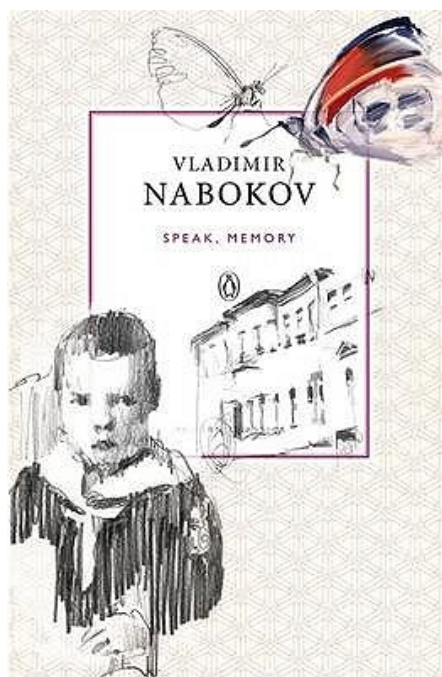




Speak, Memory

Vladimir Nabokov

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Speak, Memory

Vladimir Nabokov

Speak, Memory Vladimir Nabokov

'Speak, memory' said Vladimir Nabokov. And immediately there came flooding back to him a host of enchanting recollections - of his comfortable childhood and adolescence, of his rich, liberal-minded father, his beautiful mother, an army of relations and family hangers-on and of grand old houses in St Petersburg and the surrounding countryside in pre-revolutionary Russia. Young love, butterflies, tutors and a multitude of other themes thread together to weave an autobiography which is itself a work of art.

This Penguin Modern Classic edition contains an appendix, 'Chapter sixteen', a pseudo-review written by Nabokov in 1950 but only now published for the first time in paperback.

Speak, Memory was first published in 1951 as *Conclusive Evidence* and then assiduously revised and republished in 1966 under the title *Speak Memory, an Autobiography Revisited*.

Speak, Memory Details

Date : Published October 2000 by Penguin (first published 1951)

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Author : Vladimir Nabokov

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Genre : Autobiography, Memoir, Biography, Nonfiction, Classics, Cultural, Russia

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From Reader Review Speak, Memory for online ebook

Marco Tamborrino says

"Da allora in poi, per parecchi anni, finché scrivendo un romanzo non riuscii a liberarmi di quella feconda emozione, ho continuato a equiparare la perdita del mio paese alla perdita del mio amore."

Non ho trattato bene questo libro. Sono stato cattivo nei suoi confronti. L'ho iniziato verso la fine dello scorso anno scolastico, poi l'ho ripreso verso la fine di questo e infine oggi l'ho concluso. È un libro meraviglioso, non c'è dubbio. Tuttavia la sua pesantezza lo rende una lettura di nicchia, un pezzo da collezione. Paradossalmente, dovrebbero leggerlo coloro che hanno letto tutto di Nabokov e vogliono conoscere la sua vita negli aspetti più intimi. Dico paradossalmente perché io sono escluso da questo gruppo. Non ho letto nient'altro di Nabokov, nemmeno la celebre *Lolita* (che ho comunque acquistato tempo fa).

Non ha senso fare un riassunto di un'autobiografia, quindi mi limiterò a fare qualche commento del tutto personale sugli avvenimenti che descrive l'autore.

Vorrei cominciare con questo lungo passo:

"Ogni qualvolta comincio a pensare al mio amore per qualcuno, ho l'abitudine di tracciare immediatamente dei raggi che vanno da quel sentimento d'amore - dal mio cuore, da un tenero nucleo personale - a punti mostruosamente remoti dell'universo. Qualche cosa mi costringe a misurare il grado di consapevolezza del mio amore confrontandolo con cose inimmaginabili e incalcolabili quali il comportamento di una nebulosa (la cui stessa lontananza sembra già di per sé una forma di follia), gli spaventosi trabocchetti dell'eternità, l'inconoscibile oltre l'ignoto, l'impotenza, il freddo, i nauseanti viluppi e compenetrazioni di spazio e tempo. È un'abitudine perniciosa, ma è più forte di me. Si può paragonare all'incontrollabile insistere della lingua di un insonne su un dente scheggiato, nella notte della bocca - così facendo la lingua si scortica ma non per questo smette. Ho conosciuto persone che, dopo aver sfiorato senza volerlo qualche cosa - lo stipite di una porta, una parete -, erano costrette a passare attraverso tutta una serie rapidissima e sistematica di contatti manuali con varie superfici della stanza prima di tornare a un'esistenza equilibrata. Niente da fare; devo sapere dove mi trovo, devo sapere dove siete voi, tu e mio figlio. Quando questa esplosione d'affetto silenziosa, al rallentatore, si verifica dentro di me dispiegando le sue frange struggenti e sopraffacendomi con il senso di qualche cosa molto più vasto, molto più duraturo e possente dell'accumulo di materia o di energia in qualsiasi cosmo immaginabile, allora la mia mente non può che darsi un pizzicotto per capire se è davvero sveglia. Devo fare un rapido inventario dell'universo, proprio come chi in sogno cerca di rimediare all'assurdità della sua situazione accertandosi che sta solo sognando. Devo fare in modo che tutto lo spazio e tutto il tempo partecipino alla mia emozione, al mio amore mortale così da eliminare lo spigolo della sua caducità, aiutandomi a combattere l'avvilimento, il ridicolo e l'orrore estremi di aver sviluppato un'infinità di sensazioni e di pensieri all'interno di un'esistenza finita."

Secondo questo passo è di una levatura stilistica impressionante. E trasmette un'emozione sottile, mezza addormentata, un'emozione che ti entra dentro e lì ci rimane per tutto il libro, per poi risvegliarsi alla fine e riempirti il cuore.

