



The Last Station

A Novel of Tolstoy's Last Year

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As Leo Tolstoy's life draws to a tumultuous close, his tempestuous wife and most cunning disciple are locked in a whirlwind battle for the great man's soul. Torn between his professed doctrine of poverty and chastity and the reality of his enormous wealth and thirteen children, Tolstoy dramatically flees his home, only to fall ill at a tiny nearby rail station. The famous (and famously troubled) writer believes he is dying alone, unaware that over a hundred newspapermen camp outside awaiting hourly reports on his condition.

Jay Parini moves deftly between a colorful cast of characters to create a stunning portrait of one of the world's most treasured authors. Dancing between fact and fiction, **The Last Station** is a brilliant and moving literary performance.

The Last Station: A Novel of Tolstoy's Last Year Details

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Author : Jay Parini

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Czarny Pies says

The Last Station which examines the personal conflicts in the household of Leo Tolstoy is the fruit of a simple brilliant idea by Jay Parini. Leo Tolstoy was at the end of his life the most famous writer of his time and an extremely rich man. He was surrounded by group of ruthless friends and equally ruthless family members who all wanted a piece of him and his fortune. Everyone in the circle wrote well and kept diaries. Parini takes the stories from these diaries to compose a single cogent narrative that describes how Tolstoy was harassed out of his own home and died on the run in at a remote railway station in Southern Russia under the watch of a huge international press corps that was chasing the story.

Parini invents nothing. If anything he refrains from using much of the most lurid material available to him. This novel is fascinating to read. It is the work of a skilled hand who uses the highly noxious material available to him with admirable discretion. This is very fine writing.

Make a point of downloading the movie with Christopher Plummer and Helen Miren which is very faithful to the letter and the spirit of this outstanding novel.

Andrew Darling says

In a secondhand bookshop in Naples, Jay Parini (novelist, poet, biographer, scholar) chanced upon the diary of Valentin Bulgakov, Tolstoy's secretary during the final year of the great man's life. Parini subsequently discovered that diaries were also kept (and later published) by numerous other members of Tolstoy's circle. From these, he has crafted a magnificent fictionalised account of the events which led up to Tolstoy abandoning his wife and his home, and to end up dying in a railway stationmaster's house in a village in the middle of nowhere, Russia. Even for someone like me who has never read a page of Tolstoy, this is a gripping, exciting, extraordinary story, revealing so much about the creative process, about political and theological philosophy, about mental illness, and about Russia before the revolution. I now want to read all of Parini's work - particularly his biographies of Robert Frost and John Steinbeck. And I now feel slightly less bad about losing my life's savings in a disastrous secondhand bookshop business in a back street in Yorkshire; I don't remember a visit from Jay Parini, but I suppose it's just possible that a book from my shop kindled a similar literary enterprise; that's a thought that might comfort me a little as I contemplate the financial wreckage.

Jennifer (JC-S) says

This novel is based on the last year of Leo Tolstoy's life. By combining fact and fiction, Jay Parini provides both an interesting novel and an interpretation of a fascinating man. I doubt that I'll watch the movie: Mr Parini's imagery is all the visual interpretation I need.

Roger Brunyate says

The Passing of a Lion

I bought this book after seeing a trailer for the new movie starring Christopher Plummer as Leo Tolstoy in the final year of his life and Helen Mirren as his embattled wife. It was immediately clear that these were fine roles for two great actors; was the movie based on an equally great book?

In some ways, it did not need to be, for the greatness was already there in Tolstoy's writings and example. In the second part of his life, following the inclinations of his own Levin in *Anna Karenina*, he took up a simpler life in the country, working alongside the peasants and at least attempting to renounce his wealth. In 1910, when Parini introduces him to us, he is living at his estate of Yasnaya Polyana surrounded by a virtual commune of Tolstoyans (one of several such communities in Russia and abroad) almost worshiping the master and trying to live by his tenets of chastity, poverty, and peace. For Tolstoy himself, this involved many contradictions; the still-married father of numerous children was an unlikely prophet of celibacy, and Russia's most celebrated author might live simply but was certainly not poor. There were also great tensions with his wife, Sofya Andreyvna (Sonya), who was unwilling to renounce the comforts she felt she was due as Countess Tolstoy and mourned the distancing of the affections of her once-beloved husband.

