



A Guide to Berlin

Gail Jones

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A Guide to Berlin is the name of a short story written by Vladimir Nabokov in 1925, when he was a young man of 26, living in Berlin.

A group of six international travellers, two Italians, two Japanese, an American and an Australian, meet in empty apartments in Berlin to share stories and memories. Each is enthralled in some way to the work of Vladimir Nabokov, and each is finding their way in deep winter in a haunted city.

A moment of devastating violence shatters the group, and changes the direction of everyone's story. Brave and brilliant, *A Guide to Berlin* traces the strength and fragility of our connections through biographies and secrets.

A Guide to Berlin Details

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Author : Gail Jones

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From Reader Review A Guide to Berlin for online ebook

Lyn Elliott says

It's difficult to come to grips with *A Guide to Berlin*.

The format of six individuals coming together telling 'speak-memories' needs the stories and the voices of the story tellers to resonate and although there are interesting ideas underlying the memory-stories, they don't convince or engage. Sometimes the voices are just flat; sometimes overblown with hyperbole.

There are some connections between some of the individuals who meet for these highly contrived and quite formal 'speak-memories' sessions, but they never get to the stage of being a group, they remain an 'experimental community'.

References to Nabokov abound, from butterfly patterns and reproductive organs at the scientific end, to what I presume are some of Nabokov's theories about writing, focus on detail as a means of understanding the world. Certainly there are moments here of beautifully descriptive writing of the white snow, the ocean sound of cars driving in the wet. But many of the Nabokov references are tedious, intellectualised to the point of incomprehensibility. This may be Jones' intention, as at one point in one of these discussions she writes from the viewpoint of Cass, the main character through whom the whole story is told: 'Such disconnected conversation; such irresponsible idleness...there was a sense they all shared of the dissolution of narrative order; there was a decline to arid blather and unacknowledged tensions'.

Arid blather seems to me to be a perfect description of this next example, which follows the 'wicked act' which broke the group: 'Marco gave a little speech, absurdly formal in the circumstances. He said that the death of any human was without metaphor or likeness. The death of any human was incomparable. It was not a writerly event. It was not contained within sentences. It was not to be described in the same way as an icicle, or three wrinkles parallel on the forehead of a remembered governess, or the play of shadow and light on a swimming body, or the random harmony of trifles that was a parking meter, a fluffy cloud and a tiny pair of boots with felt spats'.

Not surprisingly, Cass 'wasn't sure she could bear it - another set of pronouncements, another articulate statement invoking the inexpressible qualities of death, or of life. A Nabokvian cradle rocking above an abyss'.

'The future had been spoilt. All was aftermath now. Afterwards and aftermath'.

Along with all this WRITING, we are asked to share Cass's fascination with the U-Bahn and S-Bahn maps of Berlins, which somehow are meant to be a metaphor for the city. Are they meant to be a metaphor for the stories as well? For the novel as a whole? I can't guess.

I read this because we have just been in Berlin and I wanted to read something that might help me understand it more. I was able to visualise many of the physical locations and the public transport system because of that, but I didn't learn anything about Berlin itself that interested me (I already know it is freezing cold in winter) nor the people who inhabit this fabricated memory world.

My partner has read everything Nabokov has ever written and he read *A Guide to Berlin* for its Nabokov associations, but he too found it disappointing.

Here are a couple of reviews from England:

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/201...>

<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-ent...>

And a kinder one from The Australian: <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/arts/...>

Lee Kofman says

I thought I'd at least like, if not love, Gail Jones's *A Guide to Berlin*. I have intellectual respect for Jones and I love the dreaminess of her voice. I adore Nabokov who is one of the main subjects of this novel and is intrinsic to its main premise, and I love books set in, and engaging with, major European cities. But this book was a crushing disappointment. It was pretentious, felt emotionally untrue, its main protagonist was a precious, irritating, self-important woman whose predicaments held zero interest to me and the book was utterly humorless. And maybe even more importantly, the moral backbone of this novel was disturbing. There is a murder at the centre of this story and the murderer, in my view, gets away with too much empathy from the narrator and, I am afraid to say, the author. The only few redeeming qualities this (unnecessary) book had were some lovely snippets of prose and some playful references to Nabokov. But really, the author could have written an essay on Nabokov, and I'm sure it'd have been a much better thing to read.

Peter Holz says

Despite being well written I found the story itself to be flat and uninspiring. Six people meet regularly in an apartment in Berlin, drawn together (rather flimsily) by their love for Vladimir Nabokov. Much of the book is contained within the characters' "speak-memories", expository lumps (as Ursula Le Guin called them) detailing their past. Instead of facts and information being revealed as the story unfolds I felt more like I was attending a lecture that was feeding me pertinent information. I also found it difficult to feel much for the characters, who appeared wooden and stilted.

