One of the biggest hurdles for people just starting to read Russian literature is the large amount of characters and their complicated Russian names. I thought that it would be handy to make a Who's Who of Anna Karenina. Because that's an excellent novel to start with and it would be a huge shame if you didn't finish it because of the names. I'll give a short description of each character and their (nick)name and I'll try not to give too much away.

**STIVA**, Prince Stepan Arkadievitch OBLONSKY. He is Anna's brother and Dolly's husband. His first name is Stepan, but intimi call him Stiva. His father's name was Arkadi, hence the patronymic Arkadievitch. Tolstoy usually refers to him as Oblonsky, and sometimes as Stiva or Stepan Arkadievitch. Oblonsky is a central character in the novel, he connects all the other characters. He knows everyone and is on friendly terms with everyone. His closest friend is Levin. He's a real bon vivant.

**DOLLY**, Princess Darya Alexandrovna Oblonskaya, née Shtcherbatskaya. She's Kitty's sister. At that time it was fashionable to have an English nickname. Her patronymic and last name take the female form: Alexandrovna Oblonskaya. She is usually called Dolly, but also Darya or Darya Alexandrovna, but never Oblonskaya. The Oblonskys form a hectic family with lots of children. They live above their means and it's Dolly who keeps things together.

**ANNA**, Anna Arkadievna Karenina, née Oblonskaya. She has the same father as Stiva and thus the same patronymic. She is married to Karenin. Anna is probably the best known character from Russian literature. She is the personification of the double standard: her brother has an affair and gets away with it; she does the same and is shunned by society. Her turbulent life never ceased to captivate readers.

**LEVIN**, Konstantin Dmitrievitch Levin. The hero of the novel. Tolstoy adorned him with many autobiographical character traits. He's considered a bit of an eccentric, because he prefers to live in the countryside instead of in the city. Those who know him well, know he has a heart of gold. He's in love with Kitty. Like the Shtcherbatskys, the Levins are an old aristocratic family from Moscow. He's fairly rich.

**KITTY**, (the young) Princess Ekaterina Alexandrovna Shtcherbatskaya, also called Katya. In spite of what the title suggests, Kitty is the real heroine of this novel. She's the youngest daughter and after some confusion she finds her true love, and has a fairytale wedding. She too has a heart of gold and quickly becomes the reader's favourite.

**VRONSKY**, Count Alexei Kirillovitch Vronsky. A very handsome and very wealthy officer. This eligible bachelor has a bossy mother. The reader can never quite see through him, but his overall impression is not so good.

**KARENIN**, Alexei (yes, there are two Alexeis) Alexandrovitch Karenin, Anna's husband and a very important politician in Petersburg. Alexei Alexandrovitch cares a lot about his good name. He is distant, a workaholic and extremely religious. In other words: a total bore.

The old Prince and Princess, the Shtcherbatskys. Although they bicker all the time, they are loving parents and it's a warm and close family.

Levin's brothers, Nikolai Dmitrievitch Levin and Sergey Ivanovitch Koznishev. Nikolai is an alcoholic who's in poor health, he lives with Masha. Their half brother Sergei is a famous writer and intellectual. Although Levin feels closer to Nikolai, he doesn't see Nikolai as often as Sergei, due to Nikolai's problems.

The Lvovs, Natalia Alexandrovna Lvova and Arseni Lvov. Natalia is Dolly and Kitty's sister. She and her husband, a diplomat, have two children.

The old countess Vronskaya, Vronsky's bossy mother and Vronsky's brother Alexander. Vronsky is not exactly close with his family, he is as polite with them as with complete strangers, if not even more so.
Yashvin, described by Tolstoy as “a gambler and a rake, a man not merely without moral principles, but of immoral principles,” he’s Vronsky’s closest friend in the regiment, which of course says a lot about Vronsky.

Countess Betty, she’s Vronsky’s aunt and Anna’s friend. Countess Lydia, she’s Karenin’s friend. Both countesses like to gossip, but Lydia belongs to the highest Petersburg circles. And then there’s Kitty’s friend Countess Nordston.

Agafea Mihalovna, Levin’s old nurse. Until Levin is married she’s his housekeeper. And that doesn’t mean that she’s the cleaning lady, but it means that she runs the household at Levin’s country estate. Nurses had a very special position in Russian aristocratic families, they were often looked after until they died, in return for their selfless devotion to the children.

Mademoiselle Varenka, Varvara Andreevna. She keeps the elderly Madame Stahl company and helps poor and ill people. She becomes Kitty’s good friend. Not to be confused with Princess Varvara, one of Anna’s friends.

Vassenka Veslovsky, a distant cousin of the Shtcherbatskys. A cheerful and enthusiastic young man with the tact of an hippopotamus.


The staff: Annushka, Anna’s maid; Kapitonitch, the Karenins’ porter and Seryozha’s great friend; Matvey, Oblonsky’s valet; Korney, Karenin’s valet; Lizaveta Petrovna, the midwife.

And finally the dogs: Laska, Levin’s dog and Krak, Oblonsky’s dog. They are clever and loyal hunting dogs and because Tolstoy employs the omniscient narrator technique, we know exactly what they are thinking. As a matter of fact you’ll think that Tolstoy had a pensieve so that he could look inside your head too. This is a novel to be enjoyed by men just as much as by women, it is not without reason that it always ends up in the top 10 of the best books ever. Happy reading!