Much as Michael Shaara had done in his Gettysburg novel *The Killer Angels*, Parini tells the story of Tolstoy's final year through a series of different voices: his wife Sonya, his daughter Sasha, Makovitsky his doctor, Chertkov his closest disciple and agent, and his new secretary Bulgakov; there are also letters and diary entries by Tolstoy himself and three poems by the author. Most of this is based on actual documentary material, but Parini is most effective, I think, when he most uses his own imagination as a novelist. Sonya's reminiscences of their courtship, for example, have a grace that offsets the mentally ill woman she eventually became. Sasha's service as her father amanuensis and ally is humanized by the warmth of a growing love for another woman. And Bulgakov's arrival at the estate is delicious, as an avowed celibate who immediately falls under the spell of one of the master's more attractive acolytes, a worldly-wise young woman called Masha.

The main downsides are that it can be hard to get one's bearings at first, some of the switches between novel and documentary are a bit abrupt, and the book tends to be rather episodic; I have noticed this problem in other biographical novels such as *The Master*, Colm Toibin's book about Henry James. Towards the end, though, when the 82-year-old Tolstoy finally abandons his wife and home to set out as a wanderer, only to fall ill at a tiny railroad station, the historical events carry everything on their tide. The book offers a fascinating insight into the character of this literary lion turned lamb, and I am sure that a good screenplay will smooth out the few rough edges.

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LATER: Having just seen the movie, I certainly think that its evocative setting and the warmth of the central performances gives it a rich coherence that the book does not quite have, with its many discussions and changing points of view. The only part of Parini's story that I really miss is the lesbian relationship involving Sasha, but I can see why this had no place in the screenplay.

James says

This is a wonderful evocation of Tolstoy's last days, the people surrounding him and the aura created by the event. He was considered not only Russia's greatest living writer, but a powerful religious figure---more revered and beloved than the Tsar. Disciples sought him out on almost a daily basis, yet Tolstoy himself was torn between his aspirations to religious asceticism and his enormous wealth.

Parini captures all the excitement and intrigue of the last days for this literary icon wealthy man who, ironically, had no interest in the very wealth that he had amassed. The story tells of a battle for control of his soul, heart, and money. A battle between his wife and chief adviser, Chertkov. Each chapter in the book is written as if in the first person by six different voices, including Tolstoy himself, Sophia, Vladimir Chertkov (Tolstoy's companion and promoter of his work) and Tolstoy's secretary, Valentin Bulgakov. His wife, Sophia, is portrayed showing signs of hysteria and paranoia as she tried to protect her families inheritance from the group of Tolstoyans formed around Vladimir Chertkov, who felt that the great man's legacy belonged to the world.

The story is based on the real diary of Tolstoy's secretary, Bulgakov, and it reads like a thriller with a denouement when Tolstoy flees toward the Caucasus to, hopefully, die alone. He only gets as far as a stationmaster's house in the small town of Astapovo. There the public gawkers and the press wait for him to die. While it helps to have some familiarity with Tolstoy's earlier years this is still a great read for those who do not. Just as Tolstoy was larger than life as a writer, he becomes, in death, a mythic figure.

Kathy says

The story of Tolstoy's running away from home at the end of his life is well known. This particular version has been made into a movie with award-winning stars, so I was curious . . . and disappointed. First of all, I was slightly annoyed that the main character was called Leo Nicholaevich rather than the Russian Lev Nicholaevich. Secondly, it is difficult to understand Lev and Sofia's alleged estrangement unless you know a lot more about their backgrounds, their marriage, and their personalities than this book explains.

On the other hand, completing this book compelled me to read two other books that I already had in my private library including "The Diary of Sofia Tolstoy," a really excellent translation with good footnotes. Now I'm curious about the movie; a good director could do a lot to flesh out the sketchy characters and motivations in the book.

GUD Magazine says

Parini's *The Last Station* is a study of the end of Russian author Leo Tolstoy's life. You don't need to be a fan of Tolstoy to enjoy it--you don't even need to have read any of his novels. This book stands on its own merits.