In questo libro io ho imparato ad amare una Russia che non ho mai visto e che ormai non c'è più. Nabokov ci parla della "Russia leggendaria", la Russia pre-rivoluzionaria, rovinata dalla crudeltà dei bolscevichi. Una Russia che lo costringe a fuggire e a passare vent'anni in esilio nell'Europa Occidentale (stabilendosi in seguito in America). Ci parla della Russia della sua infanzia, arricchendola di particolari. Ed è proprio dai particolari che parte per raccontare un evento. La sua caccia alle farfalle, l'amore per queste creature, le vite delle persone della sua famiglia, il suo primo amore, la sua istruzione, i suoi precettori e il rapporto con suo padre. Le cose più belle arrivano verso la fine: il racconto di come è iniziato il suo amore per la letteratura, il

modo in cui lui trovava le parole e le formava nella sua mente e, infine, poche pagine finali sui primi tre anni di vita di suo figlio.

Ci sono miliardi di dettagli e di voli stilistici meravigliosi, nelle pagine di questa autobiografia. È un piccolo gioiello di uno dei più grandi scrittori del '900. Un gioiello, intimo, personale e profondamente russo come nient'altro al mondo. Indipendentemente dalla nostra ideologia, la Rivoluzione d'Ottobre ha praticamente ucciso la creatività culturale in Russia. E Nabokov lo sottolinea bene. Lui che *"datemi qualsiasi cosa, su un qualsiasi continente che assomigli alla campagna pietroburchese, e il mio cuore si scioglie"*. Lui ama questa Russia magica della sua giovinezza, la Russia nei cui boschi, d'estate, portava la sua prima ragazza. Tra i luoghi silvani dove facevano l'amore, di nascosto. Nabokov è, anche e soprattutto, un uomo di una tenerezza e sensibilità senza fine. L'accuratezza con cui racconta ogni cosa è immensa.

"Le sere d'estate della mia adolescenza, quando passavo pedalando davanti alla sua isbà, mi parlano ora con la sua voce. In un viottolo tra i campi, all'incrocio con la desolata strada maestra, io scendevo dalla bicicletta e l'appoggiavo a un palo del telegrafo. Un tramonto quasi terribile nel suo splendore indugiava in un cielo senza limiti. Tra gli ammassi che mutavano in modo impercettibile si riusciva a cogliere dettagli strutturali vivacemente colorati di organismi celesti, o fessure luminose in cumuli oscuri, o piatte spiagge eteree che parevano miraggi di isole deserte. Allora di tutto questo non sapevo che farmene (mentre ora lo so benissimo) - come sbarazzarmene, come trasformarlo in qualche cosa che può essere girato al lettore in caratteri a stampa perché sia lui a vedersela con il benedetto brivido d'emozione - e quella incapacità non faceva che aumentare il mio senso di oppressione. Un'ombra colossale cominciava a invadere i campi, e nella quiete assoluta i pali telegrafici ronzavano, e quei bruchi che si nutrono di notte scalavano il gambo della pianta prescelta. Rosicchia, rosicchia, rosicchia — avanzava, aggrappato allo stelo di una campanula, un bel bruco a strisce non riportato nello Spuler, lavorando di mandibole lungo il bordo della foglia più vicina che divorava secondo un comodo semicerchio, poi allungando di nuovo il collo e di nuovo curvandolo a mano a mano che si addentrava nella nitida superficie concava. Normalmente lo avrei fatto scivolare, con un frammento della sua piantina, in una scatoletta di fiammiferi e me lo sarei portato a casa affinché l'anno dopo si schiudesse in una Splendida Sorpresa, ma la mia testa era altrove. Zina e Colette, le mie compagne di giochi sulla spiaggia; la saltellante Louise; tutte quelle ragazzine alle feste, accese in volto, la fascia della cintura bassa sui fianchi, i capelli di seta; la languida contessa G., dama di mio cugino; Polen'ka, sorridente nell'angoscia dei miei nuovi sogni - si fondevano tutte insieme in qualcuno che non conoscevo ma che avrei presto incontrato."

Vorrei davvero avere la profondità di questo scrittore quando parlo di qualcosa che mi è successo. Ma quello che più voglio, leggendo queste pagine, è avere più immagini e più storie di quella Russia meravigliosa, così bella e così fragile - proprio perché bella -, destinata a cadere per il suo splendore. Vorrei vedere con gli occhi di Nabokov i luoghi della sua infanzia, i buffi personaggi che la affollano, gli insegnanti che ha avuto, i suoi parenti e i suoi fratelli.

Quando ho letto della sua fuga dalla Russia e del successivo esilio, mi si è stretto il cuore. Il Nabokov ventenne non si rese subito conto che quello sarebbe stato un addio definitivo. Per tutta la vita gli toccò convivere con una nostalgia e una malinconia profonde. Come quando dice che le lettere di Tamara, la ragazza della sua estate russa, sarebbero continuate ad arrivare in Crimea (dove si era inizialmente rifugiato con la famiglia dopo la fuga da San Pietroburgo) al suo indirizzo.

"Tamara, la Russia, i boschi incolti che sfumano in antichi giardini, le mie betulle, i miei abeti nordici, l'immagine di mia madre che si inginocchia carponi a baciare la terra ogni volta che per l'estate facciamo ritorno in campagna dalla città, et la montagne et la grand chène - tutte cose che un bel giorno il destino ha fatto su alla rinfusa e gettato a mare, tagliandomi fuori per sempre dalla mia adolescenza."

Non penso ci sia bisogno di aggiungere altro. È un libro su gran parte della vita di uno scrittore. È un libro sulla sua anima. Va letto con pazienza e amore, perché in fondo è proprio l'amore che muove la penna di

Nabokov mentre scrive. L'amore per i suoi ricordi.

"« *Perché la pioggia ci rendeva tanto allegri?* »"

Allycks says

This is, in my opinion, Nabokov's best work. The autobiography as a form suits Nabokov perfectly, as his novels are never so much about plot or 'big ideas,' just the intense poetic possibilities of language itself. So be forewarned, there is almost no useful information here. You may learn a thing or two about pre-Revolution Russia, a scrap of detail about his encounters with Joyce in Paris, or some tidbits about butterfly hunting, but really there's nothing to be learned, no story, no clues to why he wrote 'Lolita' or whatever. What you get is the greatest prose artist of the 20th Century at his finest. Nabokov takes the mildly interesting raw material of his own life and transforms it into luminous art.

