



The Death of Ivan Ilyich and Other Stories

Leo Tolstoy , Anthony Briggs (Introduction) , David McDuff (Translation) , Ronald Wilks (Translation)

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The raid --

The woodfelling --

Three deaths --

Polikushka --

The death of Ivan Ilyich --

After the ball --

The forged coupon.

The Death of Ivan Ilyich and Other Stories Details

Date : Published February 28th 2008 by Penguin Classics

ISBN : 9780140449617

Author : Leo Tolstoy , Anthony Briggs (Introduction) , David McDuff (Translation) , Ronald Wilks (Translation)

Format : Paperback 317 pages

Genre : Cultural, Russia, Literature, Russian Literature, Short Stories

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Edward says

Chronology

Introduction & Notes, by Anthony Briggs

Further Reading

- The Raid
- The Woodfelling
- Three Deaths
- Polikushka
- The Death of Ivan Ilyich
- After the Ball
- The Forged Coupon

Notes

Leslie Balkany says

Tolstoy's turn to religion in middle age made him question what it meant to live a good life. In this novella, he is not at all subtle about explaining the answer he found...overdoing it a bit. But this doesn't lessen the power of the story or the empathy we feel for both Ivan Ilyich and Leo Tolstoy. How interesting to compare Ivan Ilyich's death and dying with Addie Bundren's in Faulkner's "As I Lay Dying."

Aiden says

Enjoyed each of the stories, but the best were Poliushka and The Forged Coupon. Excellent stuff.

Pamela says

Selection of short stories from 19th century Russia. Several deal with military life - the effect of conscription on peasant families, the lives of the officers, the skirmishes on the edges of the Russian lands. Tolstoy blends description and dialogue skilfully to create pictures that stuck in my mind, and brought out both the horror and the banality of death in military action.

The most affecting stories, though, were those that dug more deeply into the question of humanity and that old cliché, the meaning of life. The Death of Ivan Ilyich is a powerful description of a mundane life and premature agonising death, bringing out the loneliness and isolation of the dying man, and examining the nature of his suffering, both physical and emotional. Polikushka and The Forged Coupon both look at the consequences of seemingly random acts and the chains of tragic circumstances that can arise.

These are thought provoking stories, often melancholy and sometimes shocking, but with a glimmer of hope for humanity in general. They are beautifully written and totally engaging.

Eliot Boden says

I didn't care for the title story "Death of Ivan Ilyich" as much as I expected but was pleasantly surprised by the opening and closing stories, "The Raid" and "The Forged Coupon."

Joyce says

While the other stories were very, very good, the Death of Ivan Ilyich was outstanding. Initially, I thought it was going to be gruesome and depressing. Nothing of the sort. Timeless and excellent. So glad to have finally read it.

Gordon says

Full disclosure: I only read the title story -- essentially a novella -- "The Death of Ivan Ilyich", which all on its own justifies buying the book. Ivan Ilyich is a Tsarist government functionary who does everything he's supposed to: graduates from law school, climbs the ranks of the bureaucracy, marries a woman considered a good catch, fathers children, lives in a tastefully decorated apartment in the right part of St-Petersburg, plays a good game of bridge etc. Then he falls ill, grows steadily worse, and realizes he's dying. His family, doctors, friends and colleagues refuse to acknowledge the obvious, and ply him with soothing lies. Drowning in drivel and platitudes, he reconsiders his whole life, and is not pleased by what he sees.

Tolstoy's writing in this story is so good that it almost (and I stress "almost") makes me want to read War and Peace.

T says

Le maitre

Ashley ! says

Had to read this short story for one of my university courses and I adored it!

Courtney Schmidt says

So moving. Tolstoy's writings are captivating and unique, yet haunting and emotionally stirring. Excited to read more of his works.

Jack Avis says

I began this book as I have had a resurgence in my want to read more. I am taking inspiration from the spirit of Thoreau and the adventurer Christopher McCandless.

Tolstoy is surprisingly easy to read, the stories are very clever. Though, I'm not sure if this is because of its translation into English from the original Russian text but, the language is not as particularly sophisticated as I expected. Tolstoy being one of the greatest classic writers I was surprised at some particular turn-of-phrases perhaps overuse.

However that being said it does not detract from the fact that it was a thoroughly enjoyable read neither does it dissuade me from embarking upon more of Tolstoy's work, War & Peace may be lurking in the near future. Favourites being the death of Ivan Ilyich, The Forged Coupon and Polikushka.