Told in multiple first person narratives, the book explores how the various players see themselves and each other, enabling the reader to make up their own mind about their characters and motives. Personally, I came to like Tolstoy's long-suffering wife Sofya Andreyevna the best, if only because all the other characters are ranged against her. She's depicted by them as insane, hysterical, controlling, and I don't know what else,

when all she wants is to secure the royalties from Tolstoy's work to their descendants. This simple--some might say, laudable--ambition finds her ranged against her husband, their daughter Sasha, and various of Tolstoy's adherents and hangers-on. As it becomes obvious to her that she's failed, she rages in various frightening--and impotent--ways, and finds herself excluded from her husband's deathbed. The winners write the history: she drove Tolstoy from his lifetime home; she wouldn't let him die in peace. But Parini makes sure Sofya's voice is also heard.

Russia stands on the brink of momentous change, but this novel, like Tolstoy's own work, is more about the personal than the political. Tolstoy may despise the luxury in which he lives, but he's unable to break away from it. He may wish to make the grand gesture of leaving his work to the nation, but he does it in secret, fearing a confrontation with his wife. What we see is a man who's lionised by everyone around him--except Sofya--but who is too weak to live up to their perception of him. Yet his feet of clay go unobserved. He's already an icon, no longer a man. All that's left to him, therefore, is to die.

Parini writes well, and does a good job of distinguishing the various narrators--Sofya, Tolstoy himself, their daughter Sasha, Tolstoy's new secretary Bulgakov, his doctor Makovitsky, and the scary Chertkov, the leader of Tolstoy's fan club. The most likeable character is Bulgakov, whose love affair troubles him only a little in the light of one of the leading tenets of Tolstoyism: celibacy. He's more worried about the mission Chertkov has given him: to spy on Tolstoy and report back. Like Tolstoy himself, his solution is to obfuscate. He begins a tentative friendship with Sofya, but soon adopts the majority view of her.

Interspersed in the narrative are some of the author's original poems. If it is ironic that I found myself skipping them just like I skipped Tolstoy's reflections on the nature of history in *War and Peace*, I'm not convinced that the irony was intentional. On the whole, I didn't feel that the poems belonged--they broke up the narrative and disturbed the fictive dream.

That reservation notwithstanding, this is a highly readable novel which gives an insight into the nature of illustriousness--and its price.

Menna says

This novel tells the story of life at Yasnaya Polyana during the last year of Leo Tolstoy's life. Surrounded by his children, secretary, hysterical wife, and disciples that idolize him, we catch a glimpse of a very stressful time of the writer's long life. The chapters are cleverly told from the points of view of different members of Tolstoy's inner circle, and you can't help but sympathize to some extent with every character -- no matter how badly they are portrayed from the POV of another character.

If you are looking for a biography of Tolstoy's life or a deep discussion of his philosophy, this is not the book for you. This is a book about a dysfunctional marriage, a battle between moral beliefs and responsibilities, and, obviously, death. However, Jay Parini's writing is somewhat dull and the book felt longer than it actually is.

K.D. Absolutely says

It's about the final years of Leo Tolstoy. These final years include the dispute on who should own the works (*War and Peace*, *Anna Karenina*, etc) and the riches of the famous Russian novelist: his wife or his minions

who claim that his works belong to the people. The story of this final years is said to be one of the "saddest" in literary world." And this adjective almost always make me run to the nearby bookstore and get myself a copy of the book. I am a sucker for saddest books.

This is indeed a sad book. It's about death. It's about love. It's about being left alone. It's about the people you're leaving, who you all love, fighting for your wealth and legacy. You all love them and you are torn between what you feel and what you believe in. Between your personal life and the people whose right you are fighting for. Jay Parini satisfactorily captured the emotions of the people surrounding Leo Tolstoy at the age of 83 denouncing wealth and government in favor of his extreme moralistic and ascetic views that led to excommunication from the Russian Orthodox Church in 1901. Oh, never mind the excommunication, I say to myself, his works on non-violence particularly *The Kingdom of God is Within You* inspired the non-revolution works of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. And of course, his works are considered as the best even by other famous novelists like Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Gustave Flaubert, Anton Chekhov, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Thomas Mann, William Faulkner and Vladimir Nabokov (although he hated War and Peace). I would not mind to be excommunicated, if any of these people have praised my *non-existent* works.