Buck says

Vladimir Nabokov was the Niles Crane of 20th-century literature: snooty, fastidious, and comically inept at being a normal guy. (And it's part of his fastidiousness that he would have despised my handy, pop-culture analogy). Even his ailments had something snobbish about them. I mean, synesthesia? Who *has* that? And what kind of douche decides that sleep is too plebeian? Would it have been so hard to come down with herpes and depression like everyone else?

Needless to say, *Speak, Memory* is one of the most brilliant autobiographies ever written, and I'm just delaying the moment when I throw my panties on the stage along with every other reviewer here. But first I need to make fun of Nabokov a bit more. Six pages into his foreword, he tosses off this gag-inducing little metaphor:

I hope to write some day a "Speak on, Memory," covering the years 1940-1960 spent in America: the evaporation of certain volatiles and the melting of certain metals are still going on in my coils and crucibles.

That's a fairly standard trope, I guess: the artist as alchemist. What irritates me about it is the self-complacency it implies: this is the uptown equivalent of hanging a "Genius at Work" sign on your cubicle wall. It's tacky, not to mention unbearably precious. Also, wasn't alchemy discredited centuries ago as a bogus pseudo-science?

In one sense, though, the metaphor is well-chosen, because Nabokov really did view art as some kind of occult jiggery-pokery:

I discovered in nature the non-utilitarian delights that I sought in art. Both were a form of magic, both were a game of intricate enchantment and deception.

I dunno. It's not that I expect every artist to justify the ways of God to man, or forge the conscience of his race in the smithy of his soul (blech), or help me free my mind so that my ass may follow, but that strikes me as a depressingly sterile notion of art. Games, magic, deception: it all sounds like an elaborate Easter egg hunt. Or a Dungeons & Dragons marathon. Either way, it's something I grew out of a long time ago. And if you point out that Nabokov wrote *Lolita*, whereas I've written a bunch of book reports for a stupid website, I won't have much of a comeback for you. Except shut up.

I clearly have huge problems with some of the assumptions behind *Speak, Memory*, but the book itself is just so damn beautiful that I can't stay mad at it for long. People talk about Nabokov's style as if it were some glittering, rococo gush, but his elaborations are never merely ornamental: they're in the service of an almost preposterous precision. He wants to get it exactly right, and if that means ransacking the OED and piling up his clauses into syntactical Jenga towers – well, you'll just have to sit there and take it. Or go play Wii. The fact is, the world is so immeasurably complex, and our perceptions are so deliriously rich that even the most exhaustive representation of one tiny patch of reality can only be a gross simplification – a thing of sticks and squiggles, daubed by a gifted chimpanzee. Nabokov's prose is a bit less of a simplification than anyone else's, that's all. Meaning, he comes as close to honouring the riotous profusion of experience as any human being is likely to get.

There. I told you the panties would come off.

K.D. Absolutely says

Wow! This is one of the best memoirs I've ever read! Prior to this, top in my list were Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes* and Harry Bernstein's *The Invisible Wall: A Love Story That Broke Barriers*.

Vladimir Nabokov's *Speak, Memory* neither has that sorry circumstance of being a born in dirt-poor Irish family nor being a witness to a tragic love story between two people of different religions. Rather, the young Nabokov was the eldest child of a rich political couple residing on a big house (with lots of servants) alongside a prince house and a German embassy in St. Petersburg, Russia prior to the rise of Lenin and Stalin. As for his love life, being a rich politician son, he started having girlfriends at a young age of 13 or 15 with the girl he referred to as a "nymphet" that reminded me of his Dolores, his Lo-lee-ta.

So, why did I like this memoir? It's still the way Nabokov writes. The prose is clear but stylist, straightforward but not boring. His deep English vocabulary is exceptional considering that he lived most of his young life in Russia, Germany and France. Of course, based on the book, he first learned how to speak English than Russian (even if he was born in Russia) because of the many tutors that his father employed to educate him and his four siblings. It seems that in Russia during that time (1899 to 1920's), children of rich Russians were tutored at their homes prior to entering *gymnasiums* which was the equivalent of American high-school up to 2nd year of college.

I also enjoyed looking at the pictures properly interspersed in the right sections of the book. You first see the picture, read its caption. Then after reading the chapter, you have to go back to the picture and imagine how he or she reacted or handled the situation that you just read. Especially if the situation was tragic, you look at his or her eyes and ask the picture: "really? poor soul..." The people in those pictures were not the type that you would pity right away, don't get me wrong. They were the rich capitalist that had to flee Russia or they could have been killed by the Bolshevik armies. In other words, pitying them would only happen after you read their stories.

Oh, yes. Surprise. Surprise. Nabokov was also into chess. There is a nice quote about chess and fiction (novel). Here goes:

It should be understood that competition in chess problems is not really between White and Black but between the composer and hypothetical solver (just as in a first-rate work of fiction the real clash is not between the characters but between the author and the world), so that a great part of a problem's value is due to the number of "tries"- delusive opening moves, false scents, specious lines of play, astutely and lovingly prepared to lead the would-be solver astray.

Being snoopy, I was also hoping to get an answer to these questions:

Was Lolita autobiographical with he being Humbert Humbert? Did he fall in love with a 13-year old nymphet when he was already in his middle age?

Unfortunately, this memoir only covers up to the time that he was leaving Europe for U.S.A. Nabokov wrote *Lolita* when he was already in the US (it was published in 1955). He died at the age of 78 in 1977.

But he did fall in love to a 13-year old "nymphet" when he was also 13. But he wrote: *"Around that time, though, a real romantic adventure did come my way. I am now going to do something quite difficult, a kind of double somersault with a Welsh waggle (old acrobats will know what I mean), and I want complete silence, please."* End of the chapter.

Let's leave him at that. His personal life, including his true young love, should be respected.

But, wow!

????? ?????? says

[illegible]

“I confess I do not believe in time. I like to fold my magic carpet, after use, in such a way as to superimpose one part of the pattern upon another. Let visitors trip. And the highest enjoyment of timelessness -- in a landscape selected at random -- is when I stand among rare butterflies and their food plants. This is ecstasy, and behind the ecstasy is something else, which is hard to explain. It is like a momentary vacuum into which rushes all that I love. A sense of oneness with sun and stone. A thrill of gratitude to whom it may concern -- to the contrapuntal genius of human fate or to tender ghosts humoring a lucky mortal.”

