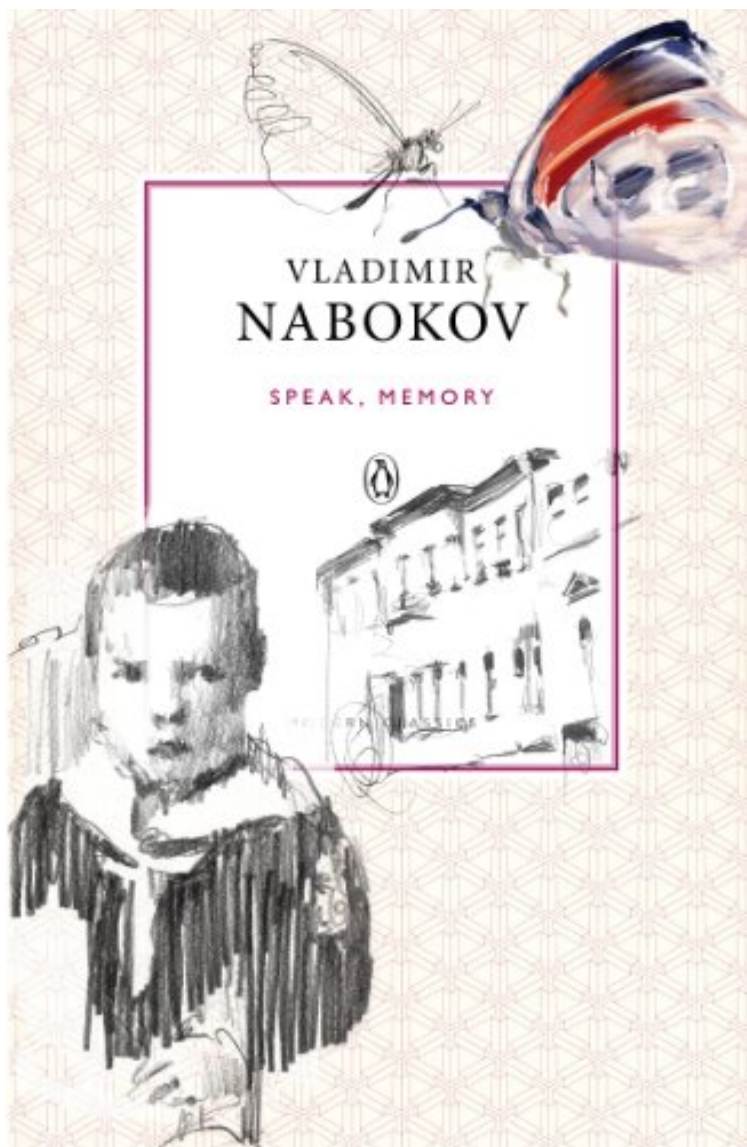


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Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited



Par Vladimir Nabokov
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Description : Description du produitThis is the candid, revealing and powerful autobiography of one of the greatest prose masters of the twentieth century. Vladimir Nabokov describes it as a "systematically correlated assemblage of personal recollections ranging geographically from St. Petersburg to St. Nazaire, and covering 37 years, from August 1903 to May 1940." "He has repeatedly fleshed the bare bones of historical data with recollections and anecdotes, delivered with a felicity of style that makes SPEAK, MEMORY a constant pleasure to read." (Harper's)

Prsentation de l'diteur'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. Part of a major new series of the works of Vladimir Nabokov, author of *Lolita* and *Pale Fire*, in Penguin Classics.

INTRODUCTION Some facts, some figures. It is a hundred years since Vladimir Nabokov was born. It is fifty years since he wrote in his autobiography *I confess I do not believe in time*. It is just under fifty years since he wrote *Lolita*, which has gone on to sell some fifty million copies, and ten years since this most American of his books could be published in the Russia he loved. And it seems an eternity since the worlds he calls up for us in *Speak, Memory* disappeared. *Speak, Memory* is the one Nabokov work outside his finest novels *The Gift*, *Lolita*, *Pale Fire*, *Invitation to a Beheading* that is a masterpiece on their level. Penelope Lively recently named it her book of the century. It has been rated the greatest of autobiographies, but since such judgements depend so much on the criteria we bring to them, I will call it only the most artistic of autobiographies. It lacks the probing self-analysis of St Augustine or Tolstoy or the overt and the inadvertent self-display of Rousseau, the historical and categorical aplomb of Henry Adams or the sparkling anecdotal flow of Robert Graves, but more than these and any other autobiographies it fuses truth to detail with perfection of form, the exact with the evocative, an acute awareness of time with intimations of timelessness.

