

The Guide

A Theatergoer's Resource

Edited by Collin Lawson & Ryan Mooney for the Education & Community Programs department at Portland Center Stage

Anna Karenina

adaptated by Kevin McKeon
from the novel by Leo Tolstoy
directed by Chris Coleman

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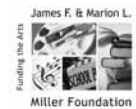
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About the Artists

Tolstoy

Tolstoy is best known for his two longest works, *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*, which are commonly regarded as among the finest novels ever written. *War and Peace* in particular seems virtually to define this form for many readers and critics. Among Tolstoy's shorter works, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* is usually classed among the best examples of the novella. Especially during his last three decades Tolstoy also achieved world renown as a moral and religious teacher. His doctrine of nonresistance to evil had an important influence on Gandhi. Although Tolstoy's religious ideas no longer command the respect they once did, interest in his life and personality has, if anything, increased over the years. Most readers will agree with the assessment of the 19th-century British poet and critic Matthew Arnold that a novel by Tolstoy is not a work of art but a piece of life; the 20th-century Russian author Isaak Babel commented that, if the world could write by itself, it would write like Tolstoy. Critics of diverse schools have agreed that somehow Tolstoy's works seem to elude all artifice. Most have stressed his ability to observe the smallest changes of consciousness and to record the slightest movements of the body. What another novelist would describe as a single act of consciousness, Tolstoy convincingly breaks down into a series of infinitesimally small steps. According to the



English writer Virginia Woolf, who took for granted that Tolstoy was “the greatest of all novelists,” these observational powers elicited a kind of fear in readers, who “wish to escape from the gaze which Tolstoy fixes on us.” Those who visited Tolstoy as an old man also reported feelings of great discomfort when he appeared to understand their unspoken thoughts. It was

commonplace to describe him as godlike in his powers and titanic in his struggles to escape the limitations of the human condition. Some viewed Tolstoy as the embodiment of nature and pure vitality, others saw him as the incarnation of the world's conscience, but for almost all who knew him or read his works, he was not just one of the greatest writers who ever lived but a living symbol of the search for life's meaning. 🏰



Kevin McKeon

Kevin McKeon is a Seattle theatre artist who has worked extensively with the interpretation of contemporary and classical literature for the stage. He is a director, actor and adaptor for Book-It Repertory Theatre, where he has helped birth world premiere productions of *A Tale of Two Cities*, *Anne Tyler's Breathing Lessons*, *Plainsong*, *Great Expectations*, and *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears*. His adaptation of David Guterson's *Snow Falling on Cedars* has been seen in regional theatres on both coasts and was produced at Portland Center Stage in 2010. 🏰

The JAW Festival

Kevin McKeon had the valuable opportunity to develop his adaptation of *Anna Karenina* at PCS's JAW playwriting festival in 2011.

Founded in 1998, the JAW festival (an acronym for Just Add Water) is an invite-only bash for playwrights to develop new plays at Portland Center Stage. With the help of an eager gathering of directors, actors, stage managers and producers, plays are honed to a razor edge and then presented as staged readings at the end of two crazy weeks. No wonder JAW's motto is "We. Play. Rough."

Though the plays are the focus of the festival, JAW features a number of additional events, including community artists labs, readings of plays written in Oregon, and recognition of young promising playwrights.

Artists have described JAW as "Collaborative, Expansive, Intensive, Impressive, Without a Net, Exhausting, Bone Crushing, and Life Changing." Reflecting on JAW's 10-year anniversary in 2008, Festival Director Rose Riordan recalled, "When the



Festival started we had no idea what it was going to become. That first year was magical—something happened that week that was so inspiring and fun we were nervous that perhaps it wouldn't ever happen again. As this year's JAW came to an end, it was gratifying to realize that it has maintained its specialness and continues to be a highlight." 🍷

Interview with Kevin McKeon

PCS What were your biggest obstacles in the process of adaptation?

KM I had to tell myself that, even though *Anna* is a great piece of work, it was written as a novel, and it was written as a novel more than a century ago. So what might resonate to a reader during that time and what might connect to an audience today are different, not to mention the material is being adapted to a completely different medium. It was about finding the threads and the themes of the novel that tell the story and weeding through those that don't.

PCS *Anna* is highly regarded as being one of the seminal novels of the 20th century. What do you think theatre brings to the story? Do you feel the story has changed now that it is on stage?