??? ???? ?????? ??????? ?? ?????? ??????? ??????? ?? ??????? ?????? ??? ???? ???? ???? ???? ???? ???? :

“The cradle rocks above an abyss, and common sense tells us that our existence is but a brief crack of light between two eternities of darkness”

Hakan says

çok ??k, çok asil, çok zarif, çok incelikli, çok estetik, çok...bir otobiyografi. ve özgün, nabokov'un e?siz üslubuyla i?lenmi?: nabokovca.

övgüler düzmek d???nda, vazar?n ilk hat?rlar?ndan yakla???k k?rk ya??na kadar olan hayat?ndan izler, daha

do?rusu tablolar-sahneler ta??d???n? söyleyeyim bu otobiyografinin. ge?mi?e bakman?n, ge?mi?i canland?rman?n yolu, hemen herkeste oldu?u gibi, nabokov'da da küçük sahnelerden geçiyor. unutilan, unutuldu?u san?lan zaman dilimleri ve nice olaylar, insanlar bu küçük sahneler içinde ?a??rtacak kadar detayla kendilerini gösteriyorlar. ancak ve ancak nabokov sürgünle yitirdi?i vatan?yla, çocuklu?um dedi?i vatan?yla, vatan?-çocuklu?unu sadece haf?zas?nda ya?atmak durumunda-zorunda kalmas?yla herkesten ay?rl?yor. "zamana inanm?yorum," diyen nabokov, belki inanamayan nabokov, böyle büyük bir k?r?lmayla bak?yor ge?mi?e ve "sanat?n lambas?yla" elbette. "beni biçimlendiren ayg?t? ne çevremde, ne de ?rsiyetimde bulabiliyorum," diyor tam olarak, "ömrüme kar???k bir filigran bas?p geçen meçhul merdanenin e?siz tasar?m?, ancak, ya?am ka??d? sanat?n lambas?yla ayd?nlat?l?rsa fark edilebiliyor."

konu?, haf?za'y? okumak için sebepler s?ralamaya gerek yok. biyografi-otobiyografi türünden beklenen pratik faydalardan da bahsetmemeli hiç. elbette konu? haf?za okura hayat dersleri vermiyor, yazar?n anla??lmas? zor eserlerine ???k da tutmuyor. öyle bir kitap de?il konu?, haf?za. ama nabokov özelinde söylemek istedi?im son bir ?ey var: konu?, haf?za nabokov'un romanlar?n?n gücünü-güzelli?ini-büyükülü?ünü tart??mamakla birlikte, genellikle nabokov'un ki?ili?ine ba?layarak uzak-mesafeli-so?uk ya da suya sabuna dokunmaz bulan, benim de uzun süre aralar?nda bulundu?um okurlar için bir yan?lg?y? fark etme kitab? olabilir. o okurlara özellikle tavsiye ederim.

Sanjeev says

Disgusting that a somebody could be such an amazing writer. (And this is a person born in Russia, writing in English!) The word "genius" seems to come up a lot when people speak of Nabokov. Having read this, I now understand.

It took me some time to become used to the way he writes. Nabokov often does not seem to care if his point is immediately clear to the reader. Some of the gems I found in this book I could just as easily have missed in a quicker read. So close attention is rewarded. Also recommended is a dictionary since his vocabulary is...good. Knowledge of French does not hurt either (possibly an offshoot of his indifference to making his point accessible are the many untranslated French sentences).

I found the discussion of his aristocratic pedigree a bit taxing at times, but he treats it all somewhat lightly so it is manageable.

In all, I really could not ask for more from a book. His insights, observations, ideas voiced, etc...they are worthwhile, priceless.

Describing the writing does not do it any justice, so here are some examples of what I liked:

Of the nothings he hears before falling asleep as a child

"It is a neutral, detached, anonymous voice, which I catch saying words of no importance to me whatever - an English or a Russian sentence, not even addressed to me, and so trivial that I hardly dare give samples, *lest the flatness I wish to convey be marred by a molehill of sense.*"
(emphasis added, by me)

About his love for a person:

"I have to have all space and all time participate in my emotion, in my mortal love, so that the edge of its mortality is taken off, thus helping me fight the utter degradation, ridicule, and horror of having developed an infinity of sensation and thought within a finite existence."

Other random selections:

"...when one is wide awake, at moments of robust joy and achievement, on the highest terrace of consciousness, that mortality has a chance to peer beyond its own limits...And although nothing much can be seen through the mist, there is somehow the blissful feeling that one is looking in the right direction."

"The lilac shrubs in full bloom...displayed clusters of a fluffy gray in the dusk - the ghost of purple."

Jimmy says

Many years ago, I had read about half of Lolita before putting it down. I don't remember why, since I enjoyed the extremely pleasing sentences at the time. Nevertheless, I have not read any Nabokov since then, and everyone seems to be personally insulted by this omission. What is it that inspires Nabokov fans to froth at the mouth so violently when it comes to this topic? (**update:** I have now re-read Lolita, and my review can be found [here](#))

I was promised that this book will let me into the secret. So I feel like even though 3.5 stars is not a bad score, anything less than 5 stars is an insult to the incredible reputation this has built up in my mind (as well as the formidable expectations of said recommenders).

In a way, I can totally see why people love him so much. It is hard not to be floored by the considerable talents of this prose. The sentences, at their best, are indeed delicious. Nabokov seems to me all about the sensual enjoyment of language, within a certain framework of description:

Closed inside shutters, a lighted candle, Gentle Jesus, meek and mild, something-something
little child, the child kneeling on the pillow that presently would engulf his humming head. -- p.
86

But he isn't always as good when it comes to bigger ideas or psychology. In fact, he has little interest in either, and when he attempts them, it often has the scent of obvious melodramatic effort to it, like bad poetry:

All is still, spellbound, enthralled by the moon, fancy's rearvision mirror. The snow is real,
though, and as I bend to it and scoop up a handful, sixty years crumble to glittering frost-dust
between my fingers. --p.100

Like a butterfly's unintuitively wild flight, his sentences go all over the place, and beautifully so. But his is almost the opposite of another sentence-master: Beckett. Whereas Beckett's sentences can float like a butterfly, they also know how to sting like a bee. It can be beautiful or ugly, long or short, totally taking you off guard with its uncompromising and singular vision. Nabokov is never cruel enough in his economy, his flourishes take too long, and by the time he lands that final punch, it feels overdone, like a rubbery egg. Yes, beautiful, but heavy with labor, dripping with intention.