Mark R. says

"The Death of Ivan Ilyich and Other Stories" collects three novellas and four shorts, by Leo Tolstoy, each a rumination on death. Here is a brief summary of each.

"The Raid" and "The Woodfelling" both take place in Chechnya, that borderland which has long been the subject of feuds and violence. Both stories feature a narrator who's a member of a small company being sent on a war-time mission. The men carry out orders, and in down time joke around, drink, and goof off like anyone would, always with that knowledge that they, or the person they're speaking with, could be dead at any moment.

"Three Deaths" chronicles a brief, ill-fated journey, a wealthy woman in her carriage, on her way to Italy, her husband certain she is too ill to travel. They make a stop, and their driver trades boots with another driver who is on the verge of death. Throughout, the deaths are contrasted with the life around them, particularly in descriptions of nature. The final sentence sums it all up:

"On high, the succulent leaves whispered in peace and joy, and the boughs of the living trees slowly stirred themselves, looking down in majesty on the dead tree that lay flat on the ground."

In "Polikushka," the titular character, a serf of low-standing, is proposed as a potential recruit for the army. Each village is required to submit three males, and it looks like Polikey's number may be called. But the mistress of the town thinks he's a bit too much of an embarrassment, and would rather send someone else, like, say old Dutlov's nephew. Old Dutlove could buy his nephew's way out of service, but doesn't want to part with the money.

When Polikey is called to see the mistress, his wife suspects the worst, but the mistress surprises them both by sending Polikey on an errand to collect money from a farmer. The town's mistress is, it seems, offering Polikey an opportunity to prove his trustworthiness, after a long period in which this was in grave doubt. Polikey successfully obtains the money, but loses it on his return trip. Here the story takes a dark turn, becoming even darker when Dutlove reveals that he has in fact "found" the money, which now is considered cursed and won't be touched by anyone, including the mistress who sent for it.

This is quite an effective story that gives a rundown of the major players in this town, and squeezes out quite a bit of sympathy for the poor, wayward Polikey (who, admittedly, desire to get out of military service when it is, most agree, his turn), and a measure of scorn for men like Dutlov, with the power if not desire to affect change.

“The Death of Ivan Ilyich” announces its subject’s death right up front, and then for the length of a novella examines Ivan’s fear of death, the false face he puts on in the presence of loved ones, and Ivan’s unfortunate final conclusion that he has indeed wasted his time on Earth.

As with others in this collection, there are certain lines that demand to be re-read. Take for instance the brilliance of the opening line of chapter two: “The past history of Ivan Ilyich’s life had been straightforward, ordinary and dreadful in the extreme.” Damn right. What a statement.

“After the Ball” is a stunning tale of a man meeting a woman’s father in one situation—a pleasant evening ball—and then encountering him in quite another—the “hiding” of an army deserter.

The last story, “The Forged Coupon,” is the longest, and to my mind most tedious of the collection. It’s a morality tale that begins when a young boy forges a bank note that he passes off as legitimate. This has consequences that ring out through the entire village. Some of the characters blend together, and I had to frequently page back to remind myself who was who. Never the less, still a decent story, particularly in the opening sections. There is, quite naturally, lots of death.

Scott Bagley says

This was my first go at Tolstoy, and I've gotta say I don't see what all the hype is about. I understand that he wrote very moral, philosophical stories and I'm fine with that, but in order to get the point across, a reader needs to care about the characters, in other words, the characters need developing. While reading this I kept hearing my creative writing instructor screaming "SHOW, DON'T TELL." There is almost nothing in this story that is not EXPLAINING what happens. There is also very little dialog which is a great tool to get the feel for characters. Ilyich and his wife begin to grow apart in their marriage, but we are told this rather than shown this, what happens to make them grow apart, I couldn't tell you. I give it a 2 star rating because "The Forged Coupon" was an OK story, but "Ilyich" was REALLY bad. I think if the same manuscript were to be given to a publisher today it would be thrown out.

Dianne says

Never in the history of western literature has such a joyless collection been assembled. For misanthropes and lovers of loathing. Makes me want to eat dirt.

Ender says

Stories in my edition:

The raid

The woodfelling

Three deaths

Polikushka

The death of Ivan Ilyich

After the ball

The forged coupon (And that's why you never forge coupons #JWalterWeatherman)
