sky in MachuPicchu, and whatever remained of us tried to breathe in deeply the fragrant air of those dark, warm nights spent under scintillating stars scattered endlessly down the Peruvian sky.

With wrinkled pages, tattered covers and unglued spine, my copy of *War and Peace* has managed to come back home. I have just put it back reverently on my bookshelf for literary gems, where I can spot it at first glance. An unbreakable connection has been established between us as fellow travellers, as wanderers of the world. Somehow, we have threaded our own unique history; an unrepeatable path has been laid down for us. The story of this particular shabby copy comes to an end though, because I won’t ever part from it. My copy of *War and Peace* has come back home, where I intent to keep it, now for good. No more war for these battered pages but everlasting peace emanating from my shelves for all times to come.

My traveling companion in MachuPicchu.

Joshua Treviño says

It is difficult, in reviewing classics, to say things about them that have not been said before. It is especially difficult when those classics are part of the literary canon; and even more difficult when those classics are not mere novels, but purposeful epics. It is in this light that reviewing Leo Tolstoy's War and Peace is a challenge. The massive book — ranging from 900 to 1,500 pages, depending upon the edition — is a cornerstone of anyone's list of all-time great literature. Strangely, few have actually read it; and few reviewers of new editions do more than assess relative merits of the latest translation.

Therefore: the one thing the reader ought to know about the new translation of War and Peace from Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky is that it is worth reading, both in itself (the book is a classic in any translation) and in this particular form (this translation is superb). As with every other review of this edition, this one must start with what is new about it: the translation.

The husband-and-wife team of Pevear and Volokhonsky have built a long and successful career on translating Russian works into English. (I still recommend their translation of Dostoevsky's The Brothers Karamazov, which kept me company in my Army days, as the best around.) They are ideally suited to the task, not merely by virtue of their marital compatibility — a translating team spends nearly as much time together as a married couple, and probably communicates better — but by virtue of their birth. Volokhonsky, as might be guessed, is a native Russophone, and Pevear's first language is English. In a column in the New York Times on October 14th, 2007, Pevear described the method of their collaboration:

---We work separately at first. Larissa produces a complete draft, following the original almost word by word, with many marginal comments and observations. From that, plus the original Russian, I make my own complete draft. Then we work closely together to arrive at a third draft, on which we make our "final" revisions.---

This is, of course, the idealized process. The actual work of conveying literature, with its poetry and rhetoric more or less intact, from one language to another is necessarily slow and inexact. Douglas Hofstadter, the author and professor of computer and cognitive science at Indiana University at Bloomington, addressed this problem at length in his book *Le Ton beau de Marot*. In this, a rather simple little poem by the 16th-century French poet Clément Marot — "A une damoyselle malade," or "To an ill girl" — is shown to have a surprising number of possible translations from French into English, with none of them quite right. There are dozens of variations in Hofstadter's book. The necessary tradeoffs, even in Marot's simple verse, are swiftly evident. Literal accuracy, or rhetorical beauty? Rhyme structure, or metric consistency? Cultural fidelity, or cultural comprehensibility? These are the issues with which translators must contend. The perverse, like Vladimir Nabokov in translating his rigid and un-lovely Eugene Onegin, simply give the reader their ideal of literal exactitude. The more well meaning will often give the reader their idea of comprehensibility in both the rhetorical and cultural spheres. Thus, Constance Garnett, who translated the great works of 19th-century Russian literature into Edwardian-era English, not only rendered prose as would an English novelist of her era: she also "translated" cultural concepts into familiar objects of reference for her intended readers. As a pseudonymous Amazon reviewer of the Pevear/Volokhonsky translation of War and Peace notes, in previous translations, "we often get 'holy images,' attended 'Mass,' 'the Virgin Mary,' etc., instead of 'icon,' 'attended Liturgy,' or 'the Theotokos.'" It is pleasing to report that though the occasional clunky passage survives in its over twelve hundred pages, Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky have done well by War and Peace. And well they should have: as Pevear notes, in translating, they each read the massive work five

times.