Kimbofo says

Gail Jones' latest novel, *A Guide to Berlin*, pays homage to Vladimir Nabokov, the Russian writer who inspired the title, as well as the city of Berlin itself.

The book focuses on a group of six Berlin-based Nabokov fans from around the world — two Italians, a Japanese couple, an American and an Australian — who meet regularly to tell a “densely remembered story or detail” about their lives, what they dub “speak-memory disclosures”.

The narrative largely revolves around Cass, the 20-something Australian who has decamped from Sydney to Berlin in pursuit of a dream: to write and to be near the family home in which Nabokov once lived. Here she meets Marco, the Italian academic/real estate agent, who organises the Nabokov get-togethers in empty apartments he's trying to sell. And from there she is introduced to the others in the group: Victor from New York, Gino from Rome, and Yukio and Mitsuki from Tokyo.

The book is loosely structured around each character's speak-memory, giving it the feel of a short story collection. It's not quite as rigid as Jones' previous novel, *Five Bells*, which follows the lives of five different characters in clearly delineated sections, but more fluid in the sense that Cass's new life exploring Berlin is woven throughout the narrative: her adventures are simply punctuated by the Nabokov meetings she attends.

To read the rest of my review, please visit my blog.

Catherine Davison says

I really wanted to enjoy this book and thought I'd be giving it more than three stars but I just can't. I must say up front Liam introduced me to Gail Jones's writing years ago when he gave me *Sixty Lights* and told me he found her to be a good writer so I was already primed to appreciate her literary style. Also as Berlin was where Liam had spent his last two weeks before that fateful flight so I was drawn to, and wanted to be, as it were, in the city of Berlin itself. However the narrative arc of the story just let me down, it didn't really get going until about two thirds in and the petered out. Nor did I get a sense of any of the characters as real people: they all felt like one dimensional characters straight from a writers' notebook of preliminary ideas, mere sketches of possible background to go with potential characters. The way each was introduced using the 'speak memories' device felt like a bit of a lazy detour and added nothing to the sense of characters as real people. While I can admire Jones' ability to describe both the physical and interior worlds inhabited by her narrator I was left feeling she had spent too much time crafting beautiful sentences at the expense of a credible and engaging plotline. I learnt a lot of new words while reading this (and yes I too am an English teacher but I had to reach for the dictionary on more than one occasion). This too seemed incredible, would all these speakers of English as a second language really know and use such arcane words? I doubt it and this detracted from any sense of credibility. I would have liked to have given this book five stars as I know Jones writes beautifully but it didn't work for me.How I wish I could discuss this book with my dear brother.

Manchester Military History Society (MMHS) says

Excellently written and unusual tale of modern Berlin

Gail Jones' story links six travellers who came together in Berlin through their love of Nabokov's work. The title is taken from Written Nabokov's 1925 short story "A Guide to Berlin".

Narrated by Cass, the only Australian in the group the six meet in an empty flat where each them take turns to deliver a "speak-memory, essentially the story of their lives. Whilst I know little of Nabokov, the book has made me track a copy of his "guide" (see link below). Gail Jones portrays a Berlin gripped by an icy winter and how their friendship grows through their meetings.

Just when you think the book is taking a predictable route there is a sudden event that changes the whole group and friendship dynamic.

I was drawn to the book as I love Berlin and Jones captures it's very essence well, particularly the public transportation system that binds the expansive city together.

It's a not my usual reading, it's very much about emotions, finding friends and relationship but I found it kept my attention to the end and definitely worth the read.

It's worth looking at this link if you are interested in the Nabokov book
<http://eurasia.cga.harvard.edu/exhibi...>

I received this book for free from the publisher in exchange for an honest review. This does not affect my

opinion of the book or the content of my review.

Jane Milton says

While the first part of this novel is sometimes a little tedious and self-indulgent, it may be worth persevering. Some of the ideas raised are really interesting. Gail Jones explores how memories are often made up of small observations, like the tiles on a train station wall; how courage may be more a matter of putting yourself in a position where you can't turn back; how it is to grow up with silent holocaust survivors as parents and how a recluse 'hikikimori' can be lured from his bedroom by his future wife. Unfortunately these ideas are bogged down in protagonist Cass' riveting, repetitive musings about such concerns as the hole in her boot, which I suppose may have been symbolic for something.

The latter part of the novel was more compelling and, frankly, pretty eerie. Think 'Crime and Punishment' and 'The Secret History'.

Michael Livingston says

A fascinating puzzle of a book.

Jaclyn Crupi says

Stunning writing. Didn't feel like the protagonist was 26, she seemed much older. The 'speak-memory' speeches were gorgeously written but didn't ring true as dialogue at all. The twist felt unnecessary and overwrought. Surely a quieter ending would have better suited the first 2/3 of the book.