KM At its best, theatre nudges people's imaginations to take a leap. We all want to be transported as an audience, and for me, if theatre doesn't take chances,

it just sits there. Risk is always involved, and truly, it is required - from the actors, from the director, and from the material they're working with. Potentially, theatre brings the best of all that to the fore, so any theatrical experience, *Anna* included, has the possibility of transcending the ordinary. That's what we shoot for, of course. We don't always achieve it.

It's a matter for debate, but *Anna* could be perceived as a moralist tract. To some readers, me included, I admit, Tolstoy stacks the deck fairly decisively against *Anna*. I think today, we're less inclined to judge her and the decisions she makes in her life, so I wanted to find the humanity in *Anna* and all the characters in the novel and level the playing field so that we could understand why they do what they do and relate to them and the obstacles they face. We can't sit in judgment of any character and say, ultimately 'They got what they deserved.' And I don't think Tolstoy would really want us to.

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PCS What was your experience working with *Anna* in the JAW festival?

KM It was thrilling to hear work that I spent many months with in my head being read and discovered by a great cast of actors. And the insight and perspective they and the other participants in JAW shared with me was invaluable in shaping the play. I learned a lot.

PCS With such a long novel, there inevitably have to be cuts. Were there any parts of the novel – certain scenes, or bits of prose – that you wish could have made it into the play?

KM And here's where I sound antithetical and you can shoot me for this, but no. When you distill the book to its essence, it's really a very small story. And the job was to find that story. I needed to keep it contained— Tolstoy wrote big. As a reader, I like that. As an adaptor, I wish he had written less material.

PCS What do you want the audience to walk away with?

KM I want them to walk away feeling challenged to look at situations from all sides. There's never one story, never one side to things. Even though we live in different times and different places, life is complicated. And if watching other people's approaches to problems resonates with us and we are able to shed some light onto our own issues as a result, we have gained perspective, and that's a good thing. 🍷

Character Guide and Family Tree in *Anna Karenina*

“All happy family names are alike; every unhappy family has their own unhappy names”

Anna Arkadyevna Karenina Stepan Oblonsky's sister, Karenin's wife.

Count Alexei Kirillovich Vronsky a wealthy and dashing military officer, friend of Stiva.

Prince Stepan Arkadyevitch Oblonsky (“Stiva”) a civil servant and Anna's brother.

Princess Darya Alexandrovna Oblonskaya (“Dolly”) Stepan's wife.

Alexei Alexandrovich Karenin a senior statesman and Anna's husband, twenty years her senior.

Konstantin Dmitrievitch Levin (“Kostya”) Kitty's suitor, old friend of Stiva.

Nikolai Levin Konstantin's brother

Sergius Ivanich Koznyshev Konstantin's half-brother

Princess Ekaterina Alexandrovna Shcherbatskaya (“Kitty”) Dolly's younger sister.

Princess Elizaveta (“Betsy”) Anna's wealthy, morally loose society friend and Vronsky's cousin

Countess Lidia Ivanovna Leader of a high society circle that includes Karenin, and shuns Princess Betsy and her circle.

Countess Vronskaya Vronsky's mother

Sergei Alexeyitch Karenin (“Seryozha”) Anna and Karenin's son

Anna (“Annie”) Anna and Vronsky's daughter

Varenka a young orphaned girl, semi-adopted by an ailing Russian noblewoman, whom Kitty befriends while abroad

Tolstoy & Anna Karenina

Anna Karenina is often regarded as one of the greatest novels of the 20th century—here is a history of the author and the making of the classic.

from
PBS Masterpiece
Theatre

TOLSTOY: LIFE AS RUSSIAN HISTORY

In *Anna Karenina*, Leo Tolstoy not only relates a telling portrait of Russian society in the second half of the 19th century, but also mirrors his own personal transformations during this time. Tolstoy expresses his beliefs and actions through his character Levin, the landowning aristocrat who searches for a higher meaning in life. But whereas Levin found his answers in love, family life, and nature, Tolstoy sought out a deeper meaning in his later years, turning away from luxury, property, and pleasures for, in his mind, a more holy and just existence.