** Nabokov confided to his friend Edmund Wilson in April 1947: I am writing two things now 1. a short novel about a man who liked little girls and its going to be called *The Kingdom by the Sea* and 2. a new type of autobiography a scientific attempt to unravel and trace back all the tangled threads of ones personality and the provisional title is *The Person in Question*. Adjacent in his mind and his bibliography, Nabokovs autobiography and his most famous novel seem to demand comparison. He had planned to call his new novel *The Kingdom by the Sea* because Humbert sees *Lolita*, the first time he meets her, as a reincarnation of the girl he loved at thirteen, whom he names Annabel Leigh in honor of Edgar Allan Poes poem (It was many and many a year ago, / In a kingdom by the sea, / That a maiden there lived whom you may know / By the name of Annabel Lee . . .). Unlike the Stanley Kubrick film, Adrian Lynes recent movie remake of *Lolita* attempts the Annabel Leigh sequence, but aspires no higher than the slickest of advertising cliches when it shows long-limbed young models, one male, one female, in coolly elegant 1920s summer cottons, strolling through a soft-focus palmy beach before they withdraw for a slow striptease. Lost loves and holiday romances may invite cliches, but Humberts recollections could not be more idiosyncratic: I was on my knees, and on the point of possessing my darling, when two bearded bathers, the old man of the sea and his brother, came out of the sea with exclamations of ribald encouragement, and four months later she died of typhus in Corfu. He reports their unsuccessful first tryst, when one night Annabel managed to deceive the vicious vigilance of her family. The urgency and the moral muddle could only be Humberts: with a generosity that was ready to offer her everything, my heart, my throat, my entrails, I gave her to hold in her awkward fist the scepter of my passion. In his novels Nabokov can not only ventriloquize his voice into the jitter and twitch of someone like Humbert, but he can also have all the freedom his formidable imagination allows to invent incidents, characters, names, relationships. Humberts requited but still unfulfilled passion for Annabel can find a reprise in *Lolita* sunning herself on a lawn and then a mirage of promised consummation in the prospect of *Lolita* on the sands beside Hourglass Lake. But in his meticulously accurate autobiography Nabokov can draw only on facts, memories and reflections, on his powers of expression and selection. He has often been rated the finest stylist of our times, and in *Speak, Memory*, more than in any other of his works, he has to rely on sheer style. No wonder anthologies of literary prose so often opt for *Speak, Memory*. The particular darling of anthologists, as Nabokov wryly notes in his Foreword, has been what is now Chapter Seven but was first called *First Love*, since with its image of first love on a French beach early in the century, it prefigures and clearly inspires *Lolita*, especially its Annabel Leigh strain. Vladimir and his Colette are only ten, as opposed to the thirteen of Humbert and Annabel, and far more innocent, even though they elope, along with Colettes fox terrier, and have to be retrieved by Vladimirs tutor: "Since my parents were not keen to meet hers, I saw her only on the beach; but I thought of her constantly. If I noticed she had been crying, I felt a surge of helpless anguish that brought tears to my own eyes. I could not destroy the mosquitoes that had left their bites on her frail neck, but I could, and did, have a successful fistfight with a red-haired boy who had been rude to her. She used to give me warm handfuls of hard candy. One day, as we were bending together over a starfish, and Colettes ringlets were tickling my ear, she suddenly turned toward me and kissed me on the cheek. So great was my emotion that all I could think of saying was, You little monkey. I had a gold coin that I assumed would pay for our elopement. Where did I want to take her? Spain? America? The mountains above Pau? La`-bas, la`-bas, dans