Perhaps it is unfair to compare him to Beckett, who after all, has no aesthetic similarities to Nabokov. Maybe Flaubert, then, whose sentences are also beautiful in a certain traditional way, but whose economy and clarity constantly stuns and surprises with layer upon layer of psychological subtlety and humor. Clearly painstaking effort was put in the writing, and yet this effort is also hidden from the reader, so that it looks easy... natural, even. Or maybe we should bring in someone who is equally enamoured by the beauty and playful potential of language, someone like Wallace Stevens, whose words have a certain surface sheen, yet hold so many more implications beneath their enticing veneers, so much philosophical depth.

Nabokov's strength is in impressionistic description, and in evocation. When he tries to do more, it is very

hit and miss. He is like one of those guitar virtuosos getting carried away by their own flashy fingerwork, capable and impressive, but rarely are their technical skills used with the kind of artistic restraint that creates truly great songs. Of course, I am only basing this on this one book alone, so upon further reading, revisions may be in order.

That said, there were many memorable moments in this book. I didn't truly get into it until Chapter 4, but boy was that chapter good. Chapter 5 was also great, about Mademoiselle. Chapter 14, about emigrant life, and chess puzzles, and where the stylization seemed less pronounced, was also interesting. Most of the book concerns itself with the many tutors, servants and other people who worked for and revolved around his aristocratic family; his interest in butterflies, writing poems, and wooing girls comes up later. Then social upheaval and fleeing the country. I found his voice a bit snobby and egotistical at times, which was also a turn-off. But most of the book was enjoyable enough, though nowhere near the heights they reached in my hype-induced imagination.

Darwin8u says

Speak, Mnemosyne!

Probably one of my favorite autobiographies to date (beaten only perhaps by the Education of Henry Adams). Realistically, it is 4.56 stars given the narrative gaps (most were written as individual pieces for Atlantic Monthly, the New Yorker and Harpers). The section on butterflies (Chapter 6), his Russian education (Chapter 9), and his portrait of his mother (Chapter 2) were absolutely AMAZING. Other chapters were just as good, and only a couple were less than what I hoped. It is interesting to think of Nabokov writing these in English in Massachusetts from his Russian memories and then translating them in the 1950s back into Russian and then using the Russian version to edit a new edition in 1966. The human mind, with all its varieties, is an phenomenal thing...but Nabokov's mind and the prose it produces makes me want to just lay down and lick the back of my own head in jealousy.

Riku Sayuj says

Remember Those Evenings

Reading tonight, he remembers those evenings,
Walking together in the endless estates,
Where the sun poured over shining green leaves.
No hint of shades.

Again in this room, with the screen-light hiding the night,
Look back to those mountains where our walking sticks are hid;
See him turn to the window, thinking his last
Of faraway climes.

Now nights come bringing only doubts, and the dead howl
Of half-formed thoughts, in their windy dwelling
Inside his mind, too full of easy questions;
Such lonely roads.

Oh, my long distance companion, my muse, remember:
How we saw that sudden lighting of the valley;
As we stood alone in the lonely darkening roads, watching
As men went home.

Remember all this, though no nearer each other.
As the night is ending, and the dawn will bring
Dreams and sleep for some, but no peace to me;
Only more dread reading.

Auguste says

How wrong Nabokov was in claiming that the music gene had skipped him! His prose is nothing if not music.

Clarissa Olivarez says

I just prefer his fiction. I understand that this is one of the most important autobiographies/memoirs ever written, but I fail to see why. I admit that Nabokov's "poetic prose" really shines through, at certain times; however, on the whole, I found the narrative voice to be frustrating, pompous, and oppressive.

Mikimbizii says

Sometimes a book just happens to you, it finds you, popping up from an exhibition that you almost didn't go to, from a dusty corner of a college library or a tiny book shop. The flirting is momentary, you know this is the real thing; there is no hesitation. You take it home, its love at first sight ("and ever and ever sight"). Suddenly all your life so far seem so mundane and banal, a new world of tender mellowness opens - you assimilate it, drown and resurrect in it, live its sublimity, you become the book. Curled up, sprawled over a bed, by the window, under a sheet in torch light, you meet; the book and you. You can't help it, it is an inevitability. Every time a guest drops in, or you have to leave for work, you swear horribly, because all you want to do is be with it, to be locked in an eternal read with it, a passion that you have never felt for anything else, anyone else. It seems as though you were waiting all your life for this moment, this juncture, this awakening, it is the beginning of a new journey. You realise you can still be happy reading and rereading only this one book for the rest of your life. In love with you, Nabokov for Speak, Memory for the universe you showed me, for Ada, for that ardor. I've fallen in love with a life I can never possess, with places that I can never see, with feelings that I am struggling to experience.

T for Tongue-tied says

I closed the book and put it with tenderness on the shelf. It was cold and windy but a sense of security, of summer warmth entered my heart. I couldn't stop thinking that a single human recollection, a memory linked to an outwardly meaningless moment, is bigger than the whole world dancing in capricious snowflakes outside my window. All the themes that gradually become us, starting in one place and ending up somewhere

completely different... There are no secrets in life, just hidden truths that lie beneath the surface. They reveal the spiral of the patterns and, through some intricate, unexplainable osmosis, are brought together to form the most remarkable story that shines with a timeless beauty, a kind of blinding revelation of the miracle of existence, akin to the ineffable light of a primordial deity.