Beyond the translation, there is the great work itself, which presumes to take on the very topics of its title. The grand sweep of its epic, to say nothing of the welter of Russian names and perhaps-unfamiliar places, is daunting to many readers. (Who knows where Mozhaisk is, or why it matters?) They should not feel ashamed of this: the very first sentence of the book presupposes a grasp of European politics and Russian society circa 1805, and the inferences and references never let up. It is a peculiarly Russian work, of course — the French invasion of 1812 was to Tolstoy's generation what the Civil War was to our grandfathers' — but it is nonetheless comprehensible to Europeans grounded in their own history. For an American, War and Peace is something else: not an artifact of our own heritage, but a work we read to sustain and deepen our connection to the West at large. Its themes of sacrifice, patriotism, and humanity are universal.

Leo Tolstoy was not, it must be said, the master of the human condition that many of the other literary greats were — Shakespeare, for example, or even his contemporary Dostoevsky — and this shows through even in the superlative Pevear/Volokhonsky translation. In life, the great author was keenly interested in developing his own thesis of Christianity, which veered into that curious territory where extreme altruism and profound selfishness intersect. A rare Russian aristocrat who cared for his peasants, he treated his devoted wife with often shocking neglect; he was excommunicated from the Orthodox Church; and he ended up dying at a train station while essentially running away from home as an old man. War and Peace, with its long internal essays on history, fate, and morality, gives us a glimpse into the mind of this troubled and brilliant figure, as his plot and his characters bend to his ideas of life and meaning.

Tolstoy was a contemporary of the men whom the philosopher Karl Popper called the historicists — that is, those who believed in the superiority of historical “laws” and inevitability to God-given free will and volition — and he shared much of their thesis. He did not, as some of them did, deny the possibility or relevance of human goodness and choice; but he did believe that those choices only affected a limited context, and mostly concerned one's internal state toward himself and God. War and Peace, then, is to a large extent a historical exposition on why the individual does not matter to history, even as he does matter to his Creator. A central character of the work, Pierre Bezukhov, undergoes a transformation throughout from dissolute if well-meaning youth, to solid paterfamilias with an assured sense of God and self — and the transformative event is a death march in French captivity, in which he realizes that all is for naught in this world. Similarly, the wartime mistakes of the Russian generalissimo Kutuzov are excused as historical inevitabilities which Kutuzov had the wisdom to accept.

Tolstoy's view here is wholly alien to the American character, and its relation to the Christian view is dubious (certainly the Orthodox Church saw little good in it). It does not follow from this that the Christian should not read it. To the contrary, it is a work so very rich, despite its flaws, that it is endlessly rewarding to those who persevere and allow themselves to become happily entangled in its endless narrative. Is it the best Russian novel? Is it the best Tolstoy novel? Is it the best 19th-century novel? It is none of these things: Tolstoy himself wrote better novels, Anna Karenina chief among them; Zola's *La Débâcle* is a far superior exposition of battle; and nearly everything is shorter. But we ought to read War and Peace nonetheless. We read it because, like Everest, it is there; we read it to join Prince Andrei on the field at Austerlitz; we read it to enter the mind of the young Natasha, insane with what she believes is love; and we read it because in it, as in all great art, we find something of ourselves.

Whitaker says

When I was growing up, the conventional wisdom was that *War and Peace* was the *sine qua non* of difficult books: the scope, the length, OMG the length! Conquering this Everest was The Test of whether you were a Man/Reader.

I have now read it. Thump chest and make Tarzan yell.

Actually, you know chump, big deal. The mountain really wasn't so large after all.

There are love affairs, there is a war, peace eventually returns to ~~the Shire~~ Russia. Sorry, got confused there for a minute with *Lord of the Rings*, another 1,000+ page work where there are love affairs, war and an eventual peace. (That's hardly a spoiler by the way. Not unless you've been hiding under a rock and don't know that Napoleon didn't succeed in conquering Russia.) Which is my point: With every half-penny fantasy potboiler these days weighing in at several hundred kilogrammes of war and peace (*cough**Wheel of Time**cough*), how can we still look at a book this size and feel fear? 1,000+ pages? Only? Pshaw! That's nuthin!. Spit out t'baccy chaw.

And yet, the notion still lives on about how HARD *War and Peace* is. So, if anyone out there still buys into that, is intimidated and deterred by that notion, well, really, don't be (unless, of course, the last thing you read was *Green Eggs and Ham*).