Count Leo Nicolaevich Tolstoy was born on September 10, 1828, the fourth of five children, to wealthy noble parents. He lived at the family estate, Yasnaya Polyana (“clear glade”), south of Moscow. Orphaned at 9, Tolstoy was brought up by relatives and educated by French and German tutors. At 16, he entered the University of Kazan, where he studied languages and law, though

he showed far more interest in gambling, drinking, and women. He was by no means a social success:

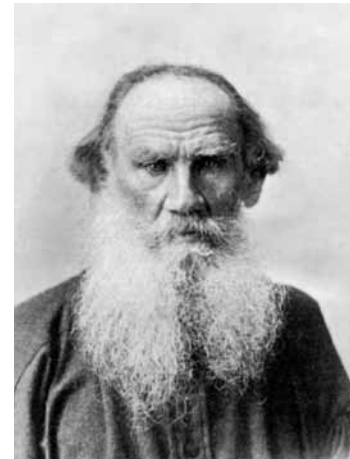
“Without knowing why I am and why I am here, life is impossible.”

—Leo Tolstoy

his stiff awkwardness led his friends to nickname him “the bear.” Eventually influenced by the writings of French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Tolstoy became disenchanted with formal education and left the university in 1847 without a degree.

Tolstoy returned that year to Yasnaya Polyana, now his legal inheritance. Along with 2100 acres came 233 male serfs, bonded laborers whose back-breaking work gave him his livelihood. For his day, the young Tolstoy had a fairly liberal attitude toward his serfs: he reasoned that as long as he treated them well, ownership was fair.

Serfs in Tolstoy’s day led wretched lives. Though the majority of the Russian population was made up of rural workers — 96.4% in 1797, 87.4% in 1897 — minority landowners ran their lives. Beatings were the most common form of training and discipline. The vast majority of serfs were uneducated and lived in squalid conditions. They were not legally allowed to hold local or international passports, so they could not seek out better lives elsewhere. Punishment



for being discovered outside one’s legal environs included beatings, fines, deportation, and exile.

Tolstoy tried to improve his serfs’ lot in life, but failed miserably. He would later record these deeds in his novel *A Landowner’s Morning*, where a young nobleman abolishes corporal punishment on his estate, provides schooling for his laborers, and lectures them on how to live better lives. The serfs greet his efforts with mistrust and greed, and the landowner soon abandons his efforts. Though these initial attempts at improving the lives of serfs backfired, such benevolence would figure significantly in Tolstoy’s later life.

His idealism dashed, Tolstoy temporarily gave up country life in 1848 and left for Moscow and St. Petersburg. For two years he lived the aristocratic life to which he was born, going to countless parties, gambling, and womanizing. Still socially awkward, he scrutinized his own actions in his diaries, and noted with great remorse the emptiness of society life. At this time, he also began to closely observe his high-born urban peers, and felt a great urge to write down what he saw. Thus, Tolstoy’s creative life was born. The next year, his first novel, *Childhood*, was published.

In 1852, Tolstoy joined his brother Nicolai in the army as a commissioned officer, fighting Tartars along the Chechnian border (a fight still plaguing the region today). The horrors of war had a great impact on Tolstoy — besides the torture each side inflicted on the other, brutality within the Russian ranks was harrowing.

Peasants made up the involuntary enlisted ranks, and, before reforms were enacted in 1863, were forced to serve for twenty-five years, making family life impossible. After the Crimean War, mandatory service was reduced to seven years, though those with bad

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records served nine. Enlisted men could expect to not see their families during years of service. Training and discipline mostly took the form of beatings and floggings. One of the worst punishments was the “gauntlet,” in which a soldier was tied to his gun and forced to run between ranks of men who flogged him, often to death. Another image that deeply impressed Tolstoy was that of Russian officers shot to death by



Russian Nobility

their own soldiers in battle. Tolstoy was also horrified by governmental use of the military to quell peasant riots. In such cases, the government essentially forced peasants to oppress other peasants. Such violence often ended in hangings and shootings of rural laborers who fought for legal rights and basics such as food.

Tolstoy spent the rest of his life fighting social inequities, beginning with education for rural laborers. In 1859, now back at Yasnaya Polyana, he opened a school for peasant children and succeeded by creating a relaxed atmosphere in which students didn't fear their masters. Tolstoy and the staff, many with radical inclinations, dressed in peasant garb so as not to intimidate students. Tolstoy's ABC text was used instead of government-issued books, an innovation that authorities frowned upon. Beginning in 1857, Tolstoy traveled extensively, studying progressive school systems and other forms of organization, whether governmental or societal. He became enormously unpopular with both landowners and the government for championing the rights of peasants, and faced several investigations and at least one police raid on his home.

Tolstoy briefly interrupted his travels to be at his brother Nicolai's side as he lay dying in France. Tolstoy was greatly affected by his brother's death; a sense of futility in life — as well as terror of death — began to slowly invade his thoughts.

