

Tolstoy's *War and Peace*

Soap opera, epic masterpiece, neither, or both?

Course #	21FTOY
Format:	Seminar
Moderators:	Nancy Coiner Kendra Dahlquist
Date and Time:	Monday, 9:30-11:30 AM 10 weeks, starting 9/27/2021
Format:	Online
Maximum number of participants:	18
Auditors accepted:	Yes, up to 2

Purpose: We will read *War and Peace* together, with plenty of background presentations and discussion to make it come alive as a work of art and life.

Description: According to Isaac Babel, "If life could write by itself, it would write like Tolstoy."

War and Peace is a huge, sweeping narrative, part history and part fiction, which describes Napoleon's attempt to conquer Russia. Centered on the lives of four aristocratic families between 1805 and 1812, it includes complex characters based on Tolstoy's parents and grandparents, who spoke French and wore French fashions but passionately resisted Napoleon's attack.

Yes, it's long, with a cast of hundreds. But almost all readers find that, after the opening chapters, the story and characters carry them along irresistibly. We witness the burning of Moscow, young people making life-altering mistakes, the glory and horror of war. Yet (as Woolf notes) "there is always at the centre of all the brilliant and flashing petals . . . this scorpion, 'Why live?'" It's a brilliant, unsettling mix.

Background presentations and lively discussions will help us enter this exhilarating work of historical and philosophical fiction.

Role of participants: Participants will read approximately 150 pages of *War and Peace* a session. They will have the choice of giving a presentation (on Tolstoy, Russian Orthodoxy, Napoleon's career, the battle of Austerlitz, etc.) or leading a discussion.

Resources: There are many excellent translations with good notes. I will send out advice about which translations will best suit individual readers. There are decent films, too, which I imagine people will watch individually.

About the Moderators: As an enthusiastic amateur of the great 19th-century Russian writers, Nancy has read and taught *War and Peace* several times. Kendra is an avid reader, has been a member of LIR for eight years, and has participated in several literature seminars.