The thing is, to my surprise, I found it a rollicking good read. There are star-crossed lovers, suicide attempts, heart-rending death bed scenes, and battles aplenty where our heroes get knocked on the head and taken prisoner. Instead of Middle Earth, you get a fantasy-land of wholesome, loving Peasant Russia and you learn how True Self comes from Loving the Russian Soil. Okay, there's also the rather irritating and interminable philosophizing by Tolstoy about History and Its Causes, but you got through the interminable side songs in *Lord of Rings* didn't you?

In case any of you are thinking that I'm mocking *War and Peace* by this comparison, please note that it's not intended to be (wholly) facetious. I **loved** *Lord of the Rings*. If anything I'm mocking the awe with which we approach "Great Works". So, yeah, if you ever thought of reading *War and Peace* but were put off by its reputation, don't be. It's actually quite fun.

Matt says

Whatever else I am, I am the type of person who reads classic novels out of a sense of obligation. Also, I must admit, out of a sense of vanity. My ego, after all, is as fragile as a goldfish and requires the constant attention of a newborn baby. Every once in awhile, it needs a little boost, and the intellectual challenge of Dostoevsky or Dickens can really work wonders.

Now, I've been told that forcing myself to read books I don't necessarily like is a fruitless waste of time (and that the reviews borne of these endeavors are a fruitless waste of others' time). That kind of criticism doesn't go far with me. By my rough estimate, just about 99% of the things I do can be similarly classified as a waste of time, unless my endless games of Spider Solitaire, like "the button" on *LOST*, is actually saving the world. In which case I am a hero.

Moreover, great literature can be a worthwhile challenge to surmount. Compare them to mountains. Obviously, we don't need people to climb mountains; it serves no functional purpose. Yet, on a personal

level, climbing a mountain (even if it's just a Class 3 walk-up) is immensely satisfying, mentally and physically. On some level, it's the same with finishing a tough book. (Mentally, that is. There is very little physical component, unless you defenestrate the book upon completion).

War and Peace is a challenge I set for myself. It was a challenge a long time coming. The reason, of course, is that *War and Peace* is the go-to book when looking for an example of great literature, or for a contender for "greatest novel ever written." If it is not exactly Everest or K2 (those are Joycean heights), it is at least comparable to Annapurna or Mount McKinley.

In the end, it is a book I wrestled with constantly. Unlike Doris from *Goodbye, Columbus*, I never considered quitting, only to start back up again the following year. However, there were times my frustrations almost led me to tear huge swaths of pages from the binding, as a primitive editing job. Like so many of the things you are told, as a child, are magical – the circus, love, magic – *War and Peace* did not entirely live up to its reputation.

If you were to ask me, would you rather retreat from Moscow in the dead of winter than read this book, I would say: "Of course not. I don't like walking, I don't like being hungry, and I'd probably die." But if I had to choose between, say, tarring the driveway or mowing the lawn and reading this book... Again, I'd choose the book. Nothing beats reading. Besides, I'm lazy.

Where to start? With a (second) rhetorical question: What's *War and Peace* about?

It's a good question, and nobody really knows. (Though many will attempt to explain). There have been longer books – both you and I have read them – but this is 1,200 pages that feels like 1,345,678,908 pages. Nominally, it's about Russia's wars with Napoleonic France from 1804 to 1813. If that seems like a big subject, don't worry, Tolstoy has given himself plenty of space with which to work. It follows dozens of characters in and out of the decades, as they live and die, love and hate, and generally stun the modern reader with their obtuseness.

The first sixty pages of the novel are a set piece in the Petersburg salon of Anna Pavlovna. You don't have to remember that, though, because Anna Pavlovna will only stick around these first sixty pages, then disappear for almost the entire rest of the book. We are also introduced to Pierre, who is, literally, a fat bastard; Prince Andrei, who is a prick; his wife Lisa, the little princess, who as Tolstoy keeps telling us, has a beautiful mustache (Tolstoy's obsession with beautiful female mustaches is pathological, and not a little frightening); Prince Vassily, who also disappears after a squabble over a will; and various other Russian aristocrats. Readers note: you should probably be writing things down as you read.