In 1865, Tolstoy began publishing in serial form *War and Peace*, his great epic of five Russian families during the Napoleonic Wars (1805-1814). For four years he chronicled with great detail and precision the poignant psychological and social aspects of the war years on Russian society. Of war, he wrote:

Millions of men perpetrated against one another such innumerable crimes, frauds, treacheries, thefts, forgeries, issues of false money, burglaries, incendiarisms, and murders as in whole centuries are not recorded in the annals of all the law courts of the world, but which those who committed them did not at the time regard as being crimes.

In 1862, Tolstoy married Sofya Andreyevna Behrs, whom he called “Sonya.” The first fifteen years of marriage proved blissfully happy for Tolstoy, who found great comfort, joy, and satisfaction in family life (much as Levin does at the end of *Anna Karenina*). He noted in his diary on January 5, 1862, “Domestic happiness has swallowed me completely.” It was during these contented years that Tolstoy produced both *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*. Together he and Sonya had thirteen children (three of whom died in childhood), and Sonya worked lovingly at copying over Tolstoy's final drafts. But things between them would change.

In the 1870s, Tolstoy slowly began a moral crisis and depression that would last the rest of his life. He remained haunted by death, and desperately sought out greater meaning in life. Never very religious, he now found great personal significance in Christ's injunction, “that ye shall resist not evil.” Nonresistance, or peacefulness in the face of violence, became the cornerstone of his life. Tolstoy also arrived at the idea that self-gratification corrupted man's inherent goodness, and that therefore property rights — owning “things that belong to all” — were evil. He wanted to give all his land away, but ultimately parceled it out to his family, who largely opposed his altruistic ideas. In his quest for a holy life, Tolstoy also became a vegetarian; abstained from sex, alcohol, and tobacco; worked on his farms; wore only peasant clothing; and even made his own shoes. His family, particularly his wife, was extremely unhappy with his conversion, with the exception of his daughter Alexandra who shared many of her father's beliefs.

After his conversion, Tolstoy renounced his earlier fiction as “trash” written for the cultural elite, and turned to writing essays and tracts. In his 1882 *Confession*, he speaks candidly of his moral crisis, and in

the 1886 pamphlet *What Then Shall We Do?* he inveighs against property ownership and the exploitation of labor. In 1894, he published *The Kingdom of God Is Within You*, describing his personal religious findings; in 1901 he was excommunicated by the Russian Orthodox Church. *What Is Art?* written in 1898, dismisses all but morally inspired art that could appeal to the average citizen. Though Tolstoy made many bureaucratic enemies, he also found many followers, several of whom sought him out at Yasnaya Polyana as a prophet.

In his last years, Tolstoy turned back to fiction, writing morality tales and plays. *Master and Man* (1885) and *The Death of Ivan Ilych* (1886), two of his best known short stories, portray men seeking spiritual conversion upon their deathbeds. The short novel *The Kreutzer Sonata* (1889) describes a loveless marriage (and was banned in several countries). The play *The Power of Darkness* (1888) demonstrates Tolstoy's belief that greed and lust lead to violence and evil. In 1892, when a severe famine hit, Tolstoy set up many

relief stations in Tula and Samara, and published his volume *The Famine*. A final novel, *Resurrection* (1899), deals with the triumph of the individual over government, as well as hypocrisy in society.

At the age of 82, unhappy at home, Tolstoy took off one night and soon became ill at a rural railway station. On November 20, 1910, Tolstoy died of heart failure in an obscure hospital in Astapova. The Church briefly considered lifting the ban of excommunication on Tolstoy at his deathbed, but ultimately decided against it. 🏰

Tolstoy on Tolstoy: *What is Art*

Anna Karenina is filled with intellectual arguments, philosophical ideals, and is set in a time where Russia was a crucible for literature, discussion, and new art. Here is a selection from Tolstoy's essay on the nature of art.

1. In order to correctly to define art, it is necessary, first of all, to cease to consider it as a means to pleasure and to consider it as one of the conditions of human life. Viewing it in this way we cannot fail to observe that art is one of the means of intercourse between man and man.
2. Every work of art causes the receiver to enter into a certain kind of relationship both with him who produced, or is producing, the art, and with all those who, simultaneously, previously, or subsequently, receive the same artistic impression.
3. Speech, transmitting the thoughts and experiences of men, serves as a means of union among them, and art acts in a similar manner. The peculiarity of this latter means of intercourse, distinguishing it from intercourse by means of words, consists in this, that whereas by words a man transmits his

thoughts to another, by means of art he transmits his feelings.