Nabokov plunges into depths of time and becomes tenderly aware of it. His book is beautifully focused, it renews old ties that have been undone - despite the gaps, nothing is completely shut off, everything becomes an opening. His brain - this marvellous brain of nebulous depths - conjures up mystery and enchantment with every little memory. The country estate and its sylvan, magnificent world spinning in the spherule of the miraged youth and unfathomable mystery of the butterfly wings; snow-blue past, awakening the stories of Nabokov's extraordinary family and St Petersburg wreathed in the waters of Neva - how unabating, how irrepressible these descriptions are, some passages as tender as the touch of a loving hand, as the earthy smell of a long-awaited summer rain.

First fascinations, first loves. First poems written in the brief shock of wonder, in a fraction of time resembling not so much an aperture as a missed heartbeat. When his child is born, the words bring out the meaning of an everyday miracle and they attain it with the subtlety of an artist's signature.

This book really is like our memory - incidental, unmotivated, fickle. We try to make sense of it, squinting our eyes in the wavering lights of the slowly moving past - memories that are real, memories that we've partially dreamed up, glimmers of what could have been but never was, what never will be again...

In memory of those who are gone

Susan says

This is a beautifully evocative memoir, consisting of the personal recollections of Nabakov, recalling his childhood in Imperial Russia. Nabakov was born in 1899 to a family who were not only members of the aristocracy, but heavily involved in politics. His father was a liberal, who opposed the Tsar and, in fact, as his grandmother wryly pointed out, was working to bring down the way of life which would eventually see him exiled and virtually penniless...

However, this is certainly not a memoir filled with sorrow or bitterness. Instead, the author recreates his privileged childhood, with its recurring pattern of winter in St Petersburg, the spring and summer spent at the family's country estate and the autumn in foreign resorts. We read of the many tutors and governesses who came and went, the author and his brother's many escapades (including boarding a ferry and leaving their nanny wringing her hands on the quay as her charges floated away and an attempted elopement with a French playmate). There is the horror of hearing his father might have died in a duel, the joy of butterfly collecting - always a passion throughout his life - his early attempts at writing poetry and his final leaving of Russia after the revolution.

Mostly, though, what we get are little snippets - beautifully written - of a world that has long gone, but which can see through the eyes of our narrator. Places, people, a way of life long since vanished, are recreated. You can almost feel the cold on carriage drives through the snow, or imagine walks in the countryside, so vivid are the descriptions. As such, it is almost not what is written, but how it is written, that is important here. The eye for detail; of the memory of a room, books on a shelf, or how it felt to wake in the morning, is what makes the book come alive. I think it is an important memoir and one which paints a

portrait of a certain era and way of life which the author obviously missed, but recalled with love.

FotisK says

Οι αυτοβιογραφίες λογοτεχνών δεν με ενθουσιάζουν ως έδος. Σύμφωνα με τη δική μου οπτική, αυτές που έχει σημασία είναι πάντα και πράτιστα το έργο και όχι οι απ΄ψεις, οι προσωπικότητες ή τα πεπραγμένα τους. Δεδομένου μάλιστα πως πλ.ττω αφ'ρητα ιδ'ως με την παρέθεση στιγμών απ' την παιδική ηλικία, αποφεύγω να αναλ'νω πολύτιμο χρόνο σε κάτι που εκ προοιμίου θεωρ' ανοήσιο. Οφέλω μ'ως να τον'σω πως τα προηγθ'ντα δεν ισχ'ουν στην περίπτωση του "Μήλησε μν'μη", καθ'τι προ'κειται για μια αμιγ'ς λογοτεχνική αυτοβιογραφία, πιστ' στο πνεύμα του μεγ'λου αγαπημένου λογοτ'χνη. Ως εκ τ'του, όλα πα'ρατ'θενται 'χουν φιλτραριστε' μ'σα απ' την οπτική του, υπ' την ενοποιητική "σκήπη" του λογοτεχνικού 'φους του. Το αποτ'λεσμα είναι πως το κείμενο που διαβ'ζουμε περισσ'τερο αποτελε' να ακ'μα σημαντικό 'ργο του Nabokov και λιγ'τερο μια επιλεκτική αιτιολ'γηση παρελθουσ'ν καταστ'σεων και εκ των υστ'ρων σκ'ψεων 'σον αφορ' τα πεπραγμένα.

Να ακ'μα στοιχε'ο, το οπο'ο αφορ' μ'ως περισσ'τερο τους οδε'οντες προς τη μ'ση ηλικία (δεν ξ'ρω γιατί θα μπορούσε να αφορ' τους νε'τερους, πλην μ'νο απ' εγκυκλοπαιδικ'ς απ'ψεως) είναι εκείνο της σημασίας της Μν'μης, 'ρα και του Χρ'νου, του οπο'ου το π'ρασμα βι'νουμε ως αν'μνηση. Δεν νομ'ζω πως υπ'ρχει κάτι σημαντικότερο 'σον αφορ' την ατομική μας μο'ρα και επ' αυτο' δεν απαιτο'νται επιπλ'ον λ'για. Ο 'διος ο Nabokov το 'θεσε μοναδικ': "Πατρ'δα μας, είναι το παρελθ'ν μας!"

Fionnuala says

Nabokov is a joker. If I hadn't known that already, I'd have learned it when I reached the end of Speak, Memory.

I'd begun my review of the book when I was about half way through reading it, something I often do, preferring to jot down thoughts and impressions as I read in case I've forgotten the significance of this or that point by the time I've reached the end. Very soon I have a couple of readymade paragraphs and only need to tidy them up here and there, add a suitable opening and closing line, and voilà! - the review has written itself.

So, imagine my surprise yesterday when I got to the end of Speak, Memory and glanced at the Appendix. What have we here, I wondered - for about half a minute. I soon figured out that the Appendix is a review of Speak, Memory, supposedly written by someone other than Nabokov, and many of the points this 'other' person makes, in a slightly boring and pedestrian voice compared to the eloquence of the rest of the book, are points I'd already noted in my provisional review - and in some of the other Nabokov reviews I've written in the last couple of weeks. Whoosh! All the wind has gone from my sails and an unsettled feeling of having been set up is creeping in.