Other introductions come later, including Andrei's father, who is also a prick (apple, meet the tree); Andrei's insufferably "good" and "pure" and "decent" and "homely" sister, Princess Marya, who's goodness is as cloying and infuriating as that of Esther is *Bleak House*; Natasha Rostov, who is sort of a tramp, much like Anna Karenina except that she is redeemed through suffering (unlike Anna, who is redeemed through mass transit); Nikolai Rostov, a young prince who goes to war; Sonya, the simple, poor girl Nikolai loves, etc. I could go on, but it wouldn't make sense if you haven't read the book. It barely makes sense after you've finished. Unless, of course, you've kept good notes.

Anyway, Pierre, the bastard, is left his father's estate, and so becomes a rich count. He marries Helene, who is another of Tolstoy's harlots, though she gets her comeuppance, Anna Karenina-style. (There are two types of women in Tolstoy's world: the impossibly pure-hearted and the whorish. Subtlety is not a Russian trait). Prince Andrei goes to war. Nikolai goes to war. They fight. Everyone else talks. An enjoyably characterized Napoleon flits briefly across this crowded stage, tugging on people's ears. The Rostovs have financial difficulties. Nikolai can't decide who to marry. Pierre has several dozen crises of conscience. At one point he becomes a Mason; at another, he tries to assassinate Napoleon. At all times he is thinking, always thinking;

there are approximately 500 pages devoted to Pierre's existential duress. (How I wished for Pierre to throw himself beneath a train!)

There is an old saying that "if the world could write...it would write like Tolstoy. That's one way of viewing *War and Peace*. It has a canvas as big as Russia, and within its pages are dizzying high and nauseating lows and bland, lukewarm middles.

The bottom line before I go on, Tolstoy-style, is that I was disappointed. My main criticism is the unfortunate mishmash of fictional narrative with historical essay. You're reading the book, right? (Or maybe listening to it on a long commute). And you're finally getting a hang of who each character is (because you've taken my advice and sketched out a character list), which is difficult when each person is called multiple things, and some have nicknames, and others have similiar-looking patronymics. But that's okay, you've moved past that. Suddenly, you're coasting along. The story is moving forward. Napoleon has crossed the Danube. There is drama. Finally, people are going to stop with the internal monologues and start shooting each other! I might actually like this!

And then, with an almost audible screech, like the brakes a train, Tolstoy brings the whole thing to a shuddering halt with a pedantic digression on the topic of History (with a capital H) and free will and military tactics and Napoleon's intelligence.

These digressions do several things. First, and most importantly, they seriously disrupt the narrative. All rhythm and timing is thrown off, which is exactly what happened to all my school concerts when I used to play the snare drum. I knew enough to quit the snare drum to focus on the recorder. Tolstoy, though, plunges on obliviously, casting all notions of structure aside. You lose sight of the characters for hundreds of pages. Instead of wondering what happens next, you start to wonder things like *where am I?* and *how long have I been sleeping?*. It tells you something when you actually start to *miss* Pierre's endless internal psychobabbling.

Second, the essays are Tolstoy at his stupidest (at least in my opinion; this is more a philosophical gripe). He believes that people have no control; that History is a force all its own, and that we act according to History's push and pull. Tolstoy says, in effect, that Napoleon is stupid, but that his enemies were stupider, but that doesn't matter, because they were all doing what they had to do, because History made them. This is all very...much a waste of time. Tolstoy goes to far as to attempt to prove this argument algebraically. Yeah, that's just what I wanted: Math!

Tolstoy's argument breaks down like this: 1. Someone does something. 2. Someone else reacts in a way that makes no sense. 3. Therefore, History is controlling things. The fundamental flaw, of course, is that Tolstoy's argument really boils down to nothing more than hindsight. Sitting in his armchair, decades after the fact, having never been on those battlefields, Tolstoy decides that the players on the scene acted dumbly, and he attributes that to cosmic events. A battle isn't lost because of bad roads, or obscured vision, or a shortage of ammunition (which are realities in all warfare, but even more prevalent in the 19th century). No, in Tolstoy's mind, it's the Universe unfolding according to its whim.

Tolstoy also has a real axe to grind with Napoleon and he doesn't hesitate to inflate his word count letting you know about it. (I suppose Tolstoy can be forgiven for hating Napoleon, but still, the book is 1,200 pages long. Enough). His analysis of the Corsican corporal is reductive and unenlightening. Napoleon was a lot of things (short, funny looking, brilliant, cruel, petty, brilliant, ambitious, oddly-shaped) but "stupid" was not among them.