4. The activity of art is based on the fact that a man, receiving through his sense of hearing or sight another man's expression of feeling, is capable of experiencing the emotion which moved the man who expressed it. To take the simplest example;

“Art is a human activity having for its purpose the transmission to others of the highest and best feelings to which men have risen.”

—Leo Tolstoy

one man laughs, and another who hears becomes merry; or a man weeps, and another who hears feels sorrow. A man is excited or irritated, and another man seeing him comes to a similar state of mind. By his movements or by the sounds of his voice, a man expresses courage and determination

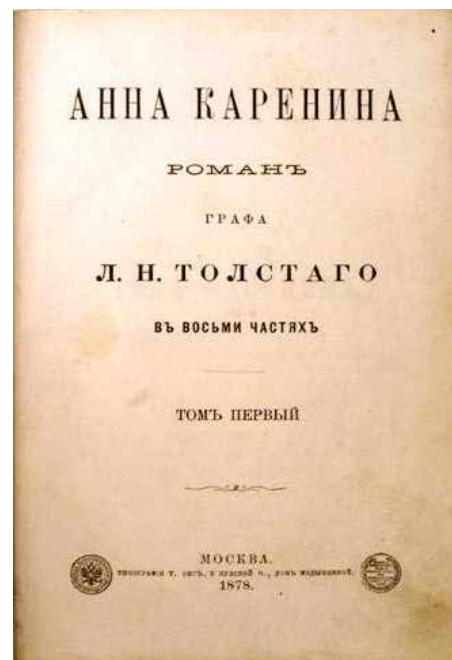
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- or sadness and calmness, and this state of mind passes on to others. A man suffers, expressing his sufferings by groans and spasms, and this suffering transmits itself to other people; a man expresses his feeling of admiration, devotion, fear, respect, or love to certain objects, persons, or phenomena, and others are infected by the same feelings of admiration, devotion, fear, respect, or love to the same objects, persons, and phenomena.
5. And it is upon this capacity of man to receive another man's expression of feeling and experience those feelings himself, that the activity of art is based.
 6. If a man infects another or others directly, immediately, by his appearance or by the sounds he gives vent to at the very time he experiences the feeling; if he causes another man to yawn when he himself cannot help yawning, or to laugh or cry when he himself is obliged to laugh or cry, or to suffer when he himself is suffering - that does not amount to art.
 7. Art begins when one person, with the object of joining another or others to himself in one and the same feeling, expresses that feeling by certain external indications. To take the simplest example: a boy, having experienced, let us say, fear on encountering a wolf, relates that encounter; and, in order to evoke in others the feeling he has experienced, describes himself, his condition before the encounter, the surroundings, the woods, his own lightheartedness, and then the wolf's appearance, its movements, the distance between himself and the wolf, etc. All this, if only the boy, when telling the story, again experiences the feelings he had lived through and infects the hearers and compels them to feel what the narrator had experienced is art. If even the boy had not seen a wolf but had frequently been afraid of one, and if, wishing to evoke in others the fear he had felt, he invented an encounter with a wolf and recounted it so as to make his hearers share the feelings he experienced when he feared the world, that also would be art. And just in the same way it is art if a man, having experienced either the fear of suffering or the attraction of enjoyment (whether in reality or in imagination) expresses these feelings on canvas or in marble so that others are infected by them. And it is also art if a man feels or imagines to himself feelings of delight, gladness, sorrow, despair, courage, or despondency and the transition from one to another of these feelings, and expresses these feelings by sounds so that the hearers are infected by them and experience them as they were experienced by the composer.
 8. The feelings with which the artist infects others may be most various - very strong or very weak, very important or very insignificant, very bad or very good: feelings of love for one's own country, self-devotion and submission to fate or to God expressed in a drama, raptures of lovers described in a novel, feelings of voluptuousness expressed in a picture, courage expressed in a triumphal march, merriment evoked by a dance, humor evoked by a funny story, the feeling of quietness transmitted by an evening landscape or by a lullaby, or the feeling of admiration evoked by a beautiful arabesque - it is all art.
 9. If only the spectators or auditors are infected by the feelings which the author has felt, it is art.
 10. To evoke in oneself a feeling one has once experienced, and having evoked it in oneself, then, by means of movements, lines, colors, sounds, or forms expressed in words, so to transmit that feeling that others may experience the same feeling - this is the activity of art.
 11. Art is a human activity consisting in this, that one man consciously, by means of certain external signs, hands on to others feelings he has lived through, and that other people are infected by these feelings and also experience them.
 12. Art is not, as the metaphysicians say, the manifestation of some mysterious idea of beauty or God; it is not, as the aesthetical physiologists say, a game in which man lets off his excess of stored-up energy; it is not the expression of man's emotions by external signs; it is not the production of pleasing objects; and, above all, it is not pleasure; but it is a means of union among men, joining them together in the same feelings, and indispensable for the life and progress toward well-being of individuals and of humanity.
 13. As, thanks to man's capacity to express thoughts by words, every man may know all that has been done for him in the realms of thought by all humanity before his day, and can in the present, thanks to this capacity to understand the thoughts of others, become a sharer in their activity and