Parini's writing is far from the experience that I had reading *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*. This book, first published in 1990, uses contemporary English and it lacks the distinct flavor and cadence of an originally-written-in-Russian novel. Not sure whether this is good or bad but when I began reading, I was expecting to be bewildered and relive the beautiful experience of reading Tolstoy novels. However, after a few pages, Parini took me into Tolstoy's estate at Yasnaya Polyana and I was mesmerized I would not want to come out anymore.

Each of the 42 chapters is narrated by the characters, bearing their names as chapter titles, surrounding the dying Tolstoy. Parini gave each of them his or her own voice. However, there is no one narrated directly by Tolstoy himself except when the character quotes Tolstoy directly or by reading his letter or diary entries. I did not feel this to be a shortcoming though, as Parini chose the best memorable lines from Tolstoy's many records or works. Oh, and there are these beautiful poems that are contained in chapters with heading "J.P." and first I was wondering who was he among the characters. Until the very last chapter. Some kind of style there, Jay Parini!

I also liked the way that Parini used the death scene of Ivan Ilych to describe Leo Tolstoy's own death. Very clever and the prose almost moved me to tears. Ironically, when I came to that part, it was Christmas morning and what am I doing all sad and gloomy on the bright Christmas morning of our Saviour's birth!

But then again, I am a sucker for sad novels. So, pray why not if it makes me happy.

Thanks to Maria for giving me a copy of this book, first in my wish list, during the recent Christmas Party!

Trudy says

I had high hopes for this book as the cover quotes Gore Vidal saying, "One of the best historical novels written in the last twenty years." However, every character in the book had at least two different Russian names, so I was halfway through before figuring out who was who! Well written but not satisfying.

Sue says

Huge disappointment, especially because the subject - Tolstoy - is himself the author of one of my favorite novels. However this book is so dull that I couldn't wait for the old geezer to kick the bucket so I could get on to something better. Parini calls his book is a novel, but it's more like a documentary: the characters are flat and there is little narrative pace. The point of view shifts from one character to another as we look into the "diaries" of each one, but they all speak in the same flat voice. Therefore it's impossible to tell with whom the author's sympathies lay. I think it was supposed to be Tolstoy, but I found Parini's Tolstoy an ingrate and a hypocrite; my sympathy lay with his crazy wife.

Silvery says

0,5 estrellas

Matt says

This little Novel about the last year of Tolstoy's life is certainly worth the read.

Told from multiple perspectives the plot revolves around the conflict between Tolstoy's wife and his disciples over the great author's legacy and the copyright to his works.

Depending on whose point of view strikes you as most accurate, Tolstoy is either a great man fighting his flaws, a misguided extremist failing to accept his humanity, or a hero who, despite his flaws, stands for values that we should all cherish and internalize. These values are egalitarianism, non-violence, justice, and basic human dignity.

One of the most interesting perspectives in the novel is that of Tolstoy's wife. She is concerned with practical things. Managing the household, protecting her children's inheritance. Frequently such characters come off negatively in writings of those committed to the spiritual and ethical life. To some extent Tolstoy, and even more so his disciples, see her that way. But her portrayal is a very human one.

The values that Mrs. Tolstoy stands for are given a full defense. This is often left out of books about men like Tolstoy, it is a very fine aspect of the novel.

Also interesting is the role of sex in the Characters' lives. In later life Tolstoy embraced celibacy. The logic behind embracing celibacy, according to this novel, is that sex is too animal for the higher spiritual life. The Characters who have sex, however, end up concluding the opposite; that sex is a kind of spiritual ecstasy and union, whereas celibacy an unhealthy denial of life.

This "pro-sex" theme is hardly original. It is, however, nicely done, and fits in well with Parini's critique of Tolstoyism in general.

It remains unclear what Parini wants us to think of Tolstoy's values and ideals. Some seem noble and

admirable, such as Tolstoy's non-violence, his passion for social justice and rights for the poor and working classes. Others seem deeply problematic, such as the aforesaid celibacy. Tolstoyism as a whole is, however, neither clearly bad nor good. Perhaps we are to make our own judgments.

