Some people say Anna Karenina is the single greatest novel ever written, which makes about as much sense to me as trying to determine the world's greatest color. But there is no doubt that Anna Karenina, generally considered Tolstoy's best book, is definitely one ripping great read. Anna, miserable in her loveless marriage, does the barely thinkable and succumbs to her desires for the dashing Vronsky. I don't want to give away the ending, but I will say that 19th-century Russia doesn't take well to that sort of thing.

My Personal Review:
According to Tolstoy, the genesis of Anna Karenina was derived from three specific events: (1) An idea for a story Tolstoy developed in 1870 about a woman who deserts her husband for another man, based, in part, on the life of his sister, Marya; (2) a newspaper story concerning the mistress of one of Tolstoy's neighbors, who, feeling only despair at being abandoned by her lover, hurled herself under a train; and (3) a sentence from Pushkin's Tales of the Balkins (The guests were arriving at the country house...), that Tolstoy read by chance one day in 1873. Supposedly, this sentence from Pushkin fueled Tolstoy's imagination to such a degree that he completed a first draft of Anna Karenina in only three weeks.

A novel about the meaning of life and the role happiness does or does not play in it, Anna Karenina is the story of a married woman's adulterous affair with Count Vronsky. As foreshadowed in the books early pages, the affair ends tragically, for both Anna and Vronsky.
The novel (which Tolstoy's contemporary, Dostoyevsky, considered a perfect work of art), also tells the story of Constantine Levin, a gentleman farmer whose lifelong pursuit of happiness and fulfillment culminates, not in his long-awaited marriage to Kitty Shcherbatskaya, but with the advice of a simple peasant about living rightly, in God's way.
From a few simple, yet melodramatic events (and the depths of a dizzyingly fecund imagination), Tolstoy fashioned a beautiful, profound and enduring novel dealing with stark questions of both life and religious faith as seen through the eyes of the farmer, Levin. Also a morality play, Anna
Karenina delves deeply into the damaging effects of society's ostracization, especially regarding the characters of Anna and Vronsky. Many consider Anna Karenina Tolstoy's most personal work and, indeed, many of the novel's scenes do mirror Tolstoy's relationship with his own wife, Sonya. Levin's courtship of Kitty and his expressions of love for her, written with chalk on a table, are reflective of Tolstoy's courtship of Sonya. Even more evocative of Tolstoy, himself, is the soul-wrenching scene in which Levin gives Kitty his diaries to read, exposing his very soul to the woman he has come to love so completely.

The final scenes of the novel, especially Levin's intense search for the answer to the meaning of existence are reflective of Tolstoy's own search, dramatically documented in his beautiful memoir, A Confession, and considered by many to be one of the most truthful, agonizing and soul-searching statements of authentic spirituality.

The publication of Anna Karenina coincided with the end of Tolstoy's life of material and emotional luxury. From this point on, he concentrated on a deeper and more mature quest. Although he would go on to write the beautiful novel, Resurrection, and The Death of Ivan Ilyich, a true existential masterpiece, Tolstoy's career reached its zenith in the character of Anna Karenina and her seemingly irrational embrace of death. Anna's husband, Karenin, is often overlooked, although he is equally compelling; a complex and emotional character who briefly embraces the doctrine of Christian forgiveness in his emotional denial over the loss of Anna.

No doubt the second most famous line of the book is Vronsky's startling realization: It showed him (Vronsky) the eternal error men make in imagining that happiness consists in the realization of their desires.

Almost epic in scope and poignantly detailed, Anna Karenina represents the perfect balance of drama, morality, and philosophical inquiry. How are we to live our lives, the novel asks, when all the illusions we hold so close to our heart have been stripped away? What are we to believe in and cling to?

With its emphasis on drama over polemic, Anna Karenina thus embodies art of the highest order. In its portrayal of man's timeless struggle to make sense out of life while coming to terms with death, both its theme and its characters remain, now and forever, timeless.

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