can himself hand on to his contemporaries and descendants the thoughts he has assimilated from others, as well as those which have arisen within himself; so, thanks to man's capacity to be infected with the feelings of others by means of art, all that is being lived through by his contemporaries is accessible to him, as well as the feelings experienced by men thousands of years ago, and he has also the possibility of transmitting his own feelings to others.

14. If people lacked this capacity to receive the thoughts conceived by the men who preceded them and to pass on to others their own thoughts, men would be like wild beasts, or like Kaspar Houser.
15. And if men lacked this other capacity of being infected by art, people might be almost more savage still, and, above all, more separated from, and more hostile to, one another.
16. And therefore the activity of art is a most important one, as important as the activity of speech itself and as generally diffused.
17. We are accustomed to understand art to be only what we hear and see in theaters, concerts, and exhibitions, together with buildings, statues, poems, novels. . . . But all this is but the smallest part of the art by which we communicate with each other in life. All human life is filled with works of art of every kind - from cradlesong, jest, mimicry, the ornamentation of houses, dress, and utensils, up to church services, buildings, monuments, and triumphal processions. It is all artistic activity. So that by art, in the limited sense of the word, we do not mean all human activity transmitting feelings, but only that part which we for some reason select from it and to which we attach special importance.
18. This special importance has always been given by all men to that part of this activity which transmits feelings flowing from their religious perception, and this small part of art they have specifically called art, attaching to it the full meaning of the word.
19. That was how man of old -- Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle - looked on art. Thus did the Hebrew prophets and the ancient Christians regard art; thus it was, and still is, understood by the Mohammedans, and thus it still is understood by religious folk among our own peasantry.



Cover page of the first volume of Anna Karenina. Moscow, 1878

20. Some teachers of mankind - as Plato in his Republic and people such as the primitive Christians, the strict Mohammedans, and the Buddhists — have gone so far as to repudiate all art.
21. People viewing art in this way (in contradiction to the prevalent view of today which regards any art as good if only it affords pleasure) considered, and consider, that art (as contrasted with speech, which need not be listened to) is so highly dangerous in its power to infect people against their wills that mankind will lose far less by banishing all art than by tolerating each and every art.
22. Evidently such people were wrong in repudiating all art, for they denied that which cannot be denied — one of the indispensable means of communication, without which mankind could not exist. But not less wrong are the people of civilized European society of our class and day in favoring any art if it but serves beauty, i.e., gives people pleasure.
23. Formerly people feared lest among the works of art there might chance to be some causing corruption, and they prohibited art altogether. Now they only fear lest they should be deprived of any enjoyment art can afford, and patronize any art. And I think the last error is much grosser than the first and that its consequences are far more harmful. ■

Get to Know Your Russian Names!

Learning Russian names is easy, once you learn a couple of tips.

You might have noticed the many names and nicknames in Anna Karenina; this article explains the mechanics and etymology behind this system.

The first is to understand the structure. Most Russian full names consist of three parts, just like American ones. The difference is the middle name: whereas Americans tend to select a middle name for the way it rolls off the tongue between the first and last name, or as an opportunity to squeeze in an additional family or saint name, in Russia the middle name nearly always consists of the father's first name.

AUTHORS ON TOLSTOY

Julian Mitchell: It has been said that a careful reading of Anna Karenina, if it teaches you nothing else, will teach you how to make strawberry jam.

(Radio Times, 30 October 1976)

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi: Tolstoy's life has been devoted to replacing the method of violence for removing tyranny or securing reform by the method of nonresistance to evil. He would meet hatred expressed in violence by love expressed in self-suffering. He admits of no exception to whittle down this great and divine law of love. He applies it to all the problems that trouble mankind.