Jennopenny says

Disclaimer, I got a e-copy of this from Netgalley for review.

Oh. Berlin. How I love that city and when I saw the title of this book I couldn't wait to read it. And also Nabokov, whom I admire.

Then I started to read and was semi interest.

It's about Cass who has moved from Australia to Berlin and finds a group of Nabokov fans (the title comes from Nabokov's short story with the same title). They meet and share a "speak memory" where each of them share a part of their life, usually with how they found Nabokov's writing included.

In between the meetings Cass walks Berlin and tries to find her place and spends time with one from the Nabokov group, Marco.

The story is slow. There isn't really much happening, which is something I usually don't mind but something happens about two thirds into the novel that changed the whole set up for me. A part where things happen which I didn't really understand and felt strange about.

Without spoiling it, it felt like that part wanted to be a bit like beginning of The Secret History

I didn't enjoy my time reading this book. The language is good and some of the "speak memories" I found interesting but mostly I was glad that this book was as short as it was.

For me this didn't hit home, but if we had it in the bookstore where I work I would be able to recommend it to customers with other tastes. I understand that others would get more out of this, specially if you read more Nabokov than I have.

I liked this for the Berlin romance, I mean the way Jones writes about the city Berlin, which I miss on a daily basis.

If you like slow moving books, where the main character grows with good language and with a hint of a mystery, this book might be for you.

Jennifer (JC-S) says

'And it was then, resting on the brink of disclosing conversation, that Marco changed the subject and told her of his group.'

Five international travellers, Marco and Gino from Italy, Yukio and Mitsuko from Japan, and Victor from America meet regularly, inspired by a shared interest in the work of Vladimir Nabokov. Marco invites Cass, from Australia, to join their meetings. It is winter in Berlin, and Cass finds the city somewhat inaccessible. Cass has come to Berlin to write. She hasn't started writing yet, and perhaps this meeting with its possibility of literary fellowship may provide her with momentum. Marco tells her where and when to meet, and that at the next meeting 'they would begin a 'speak-memory' game in which each would introduce themselves with a densely remembered story or detail.'

Cass joins the group, at 5pm the next day, and Victor is the first to speak. He tells the story of his life and of Nabokov's influence on him. There are more meetings, and at each one a 'speak-memory' is shared. Friendships are formed between different members of the group, and winter in Berlin becomes more bearable. But memories are not always safe, and sometimes the past can intrude on the present in unexpected ways.

The group is destroyed by a sudden, tragic event. Lives are changed unexpectedly. Friendships are challenged and stretched. Can the individuals in the group move on?

Cass (together with the shade of Vladimir Nabokov) is central to this story, and we share her perspective of events: of life in Berlin – from the discomfort of her leaking boots in the snow, her pleasure in developing friendships and the impact of tragedy.

'I like this idea – that an object sucks in the memory of its use.'

I enjoyed this novel, and will reread it at some stage. Not so much for the story (or stories) of the travellers but for the hints of Nabokov.

Note: My thanks to NetGalley and Random House Australia for the opportunity to read an advance copy of this novel.

Al Bità says

There is much to enjoy in this poetic, literary, philosophical and meditative novel.

Many writers have used the device of a group of people who meet to share stories with each other, and this conceit is used very cleverly by Jones. The group consists of six people: the Italian Marco, who is the convenor of the group, and his Italian friend Gino; the American Victor; the soul-pair Mitsuko and Yukio from Japan; and the Australian girl Cass. All find themselves in Berlin, in the dead of winter, with the only link between them a shared love and passion for the life and writings of the Russian-American novelist Vladimir Nabokov. They decide to meet on a regular basis in various locations to share what they call “speech-memories” of their personal histories and interests. In the process we witness a sense of growing connectedness despite the widely differing circumstances of their personal lives.

The six protagonists are the main focus of the novelist, but there are a few others included, some shared only between certain members, others linked in circumstantial ways to all. However, all of these are presented essentially through the eyes of Cass, and it is her mind and commentaries that pervade the novel. At the same time, towards the end of the book, the Author interposes herself between the reader and the work with occasional phrases like “...Cass will remember...”. The use of the future tense simply and effectively reminds the reader that Cass herself should be included in the six as a subject of as much scrutiny as each of the others... Thus, if there are some things Cass will remember later, then perhaps there may be many things she will forget, or things which she might overemphasise — so just how accurate or trustworthy can her recollections be? For that matter, just how truthful or selective are the details of *any* of the protagonists “speech-memories”?

