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Pale Fire Publisher: Vintage



Synopsis

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Customer Reviews

This fictionalised Forward and Commentary on a fictional (but `real') poem by a fictional poet called John Shade, by a crazy Russian Ã©migrÃ© masquerading as the exiled and deposed King of the fictional sub-arctic country of Zembla is guaranteed to satisfy the most determined of lit-crit detectives. And as evidenced by the reviews on and essays published elsewhere, there is no shortage of people compelled to argue a plausible interpretation for who is really who in this playful, funny, but bitter-sweet novel. There seems to be a compulsion to excavate down to a notional foundation stratum of this novel of playful puzzles, mis-identifications and wilful mis-representations. Is Kinbote Botkin? Is Shade Kinbote? Is Kinbote Shade? Is Shade haunting Kinbote? And did Grey kill Shade mistakenly for Kinbote or for the Judge in whose house Kinbote resides? The answers to these questions are diverting but ultimately miss the point. The pathways of meaning are deliberately constructed by Nabokov to betray, obfuscate and delight the reader. Almost every novel he wrote was a literary dance suspended in the aether. He had little interest in Reality or historical veracity. His Muse, to whom he paid the deepest respect, enjoins him to celebrate the imaginative instinct in all its manifold immanences. As Appel termed it, Nabokov wrote `involute' novels employing a variety of literary techniques and tropes in order to celebrate and praise the creative impulse. Imagination and the many worlds that it could conjure are the end-point and starting-point for everything that he wrote. This is what his novels are `about'.

Do you enjoy reading the poetry of Percy Bysshe Shelley, John Keats, Lord Byron and William Butler Yeats? If so, then Vladimir Nabokov might be your favorite novelist, since this master prose writer's feel for language and precision of words is equal to any of these great poets. However, if

you are like most readers of novels, what keeps you turning the pages isn't necessarily the poetic precision of language. Alas, there is still a way for you to enjoy *Pale Fire*. You can experience the beauty and stunning perfection of Nabokov's language, even if poetry isn't your thing. Take my word for it here: the audiobook is an entranceway to the novel. Robert Blumenfeld speaks the words of Charles Kinbote with a charming, easy-to-understand international European accent, a mix of French-German-Eastern European, and Marc Vietor reads the John Shade poem --- Vietor does a fine job with the poem but Blumenfeld as Kinbote is exceptional, listening to his voice is like listening to a virtuoso perform a baroque score - you will want to listen and listen and listen some more. Order yourself both the book and the audiobook and read and listen concurrently --- you will have one of the most rewarding and aesthetically satisfying literary experiences of your life. Turning to the novel itself, we have Kinbote's forward at the beginning and index at the end, and the actual John Shade poem, entitled 'Pale Fire', and the extensive Charles Kinbote commentary on the poem, which turns out to be not only a commentary in the conventional sense of the term, but a benchmark for a subject of Kinbote's prime interest - his dear distant northern land, Zembla, and a subject even more dear to his heart - himself. Indeed, Charles Kinbote. What a man!

I think you have to know at least some basic facts about Nabokov's life before you can see some sense in this very puzzling "autobiography" (for example that he comes from a prominent Russian family of the minor nobility, that his father was an important politician of the Opposition when the Revolution broke out in 1917, that Nabokov fled to Western Europe, then to the U.S.A. where he continued writing and where he taught literature). How these facts refer to the fictions in his novel is another question. There is a long poem at the centre (not bad, reminding one in a way of T.S. Eliot) by some distinguished American poet, John Shade (I confess I looked him up in Wikipedia). Then there is arrogant (yet self-ironical), obsessive Charles X. Kinbote, who pretends to be the loyal, dedicated editor of this poem adding a long "commentary", a mass of shorter or longer footnotes, which then make up the largest part of the novel. But, in fact, Kinbote gladly takes anything from the poem that sets him off talking about himself, his past, his beloved and lost Zembla ("a distant northern land"), from which he had to emigrate after the Revolution, like the king of Zembla, Charles the Beloved, with the killer Gradus at his heels. What is the great design of this? Kinbote professes to be a great lover of art. When finally he manages to lay his hands on the finished manuscript of Shade's, he presses it against his body sighing: "bullet-proof at long last" (300). And he considers his footnotes as art, too: "I can do what only a true artist can do - pounce upon the forgotten butterfly of revelation, wean myself abruptly from the habit of things, see the web of the world" (289). We hear

Nabokov, the butterfly-expert talking.

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