And then today I read this line in The Gift which I've just begun: *one hears the flippantly flat little voice of the reviewer (perhaps even of the female sex)...* I look around to see if the ghost of Nabokov isn't sniggering at me from a Novemberdim corner of the room, saying, *This one's for Kinbote!*

The result of all these coincidences is that I no longer feel like commenting on the carefully chosen themes of this memoir, or pointing out the nice balance between the personal and the general, the planned and the accidental, in the teasing out of these memories. Nor do I want to talk about the many interesting references to poetry and parks, chess and fate, art and nature, which fill the pages of *Speak, Memory*. I had a section on the various heteronyms Nabokov uses throughout his work but that too is now obsolete, as are the thoughts about his brother Sergey, and the strong and unsettling resemblance between Sergey and the nameless narrator of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*.

No, there's no need for any of that as it's all been analysed in the Appendix, and in a far more erudite and pompous manner than I could ever manage. Nabokov has checkmated me nicely...

But I'll get my own back soon.

edit: 25th November: On page 196 of *The Gift*, a character accuses the narrator, Godunov (who resembles Nabokov more than a little), of being...a joker!

Let me tell you, my lad, you're quite a joker...

Manny says

One of the greatest literary autobiographies ever - a model for how to do it. My favourite anecdote: when he talks about how cold it was in his student room, he denies the rumour that the water in his toothmug froze solid during the night. Just a crisp layer of ice on the top, that he broke with his toothbrush...

Sue says

Finis! There are parts of this memoir that I absolutely loved and there are parts, mostly later in the memoir and in Nabokov's life, that I found more difficult to embrace as a reader. The Everyman's Library Edition I read also has an excellent introduction by Brian Boyd which offers great insights into the book, especially for a reader like me who has no background in Nabokov.

To outline the task he had set before him, Nabokov writes in his Foreward

"This re-Englishing of a Russian re-version of what had been an English re-telling of Russian memories in the first place, proved to be a diabolical task, but some consolation was given me by the thought that such multiple metamorphosis, familiar to butterflies, had not been tried by any human before." (p 6)

This mention of butterflies is but an early allusion to what will be a life-long hobby pursued in Russia and every country Nabokov lived in exile.

Nabokov is a man between worlds, of a patrician background lost in the Russian Revolution, but he does not

appear to live with regret. Instead he clings to the memories of the Russia he has loved, the Russia he knew as a much loved child, and provides wonderful descriptions of the sights and people of that world. In one descriptive passage of the arrival of a new tutor coming to the estate by sleigh in the winter, Nabokov's worlds collide.

"Very lovely, very lonesome. but what am I doing in this dreamland? How did I get here? Somehow the two sleighs have slipped away leaving behind a passportless spy standing on the blue-white road in his New England snowboots and stormcoat. The vibration in my ears is no longer their receding bells, but only my old blood singing. All is still, spellbound, enthralled by the moon, fancy's rear-vision mirror. The snow is real, though, and as I bend to it and scoop up a handful, sixty years crumble to glittering frost-dust between my fingers" (pp 73-74)

There are many delightful sections in this overall wonderful memoir. At times it can become obscure and pedantic---Nabokov's language is not that of most authors I read. but the emotional content is accessible. In the chapter dealing with his burgeoning fascination with butterflies, he states "I found the nonutilitarian delights that I sought in art. Both were a form of magic, both were a game of intricate enchantment and deception." p 95

Among my favorite chapters are those dealing with the multiple tutors/mentor/governesses he and his closest brother had in Russia, the chapter about his mother, that chapter that describes his "discovery" of poetry, and the descriptions of his teenage loves. He gives little away here but there is a sense of loss.

Some of the later chapters I found rougher going as VN travels in Europe and settles into a course of life. Perhaps the emotional level was not the same? The emotion rushes back with the birth of his son Dimitri.

All in all I enjoyed this memoir while recognizing I was in the presence of someone who does not think as I do, who creates and writes on a different plane with a use of English (even as a second language) that is far more extensive than mine. With that caveat, I recommend it to others who enjoy reading memoirs.

This is a strong 4 (possibly a 5 but for a few chapters I found less compelling).

Marcel says

I have often noticed that after I had bestowed on the characters of my novels some treasured item of my past, it would pine away in the artificial world where I had so abruptly placed it. Although it lingered on in my mind, its personal warmth, its retrospective appeal had gone and, presently, it became more closely identified with my novel than with my former self, where it had seemed to be so safe from the intrusion of the artist.

Please disregard the three stars above. There is no dark lined silvery cloud rating system in my unguarded border between love and hate. If you read quotes from Speak, Memory you will know that it has words of sublimity, knowing truth about beauty and art.

Here is one that I have loved for years:

But then, in a sense, all poetry is positional: to try to express one's position in regard to the universe embraced by consciousness, is an immemorial urge. The arms of consciousness reach out and grope, and the longer they are the better. Tentacles, not wings, are Apollo's natural members.

I have thought about that quote often (the first part is often left off. I can't understand why). I know what he is talking about. I would think that I can't relate to this man who must've sprung from his mother's loving womb into a world opened to other worlds that could be imprinted on the insides of eyelids like the too perfect to be anything but miraculous mimicry of his camouflaged moths to flame. This was a perfect realization from Nabokov that I don't think I would have done on my own. The smallest detail birthed just right on those wings (I wonder how many beats per second they need to sustain, if their flight manages to beat the necessity and work). It couldn't have been only for survival. I will think of his beautiful prose like those moths that were making themselves more than what they merely had to be survive. I love that he saw them that way. I don't know how many reviews of his works I've read over the years that were almost too jealous to be admiring that he could write as he does in his second language. The truth is that he had three first languages. English wasn't my first language. Mine was a made-up secret twin language that I didn't give up until I was three. I hate language because I have to give it up to have new words. His are worlds at once, with portals. If asked to explain the most basic English grammar like what is a noun or an adjective I could sweat like those times I panicked and couldn't remember my own ATM code or phone number. I admire and envy his visual ecstasy, where he wills to go. I love it, really. He did, however, hate music. In the most extreme emotional times he could tolerate the violin (my reason for living) and he hated the piano. I could never make myself into what I feel for music the way that Nabokov does his pleasures in his words. It is his own language. I know what he is talking about, though. He is looking too. I can't go where he went but he wanted to go somewhere else too.