Jones's writing is cool, crisp and clear as when snow has just fallen, and all is shrouded in its fresh, white mantle; in a sense this could suggest a certain coldness and hardness, yet there is much poetry and delicacy as well, much like the snowflakes comprising the snow. Apart from the descriptions of historical and other locations in Berlin, many literary, philosophical and social issues are also bandied about by all the protagonists, and provide much that is stimulating and provocative.

The last half-dozen or so chapters with their confronting and disturbing events unfortunately create a kind of disconnect with the reader's suspension of disbelief: the events and their consequences seem to be *too* artificially constructed and even unjustified to be entirely believable. They tend to raise more questions than answers, which I feel is a pity.

Despite this, these last chapters also serve to present a re-evaluation of all that has gone before as regards relationships, friendships, connections and even meanings, making the whole book a kind of meditation on all these issues. I would even suggest that for a sensitive, intelligent reader, the book is, in some special way, quite beautiful; yet contained within that beauty are the seeds of something dark and mysterious which could (and will?) flower into the stuff that nightmares are made of...

Brenda says

Written by Vladimir Nabokov in 1925, his *A Guide to Berlin* is a short story; it was translated into English with the help of his son, Dmitri Nabokov and included in a collection of short stories - *Details of a Sunset and Other Stories* (published 1976)

Aussie author Gail Jones has written of six travellers who came together in Berlin through their mutual love of Nabokov's work – Victor, Marco, Mitsuko and Yukio, Gino and Cass. Every so often they would meet in an apartment where each of the friends took turns to relate what they called a “speak-memory” – the story of their lives and how Nabokov's work influenced them. Mitsuko and Yukio were from Japan; a young couple in love – the other four were strangers initially. Gail Jones' story tells of the deep cold of Berlin's icy winter; the tentative friendships that formed between the six, drawn together by their memories and their love of Vladimir Nabokov. Their evenings were filled with food and drink; fun and frivolity, but with the seriousness of each “speak-memory”.

But when a sudden, tragic event shattered the friends, it left them to wonder at the fragility of friendship – the insurmountable odds of mending a fracture so complete...

A Guide to Berlin by Aussie author Gail Jones is a deeply interesting look at Berlin and the lives of a few travellers who interacted over a short period of time. Narrated by Cass, the only Australian in the group, it showed her thoughts and feelings; her love of the trains of Berlin and her slow trusting of strangers. I thoroughly enjoyed Jones' writing and could feel the chill of the winter; the interest in memories and the love of Nabokov. I have no hesitation in recommending this novel highly – though not my usual reading I found it to be definitely worth the read.

With thanks to NetGalley and the publisher for my copy to read and review.

Lisa Matthews says

I really loved this novel. I thought the prose was beautiful. I have not read any Nabokov for decades so don't really recall the detail of his work and I have not visited Berlin, however these deficits did not detract from my enjoyment. I liked the premise of the story and the way we get to know the characters through "speak memory". The novel also shows that often it is the things that are not spoken that have the most influence on a individual's life, and there is a very unexpected twist at the end which I also feel is representative of the "unspoken and unrevealed", and which is only fleetingly referred to prior to the event occurring. Many people have described this book as pretentious, and while I can understand why the novel is described in this way, I have read many far more pretentious books than this, and personally feel it was a lovely literary piece of work. I have only read one other of Jones's novels - *Sixty Lights* - and did not rate it as highly, but feel compelled to revisit it now, as well as her other works. For me there was a lovely quietness and understatement in the novel, a quality I enjoy in both books and films. So I thoroughly enjoyed immersing myself in the beauty of the words contained within the pages of this book.

Susan says

This novel is narrated by Cass, an Australian in Berlin. One day, whilst going to see the apartment where Vladimir Nabokov once lived, she is approached by Marco Gianelli. He tells her of a group who meet in the city; all lovers of literature and Nabokov, they meet up to talk and relate their ‘speak memories.’ “Speak, Memory,” was an autobiography of Nabokov’s early life, while “A Guide to Berlin,” was a short story, written in 1925 and published in a collection called, “Details of a Sunset and Other Stories,” in 1976.

Despite Cass’s insistence that she is, “not a joiner,” she finds herself meeting the group. Apart from herself and Marco, there is his fellow Italian Gino, Japanese travellers Yukio and Mitsuko and New Yorker, Victor. What follows is an almost deceptively poetic novel about these six travellers and their group dynamics and friendships and the way they are changed by a tragic event.

This will appeal to all lovers of literature, and, of course, Nabokov. It is unusual to find a novel which is so character, rather than plot, driven. Reflective, tentative and featuring the city of Berlin almost as another character, this is a surprisingly immersive novel. Once you have read this, possibly it will lead you – as all good books do – to read further. I am certainly going to find, and read, the short story that inspired this. Lastly, I received a copy of this book from the publisher, via NetGalley, for review.