Yet, there were moments when I loved this novel. Every once in awhile, *War and Peace* comes alive in that classic way; after plodding through a turgid essay, you'll suddenly come upon a passage that's drawn so vividly you will remember it forever. There is the battle of Austerlitz, which is impeccably researched (so

much so that a narrative history I read on the subject actually cites to Tolstoy) and thrillingly told, especially the fight of Captain Tushin's battery. There is Prince Andrei, wounded on the field of Austerlitz, staring up at "the infinite sky," realizing that he's never really looked at it before. There is Pierre, realizing he is in love with Natasha as he gazes at the stars and glimpses the comet of 1812. There is Napoleon suffering a cold on the eve of Borodino. There is Andrei watching a cannon ball land at his feet, its fuse hissing... There is Petya, the young adjutant, who rides to his doom chasing the French during their retreat.

Every once in awhile, there will also be something clever, showing you that Tolstoy isn't just wordy, but also inventive. For instance, there's a scene in which Tolstoy describes the thoughts of an old oak tree. Indeed! Among the hundreds of characters, there's even a tree.

I was also fond of a passage in which General Kutuzov, the Russian commander, holds a meeting in a peasant's house to discuss abandoning Moscow. Tolstoy tells this story from the point of view of a little peasant girl who, in her mind, calls Kutuzov "grandfather." (It's cute, but Kutuzov was no kindly old man. He was an indifferent drunk. The night before Austerlitz, he allegedly engaged in a four-some with three of the "comfort women" he brought with him on campaigns. Unfortunately, despite writing 1,200 pages, Tolstoy doesn't find space to devote to this occurrence).

The good, though, is surrounded by the bad or the boring. The flyleaf of the book said that Pierre, Natasha, and Andrei were three of the most dynamic characters in literature. I don't think so. Aside from Andrei, I was mostly unimpressed with the main characters (Napoleon was fun, in an over-the-top bit part). Pierre is a boob and a bore, and his sudden heroics during the burning of Moscow come from nowhere. Natasha is a flake. She's the stereotypical girl plucking the daisy: I love him; I love him not; I love him...

The end of the novel is (like *Anna Karenina*) a huge anti-climatic letdown.

As we approach the final pages, Tolstoy gives us a description of the battle of Borodino. It is a masterpiece of military fiction. The research and verisimilitude. The vividness. Pierre's confrontation with the Frenchman in the redoubt:

Now they will stop it, now they will be horrified at what they have done, he thought, aimlessly going toward a crowd of stretcher bearers moving from the battlefield.

Tolstoy's Borodino is actually one of the great battle scenes I've ever read; afterwards, though, things fall of a cliff. There is no slow decline into mediocrity; no, it happens at the turn of the page. It's like Tolstoy suddenly stopped taking steroids.

In an unseemly rush, Tolstoy has Napoleon move into Moscow, Moscow burns, Napoleon retreats. All of this occurs indirectly, through digression-filled essays on History. The characters recede into the background; all narrative vitality disappears. There are only a couple exceptions: one scene of the city burning, followed by one (admittedly powerful) scene of the French executing supposed arsons. During the French retreat, there is not a single visceral moment depicting their hard, frozen march. Instead we get Tolstoy nattering on about Napoleon's stupidity.

Then come the Epilogues. When I reached them, I felt a bit like a cowboy in one of those old westerns who is riding across the desert and finds a well, except the well is dry and full of snakes and then an Indian shoots him with an arrow. We will never know the fates of the dozens of characters we've followed for the previous thousand pages. Tolstoy leaves their destinies to the imagination so that he can rant. It's a stupefying literary decision, and reminded me of nothing so much as my Uncle Ed on Thanksgiving after five glasses of wine:

You can't get him to shut up. Except at Thanksgiving, Uncle Ed usually passes out by the fourth quarter of the Cowboys game. Not Tolstoy. Not even death can quiet him.

War and Peace was an experience. There were times I envisioned myself reaching the end, spiking the book like a football, and then doing some sort of victory dance around the splayed pages. When I got there, though, I simply sighed, leaned back in my chair, and thought: At least this was better than *Moby Dick*.