So there were times when I absolutely hated reading this book. I squirmed in my seat as if I were the victim of multiple courses of Green Eggs and Ham. Reading in all of my favorite reading places of my car, bed and empty bathtub I would feel at once desperate to be done already and dog-earing pages to my memory as if his beautiful words could be butterflies pinned to delicate pages. My private Mariel time was intruded upon with some of the most boring times I have had all year (and that is saying something). A friend of mine on goodreads, Kristen, and myself have a longstanding argument/discussion about my criteria for what a memoir should be. I've consistently not explained myself very well. My twin also took me as expecting the person to take themselves with absolute truth, no attempts to make themselves look good, etc, denying understanding of how hard it would be to live with yourself if you gave up the constant wing beating. I want a portal into their lives. I want to be allowed entry, to pass between their shoulders and have room for me, Mariel, where I would never be allowed anywhere else. I want to learn the same rhythms. That world must contain the others in their lives, the look extending beyond corner of their eyes. I could ideally step out without them and look at others.

A lot of Speak, Memory is about servants in the Nabokov family. I liked his mother's former nurse who they give keys to a different food larder so that they won't starve to death and her feelings won't be hurt. Did she ever think about being born a slave? I liked that he tried to save Mademoiselle from his own use of her in his fictional work by writing about his memories of her in this book. It is interesting that he felt he lost his own memories once they were given to fiction. But I couldn't get past this feeling of them as servants. Maybe the fiction is more generous because it would give of yourself to the image of them in your mind. Who were they when they went home? Maybe they thought that young Vladimir was a nancy boy lolling about on a Turkish sofa to read War and Peace at the age of eleven (I was reading The Silence of the Lambs when I was eleven). I couldn't help but think about the governess who was sent away for seemingly no reason (my guess is that she had the young master help her search for the missing glove) while he was consoled with hot chocolate and drawings. I was reminded of reading Natasha's Dance (a very good book about the cultural history of Russia I read earlier this year. Umm, reconciling Tolstoy's noble peasants with how much their lives must

have truly sucked so hard, yeah?). There came a point when I was bored to tears reading about how many thousands of servants (coughs slaves coughs) each nobleman had to their name. "Not again!" I love reading about the very Russian practice of hunting for mushrooms in the forest. I wanted very much to go on one of those hunts with Nabokov's beloved mum. I don't know, I was bothered by it all because it is so one-sided. I loved that he felt guilty about ditching his friend (who biked all the way to their home because his recently bankrupted family couldn't afford the train fare) to hunt for his butterflies in secret. But it's all about him and it is dull to force my brain edges into a one-sided affair.

The butterflies. I kind of get it and... Well, he was killing them to collect them in those books. I find it curious that he didn't once mention any conflicting feelings about this aspect of his obsession. He does about his own memory and using it in writing, but not about the lives of these creatures.

I had also read about this a long time before I read this book that he waits a long time to leave Nazi Germany even though his wife was Jewish. I guess this is why Kristen had suggested reading this memoir to prepare for *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* (I might get pissed about proclamations of Sartre love and ignoring realities of abusing teenaged girls she had a position of power over, yeah). I don't want to sound judgmental because that is not how I feel in my heart. I have pets. Some of my pets are birds. It is something that I stab my mind with out of the dark at any time. I think if they could talk my dogs wouldn't tell the judge that they want to live with me instead of running wild (tell that to the dog catcher, guys!). (Speaking of dogs: Something the Nabokov family and my family have in common is the recurrence of dachshunds. I think they had twelve? My memory could be lying about this. Anyway, it was a lot. Mine had eight altogether.) I can imagine how it felt to find the longed for rare butterfly to add to his collection. He might have missed that longing and replaced it with another quest. My life needs something to long for and think about to slow down time and make it faster. I know that Nabokov was like that. But my mind goes "But..." and the passion can be cruel. I wonder too much about what I killed to feed the fumbled love I invented for myself. What do they kill, in these memoirs? But what if they didn't want to be in a book? What if these people in his life didn't want to be in position to Vladimir Nabokov? (I guess they could write their own memoirs, if they didn't die under Leninism. I can't help but wonder why he wrote about this one tutor that much. It became like picking on someone behind their back...)

He writes in his fiction and in *Speak, Memory* about the expatriates who miss their Scrooge McDuck luxuries to swim in. Nabokov misses his childhood. And I know I'm being a jerk and kind of deliberately missing the point because I can't sidestep that trapped sick/boredom feeling I used to get so often in my own childhood. He was the center of the world in his childhood. He didn't have to think about his father's foot stabbing political sympathies for revolutionaries. His mother got his synesthesia because she had it too (although hers was for musical notes while he saw words in colors. I liked how he had only placed one of the rose pink colors to its living counterpart days before writing about it in his memoir). I loved how he could still feel the handle of his son's pram. But what about the girls who would smiles appeared only as he was approaching and departing? I want to know how he looked to them. My memoir criteria may be impossible. I want to be let in and I don't want to have to make it for myself.

A moment later my first poem began. What touched it off? I think I know. Without any wind blowing, the sheer weight of a raindrop, shining in parasitic luxury on a cordate leaf, caused its tip to dip, and what looked like a globule of quicksilver performed a sudden glissando down the center vein, and then, having shed its bright load, the relieved leaf unbent. Tip, leap, dip, relief- the instant it all took to happen seemed to me not so much a fraction of time as a fissure in it, a missed heartbeat, which was refunded at once by a patter of rhymes: I say "patter" intentionally, for when a gust of wind did come, the trees would briskly start to drip all together in as crude an imitation of the recent downpour as the stanza I was already muttering resembled the shock of wonder I had experienced when for a moment heart and leaf had been one.

Nabokov's poetry was my favorite part of *Speak, Memory*. How to write poetry is to be able to notice all kinds of things that are happening all at once, all at once. Janet Frame's beginnings as a poet was also my

favorite about her memoir To the Is-Land. I love to know how others reach out. I want to reach out too. I want to be let in more than anything. I feel if I could be let in then maybe I could reach something that has always been denied me. Like when you try to remember something and you can't.