As I mentioned above, it depends on which character is talking with us ... the true value of Tolstoyism is a matter of perspective.

Chrissie says

Was the book enjoyable? No. (Do you enjoy watching family brawls?)

Was it interesting? Yes, definitely!

You do laugh sometimes.

After reading this book I felt I better understood Leo Tolstoy and who he had become at the end of his life. If you are looking for an in-depth biography of his entire life, look elsewhere. This book only looks at the philosophy and thoughts central to this writer at the very end of his life, right before his death at 82. You look at the last chapter of his life. It is about his relationships with those in his family and his followers.

L.T. and his "disciples" proclaimed the virtues of celibacy, chastity and sexual abstinence. He despised wealth and luxury. He praised religious piety. But then you compare these 'glorious virtues' to how he in reality lived his life. He was from the aristocracy and lived in wealth. He had 13 children and was promiscuous. He was sexually drawn to both men and women. . So his actions before his death, were they a refutation of past errors or were they simply hypocritical blather? The family members form two camps, those on the side of their mother and those supporting their father. The readers of this book are bystanders watching the turmoil, skirmishes and final battle between the two sides. Family arguments can't get much worse, and we all know how terrible these can be. This is the central theme of the book: Leo's wife, Sonya (Sofya Andreyevna) felt that the proceeds from his books should go to the family. The new will changed this. She fought this with all her heart. She took it as a statement of her husband's lack of love for her and their children. From this core problem the love that did exist between Sonya and Leo was smothered. You glimpse their initial love only at the beginning of the book. From then on the wounds escalate into jealousy, misunderstanding and hatred. Love and hate are two sides of the same coin. I felt that the tedious bickering leading to the final dénouement could have been edited. The book does end with a huge crash, so I almost thought of adding another star. But no, I didn't.

Beware, the names of the individuals can be confusing. Everyone has at least four names, and often you are only given the initials. Each chapter is given the name of the individual expressing their point of view. You must know who you are listening to. Each one judges the others differently. From all these divergent opinions you, the reader, can draw your own conclusions. If you think I am joking by the difficulty of keeping track of who is who, read this from page 141. Bulgakov is expressing his views:

'Are you well, Valentin Fedorovich?' Sergeyenko asked, putting a hand on my forearm as I was about to go to bed.

'I have a mild headache, Leo Petrovich. Nothing serious.'

'Keep well, my boy. You are doing excellent work with Leo Nikolayevich. He has communicated this to

Chertkov, who asked me to pass the word along. '

'Tell Vladimir Grigorevich that I am honored.'

So we have six different names here. Is that 6 different people? No! Only four, because:

Vladimir Grigorevich Chetkov is one,

Valentin Fedorovich Bulgakov is the second,

Leo Nikolaevich Tolstoy is the third and

Leo Petrovich Sergeyenko the fourth. These four have in addition each their own nickname. You have to remember four names for every individual. I had to get out a pen and paper..... Honestly, after a while you get the hang of it. :0)

Although what I have said might make you think this is all just too depressing, but that is wrong since there is humor in the writing. Sasha (Alexandra Lyvovna), L.T.'s daughter who faithfully supported her father and typed his documents in the "Remington Room" says the following of her sister Tanya:

Tanya, my saintly sister, heard about the latest marital brushfires , and decided to visit us. She is like a wandering bucket in search of a fire. (page 257)

You couldn't survive the arguments if there were no humor.

After reading the book, you are knowledgeable about the end of Tolstoy's life, you can better judge the opposing viewpoints, you have struggled with names and never-ending family disputes and laughed too.

Read with Sophia Tolstoy. Here is another possibility: Henri Troyat has written a book entitled Tolstoy. I cannot get the title link to appear.....

Nancy Chappell says

I loved the movie but probably should have read this first. Intrigued by Tolstoy and his wife, though the end of their 50 year marriage was fraught with anger, hurt, disappointment (to say the least). Ah...famous men... certainly leave behind frustrated and lonely wives. It was interesting that the author read diaries of all the main characters and gave us their varied views of often the same incident.