(19 November 1909)

Ernest Hemingway: I started out very quiet and I beat Mr. Turgenev. Then I trained hard and I beat Mr. de Maupassant. I've fought two draws with Mr. Stendhal, and I think I had an edge in the last one. But nobody's going to get me in any ring with Mr. Tolstoy unless I'm crazy or I keep getting better.

(The New Yorker 13 May 1950)

First names may seem very foreign and strange to American ears, but many of them are the same Biblical, Latin and Greek names that are common in our own society. Most of the rest are Old Slavic names common throughout the region, with the odd Scandinavian one thrown in for good measure. More easily identifiable men's names include Alexander (and its short form Sasha), Alexei (short form: Alyosha), Andrei (like Andrew), Anton (Anthony), Danil (Daniel), Evgeny (Eugene), Fyodor (Theodor), Grigorii (Gregory, short form Grisha), Ivan (John), Osip or Iosif (Joseph), Pavel (Paul), and Stepan (Steven). Boris, Vladimir and Oleg are Slavic

This is called the *patronymic* (patro meaning father), and has two components: the father's name, plus an ending that means "of" (as in *son* or *daughter of*). These endings usually look like "-ov/ova/ovna", "-ev/eva/evna", or "-ich/ovich/evich". (The versions with an -a at the end would be for the daughter, and the other versions would be for the son).

We can use Vladimir Putin as an example. His full name is Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin. Looking only at the middle name, we see a compound name: Vladimir + "ovich". Thus, his full name is Vladimir -"Son-of-Vladimir"- Putin. Another example is Leo Tolstoy, whose full name is "Lev Nicholaevich Tolstoy". His middle name, Nicholaevich, is the compound of "Nicholai" + "evich", and means "the son of Nicholas."

First names may seem very foreign and strange to American ears, but

names; Kirill, Dmitri, Gennady and Vasily are Greek; and Vitaly, Maksim and Sergei are Latin. Igor, from the Swedish Ingvar, was brought by the Vikings.

Women's names generally come from the same categories. Alexandra, Anna, Barbara, Diana, Ekaterina (and Katya, from Katherine), Eva, Elena (Helen), Elizaveta (Elizabeth), Irina, Lidiya, Sophia, Eleonora (Eleanor), and Yuliya (Julia) are likely familiar to Americans. Anastasia, Galina, Raisa, Tatyana and Zoya (Zoe) are Greek in origin; Lada, Lubov (Love), Lyudmila, Olga, Svetlana and Vera are from Old Slavic; Natalia from Latin.

Although Jewish biblical names do not necessarily indicate that the holder is of Jewish ancestry, it is less common to give non-Jewish children such names such as Michael.

The polite way to speak about or directly to a Russian is with their first name, plus the patronymic. This is appropriate when speaking to a teacher, a doctor, an elder, leaders, and other people to whom you owe proper respect.

When you are speaking to a close friend or loved one, you would use a pet form of the first name only. Usually, the names are created by adding "-ya", "ochka" or "ushka" to the end of the name; generally, the longer the nickname, the more intimate the relationship.

Example: Andrei Andreyevich (formal), Andrei (casual), Andrushka (very close), Andrushochka or Andrushenka (extremely close).

Sometimes, however, the nickname does not resemble the original name at all. For example, Sasha is the short form for Alexander, Vova for Vladimir.

To satisfy your curiosity, the following are popular nicknames (in parentheses). Anastasia (Nastya), Anatolyi (Tolia, Tolik), Anna (Hanna, Ania), Boris (Borya), Dmitri (Dima, Dimochka), Elizaveta (Liza), Ivan (Vanya, Vanechka), Larisa (Lalya, Lara), Natalia (Natasha), Oleg (Olezhka), Olga (Olya, Lyolya), Pavel (Pasha), Pyotor (Petya), Sergei (Seryozha), Stepan (Styopa), Vadim (Vadik), Vasily (Vasya), and Viktor (Vitya).

Finally, we have the last name. There are countless Russian last names, with the most popular accounting

for mere percentages of the population. This means that it is simply not practical to try and learn the names and their meanings. (Unlike with Korea and China, which have perhaps five common surnames each). However, they do have one element in common: they tend to be either adjectives (generally ending in the letters “-y/sky” or “-in”), or similar to patronymics (ending in “-ov/ev”, etc).