la montagne, as I had heard Carmen sing at the opera. One strange night, I lay awake, listening to the recurrent thud of the ocean and planning our flight. The ocean seemed to rise and grope in the darkness and then heavily fall on its face. Of our actual getaway, I have little to report. My memory retains a glimpse of her obediently putting on rope-soled canvas shoes, on the lee side of a flapping tent, while I stuffed a folding butterfly net into a brown-paper bag. The next glimpse is of our evading pursuit by entering a pitch-dark cinema near the Casino (which, of course, was absolutely out of bounds). There we sat, holding hands across the dog, which now and then gently jingled in Colettes lap, and were shown a jerky, drizzly, but highly exciting bullfight at San Sebastian. My final glimpse is of myself being led along the promenade by Linderovski. His long legs move with a kind of ominous briskness and I can see the muscles of his grimly set jaw working under the tight skin. My bespectacled brother, aged nine, whom he happens to hold with his other hand, keeps trotting out forward to peer at me with awed curiosity, like a little owl." The tenderness, the boys total surprise at the sudden kiss, his absurd off-guard response, the naive romanticism of the escape plan, the haunting duration of that night of solitary scheming to the sound of the sea, the flashes of unforgotten detail (ropesoled shoes, flapping tent, butterfly net in paper bag), the spaced glimpses of memory, so much truer to recollection than a glibly sustained narrative, the owl-like swivelling of the shamelessly curious younger brothers head all these are worlds away from Humberts lurid complaints, let alone Lynes anodyne gloss. In *Lolita*, Humbert attempts to consolidate his past by imposing it on what should be *Lolita's* fluid future. In *Speak, Memory* Nabokov lets us feel the poignancy of his final parting from Colette in 1909, but as a healthy boy rather than a monster in the making he accepts the reality of growth and change, and a succession of females stir his fancy: a young American woman at a Berlin skating rink in 1910, who suddenly loses her enchantment when he discovers she is a dancer on a music hall stage, or Polenka, the daughter of the Nabokovs head coachman, in 1911, or at last Tamara, his first real love, in 1915 and 1916, the subject of his first book of passionate poems, the object of his heartrending nostalgia when his family flees into the Crimea at the end of 1917 and her letters somehow reach him through the turmoil of the Russian civil war: "Tamara, Russia, the wildwood grading into old gardens, my northern birches and firs, the sight of my mother getting down on her hands and knees to kiss the earth every time we came back to the country from town for the summer, et la montagne et le grand chene these are things that fate one day bundled up pell-mell and tossed into the sea, completely severing me from my boyhood. I wonder, however, whether there is really much to be said for more anesthetic destinies, for, let us say, a smooth, safe, small-town continuity of time, with its primitive absence of perspective, when, at fifty, one is still dwelling in the clapboard house of ones childhood, so that every time one cleans the attic one comes across the same pile of old brown schoolbooks, still together among later accumulations of dead objects, and where, on summery Sunday mornings, ones wife stops on the sidewalk to endure for a minute or two that terrible, garrulous, dyed, church-bound McGee woman, who, way back in 1915, used to be pretty, naughty Margaret Ann of the mint-flavored mouth and nimble fingers. The break in my own destiny affords me in retrospect a syncopal kick that I would not have missed for worlds." The incident of young Vladimirs attempted elopement with Colette is not quite typical of *Speak, Memory*. Nabokov can recall scenes from his past with perfect framing, focus and lighting, but for the most part incidents are subordinate, as in the passage just above, to epochs, to phases of his life, to pulses of feeling, and to the sudden shifts of thought these phases and pulses can engender. Here his sense of loss is still more wistful than in the case of Colette, and like so many of his losses has been, as it were, repeatedly rehearsed: in his verse that claims nothing could ever match the magic of his first summer with Tamara; in their frustrations over their first winter in St Petersburg; in their discovery that their second summer indeed cannot relive the first; in their realization that they have drifted apart, even before the revolution sends them to different corners of Russia and then somehow revives the spell they cast over each other. But even as he evokes loss layered upon anticipations of loss and a kind of recovery that only sharpens the initial loss, Nabokov cannot keep to the one plaintive note. Part of the special spell of *Speak, Memory* is the gap between, on the one hand, his perfect past (his trilingual upbringing as the favorite child of loving, sensitive, liberal, cultured, fabulously wealthy parents, at the heart of St Petersburg, on idyllic country estates, on the beach resorts of southern Europe) and, on the other, the losses that would follow: the poverty and dislocation of exile, the assassination of his father, the long widowhood of his mother, then a second dislocation from the cultural refuge that the Russian emigration in Europe had become, once he crossed the Atlantic to where even his language, the one thing he had taken intact from Russia, would no longer serve him. Nabokov here registers the pain, the sharp severance from the past that would be characteristic of his destiny, yet affirms with wonderful humor that he would not have

missed this shift, this syncopal kick, for worlds. At the same time, by dint of the very gap between Russian exoticism and his homely image of the McGee woman, the old naughty Margaret Ann, he shows how much he has now learnt to feel at home in America and incidentally anticipates the contrast between stay-at-home Shade and the wild romantic nostalgia of Kinbote in *Pale Fire*. Although *Speak, Memory* stops just when Nabokov and his family are about to leave Europe, America repeatedly shows through the scenery of his European past, like the foreglimpse of a second homeland, a solution to the problem of exile, a fulfillment of some of the fondest dreams of his childhood. He records the pangs of nostalgia, the anticipations of future loss that preceded them, and the compensations of memory, yet even here affirms the poignancy of his loss as a gain, a gain still more generously repaid once his destiny makes that surprise swerve towards America. *Revue de presse* "[Nabokov] has fleshed the bare bones of historical data with hilarious anecdotes and with a felicity of style that makes *Speak, Memory* a constant pleasure to read. Confirmed Nabokovians will relish the further clues and references to his fictional works that shine like nuggets in the silver stream of his prose." Harpers "Scintillating One finds here amazing glimpses into the life of a world that has vanished forever." *New York Times*