

Novels & Memoirs 1941–1951: The Real Life of Sebastian Knight / Bend Sinister / Speak, Memory

Vladimir Nabokov , Brian Boyd (Editor)

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After a brilliant literary career writing in Russian, Vladimir Nabokov immigrated to the United States in 1940 and went on to an even more brilliant one in English. Between 1939 and 1974 he wrote the autobiography and eight novels now collected by the *Library of America* in an authoritative three-volume set, earning a place as one of the greatest writers of America, his beloved adopted home.

The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, the first novel Nabokov wrote in English, published a year after he settled in the U. S., is a tantalizing literary mystery in which a writer's half brother searches to unravel the enigma of the life of a famous author. A characteristically cunning play on identity and deception, this novel was published in 1941.

Bend Sinister (1947), Nabokov's most explicitly political novel, is the haunting, dreamlike story of Adam Krug, a quiet philosophy professor caught up in the bureaucratic bungling of a totalitarian police state. "I am neither a didacticist nor an allegorizer," Nabokov affirms in his introduction to the novel, but goes on to state: "There can be distinguished, no doubt, certain reflections in the glass caused by idiotic and despicable regimes that we all know and that have brushed against me in the course of my life: worlds of tyranny and torture, of Fascists and Bolsheviks, of Philistine thinkers and jack-booted baboons."

Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited (1951; revised 1966), Nabokov's dazzling memoir of his childhood in imperial Russia and exile in Europe, is central to an understanding of his art. With its balance of inner and outer worlds—of family chronicle and private fantasy, revolutions and butterflies, the games of childhood and the disasters of politics—the work that Nabokov called "a systematically correlated assemblage of personal recollections" is a haunting transmutation of life into art. "I have to make a rapid inventory of the universe...I have to have all space and all time participate in my emotion, in my mortal love," he writes toward the end of the book, "so that the edge of its mortality is taken off, thus helping me to fight the utter degradation, ridicule, and horror of having developed an infinity of sensation and thought within a finite existence."

The texts of this volume incorporate Nabokov's penciled corrections in his own copies of his works and correct long-standing errors. They are the most authoritative versions available and have been prepared with the assistance of Dmitri Nabokov, the novelist's son.

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Gary says

Starting with Sebastian Knight.

Prasad GR says

Good beyond my wildest expectations! 'Speak, Memory' is a lesson in writing memoirs

Bryguy says

This rates only "Speak, Memory."

Jbarrett says

Just finished Speak, Memory. Nabokov is a fabulous writer. He led a very interesting life and came from a most accomplished family in Russia. Even though his memoir covers his birth in St. Petersburg in 1899 to his leaving France for the US in 1940 it is worth a read. His use of language and grasp of history and culture is breathtaking.

David Johnson says

Speak, Memory, for its stylist evocation of place and sense, is an outstanding example of memoir and must be read before one ventures to document one's own dance through the calendar. Style also covers author's shyness about his marriage. I've since read short, impish Pnin and am soon to challenge Ada or Ardor in my Nabokov project.

Howard Cincotta says

Taken together, *Sebastian Knight*, *Bend Sinister*, and *Speak, Memory* paint a remarkable picture of the life of the small sliver of the Russian population who lived in wealth and privilege during the last years of Tsarist Russia, and the exile life of the lucky ones who escaped a far bleaker existence after the 1917 Russian Revolution. (In fairness, Nabokov's father was never a monarchist, but a staunch liberal who condemned the tsar and his policies, and even served a brief time in prison for his open criticism.)

These books also portray one of the most remarkable literary minds of the 20th century. The brilliant prose is here, of course, but also an unmistakable intellectual arrogance that, far from denying, Nabokov appears to revel in. But we make allowances as Yeats observed of another writer ... "pardon him for writing well."

The Real Life of Sebastian Knight glitters, but not a lot happens, and although our narrator suggests that a great mystery surrounded Sebastian's life as an émigré Russian writer of distinction if not popular success, very little happens that is genuinely surprising.

(A fictional sample of Sebastian's fiction: "The only real number is one, the rest are mere repetition" ... "Physical love is but another way of saying the same thing and not a special sexophone note, which once heard is echoed in every other region of the soul.") Not lines that would make me want to run out and buy his books.

Sebastian, as related by his half-brother narrator, is an enervated figure with a heart condition. He is educated at Cambridge and lives restlessly on the continent, where he conducts a desultory love affair, and then dies before the narrator can reach his side. At the end, the brother tracks down Sebastian's mysterious and seductive last lover, but rejects the opportunity to sleep with her, for no discernable reason except to establish his moral superiority, and inadvertently, the author's callowness.

Bend Sinister, set in a fictional East European totalitarian state, is Nabokov's only political novel. The brightness from the dazzling language initially makes it hard to engage the story, that of Krug, a celebrated academic, who is raising a young son while devastated by the death of wife. Krug, with the signature intellectual arrogance of the Nabokovian protagonists, runs afoul of the country's "Dear Leader," who happens to have been Krug's hapless and unprepossessing schoolmate, known as "Toad," whom everyone liked to pick on.

The story finally kicks in with the brilliant depiction of the casual, laughing, and utterly terrifying manner in which Krug's friends disappear into the gulag before Krug himself is arrested. But the most horrifying moments occur offstage, when it becomes clear that Krug's son has been abducted and presumably tortured and killed with a kind of casual depraved indifference. Those killers are, in turn, killed by the dictator (much as Stalin's infamous executioners, Yagoda and Yezhov were themselves tortured and shot). At the end, Krug is led to the firing squad in a scene of surreal violence that underscores the dictator's own cowardice and corruption.

Nabokov's childhood memoir, *Invitation of a Memory*, belies Tolstoy's famous adage that all happy families are alike. It reads like an old-fashioned magic-lantern show -- a succession of vivid and indelible images -- presumably remembered, half-remembered, and imagined -- of the lost world of life on prerevolutionary country estates and European travel. Nabokov's sensibility is overwhelmingly visual here; he admits to having no ear or interest in music whatsoever. He describes the minute details of home interiors, butterflies, and the Russian countryside as if viewed through a magnifying glass or the wrong end of the telescope.

Here is a typical passage, recalling one of his uncle's estates: "I particularly remember the cool and sonorous quality of the place, the checkerboard flagstones of the hall, ten porcelain cats on a shelf, a sarcophagus and an organ, the skylights and the upper galleries, the colored dusk of mysterious rooms, and carnations and crucifixes everywhere."

By the end, it is hard to avoid sharing Nabokov's perception that he and his family lost something close to a paradise of culture, love, learning, and, yes, affluence, with the coming of the Bolshevik revolution.

Dylan says

Nabokov's world draws you in...you almost view it through his own synesthesia...his own hesitation and slight embarrassment at writing in English doesn't diminish the power of these (unfairly) lesser known works. 'Invitation of a Beheading', still darkly humorous and still as relevant today as ever. Handsome edition too from the Library of America.

Jerry says

Speak, Memory contains some of the best writing I have ever grokked.

Mk Miller says

Bend Sinister is great.