In the adjective category, the meaning could literally be anything under the sun. (Tolstoy, for example, is form of the adjective meaning “fat”). The author Andrei Belyi’s

adopted last name is the adjective meaning White—an interesting choice for a pseudonym, considering the Civil War waged between the Whites and the Reds as he wrote.

Joseph Stalin (born in Georgia with the last name Dzhugashvili), chose his future last name to match the adjective meaning Steel—a choice whose significance was not lost on Soviet citizens.

Professions typically fall into this category as well, although they can also take the -ov/ev ending. For example, the name Boyarsky is derived from the title “Boyarin”, meaning landed gentry or nobility. (This was probably an undesirable last name during the revolution). Rasputin would also fit this form, deriving from the title “Rasputnik”, or libertine, and the corresponding adjective Rasputny, meaning profligate and licentious.

In the latter -ov/ev category, the names generally fit one of the following categories: male first names, animals, colors, or

cities of origin. Chernov contains the root word “Chyor”, which means black; Medvedev contains the root word “Medved” which means bear; Popov contains the root word “Pop” which means priest.

Nikita Krushchev’s last name is derived from the word for a European beetle, an agricultural pest. A bumbling politician from a peasant background, known in the US for his tours of the American heartland, his surname seems to fit his legacy.

Amusingly, Gorbachev is derived from the word Gorba, or hump. The adjective “gorbaty” means humpbacked, and the American nickname “Gorby” is the plural form, meaning multiple humps.



Portrait of Baroness Varvara Ivanovna Ikskul von Hildenbandt, by Ilya Repin, 1889

As the politician’s popularity plummeted in Russia near the end of the Cold War, it is unlikely that his last name was able to help elevate his standing.

Jewish last names are obvious to most Russians, and are worth noting as a clue to that individual’s place within that society. Some of the most common are Feldman, Shapiro, Friedman, Rabinovich, Brodsky, Zaslavsky, Kogan, Reznik, Kats, Goldshtein, Greenberg, and Kaplan. You should not automatically assume that the bearer of these names are active participants in their religious community, nor that they consider themselves to be oppressed. Yet, because religious identity- particularly Jewish affiliation- continues to be relevant in Russian society, it is good for you to be aware of the names.

The next time you see a Russian name, don’t be intimidated! Simply look for the markers- the endings of -y, -sky, -in, -ov/ev, -ovna/evna, and -ich. Sound it out and see if it sounds anything like the names that are already familiar to you. And, if you are especially ambitious, look up the root word to get a sense for the way that the name comes across to Russians. (You don’t even need to know the Cyrillic alphabet; you can go to an etymology site in English). At the very least, when you come across a Russian name, you will be a little less lost than before. 🍷

AUTHORS ON TOLSTOY

Anton Chekhov: I fear Tolstoy’s death. His death would leave a large empty space in my life. First, I have loved no man the way I have loved him. I am not a believer, but of all beliefs I consider his the closest to mine and most suitable for me. Second, when literature has a Tolstoy, it is easy and gratifying to be a writer. Even if you are aware that you have never accomplished anything, you don’t feel so bad, because Tolstoy accomplishes enough for everyone. His activities provide justification for the hopes and aspirations that are usually placed on literature. Third, Tolstoy stands firm, his authority is enormous, and as long as he is alive bad taste in literature, all vulgarity in its brazen-faced or lachrymose varieties, all bristly and resentful vanity will remain far in the background. His moral authority alone is enough to maintain what we think of as literary trends and schools at a certain minimal level. If not for him, literature would be a flock without a shepherd or an unfathomable jumble.

(a letter to M.O. Menshikov,
28 January 1900)

Further Reading

***Anna in the Tropics* by Nilo Cruz**

For a theatrical allusion and extension of the romanticism of *Anna Karenina*

***Lectures on Russian Literature* by Vladimir Nabokov**

If you are interested in literary theory and criticism

***Tolstoy: A Biography* by A.N. Wilson**

Further reading on the life and writing of Leo Tolstoy

Discussion Questions

1. It has become common practice for popular books to become movies, and there have been 13 film adaptations of *Anna Karenina*. What makes a story better for the stage than for the screen? Do you think *Anna* is better on stage, or on film?
2. *Anna Karenina* is full of complex and often volatile relationships. Which relationship do you find most compelling?

Group Activities

Think of your favorite book or story, in small groups talk about how you would adapt that story into a play – what would have to be cut, and how you would portray the action of the prose. Meet back in a larger group and discuss.



Tolstoy with his grandchildren, c. 1900