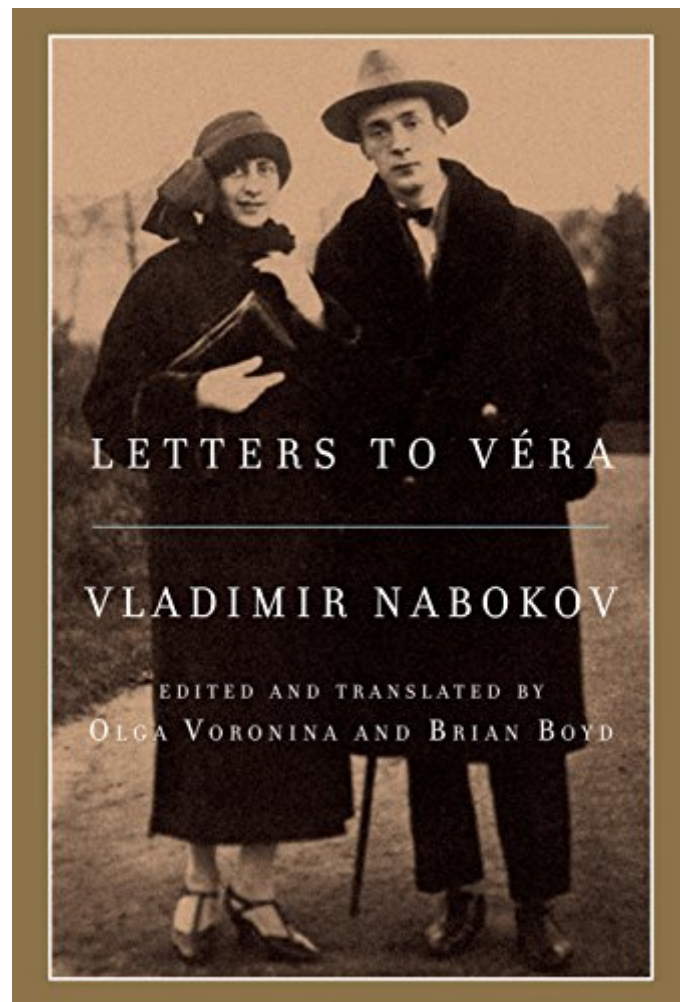


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Letters To VĚra



Synopsis

The letters of the great writer to his wife "gathered here for the first time" chronicle a decades-long love story and document anew the creative energies of an artist who was always at work. No marriage of a major twentieth-century writer is quite as beguiling as that of Vladimir Nabokov's to Véra Slonim. She shared his delight in life's trifles and literature's treasures, and he rated her as having the best and quickest sense of humor of any woman he had met. From their first encounter in 1923, Vladimir's letters to Véra form a narrative arc that tells a half-century-long love story, one that is playful, romantic, pithy and memorable. At the same time, the letters tell us much about the man and the writer. We see the infectious fascination with which Vladimir observed everything "animals, people, speech, the landscapes and cityscapes he encountered" and learn of the poems, plays, stories, novels, memoirs, screenplays and translations on which he worked ceaselessly. This delicious volume contains twenty-one photographs, as well as facsimiles of the letters themselves and the puzzles and doodles Vladimir often sent to Véra. From the Hardcover edition.

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Customer Reviews

Given Nabokov's penchant for creating a fictitious persona to present to the world, his early letters are a rare glimpse of the man before he has achieved wealth, fame, and a polished facade. These letters to Vera, small masterpieces, are a rare gift. This review should come with a warning: I'm highly conflicted about the works of Vladimir Nabokov. In a college class I was once asked to read a selection of paragraphs by various famous authors, without knowing the authors' actual names. I loved all of the selections with the exception of one hideously overwrought landscape description, that was clearly pure kitsch. To this day I despise the source of the quote: Nabokov's "Lolita." Yet one of my all time favorite books is his "Invitation of a Memory." Another is "The Gift." How could the same writer produce both styles? When I read Brian Boyd's masterful biography of Nabokov, I loved volume 1 about Nabokov the Russian writer, and hated volume 2 about Nabokov the American novelist. Not because of Boyd, but because of the subject. After achieving wealth and fame with "Lolita," Nabokov's self presentations in interviews are particularly egregious: dishonest, arrogant, and great fun to read. Nabokov delighted in hoaxes, doubles, mimicry, and disguises. So I'm grateful that Brian Boyd, with his wealth of knowledge about the "real" Nabokov, was willing to work with the translator Olga Voronina on annotating Nabokov's "Letters to Vera," his fiercely devoted wife. While fact-oriented, Boyd is still dutifully respectful of both the author and his wife. Michael Maar's "Speak, Nabokov," is a useful antidote to the usual hagiography. Maar was the first to point out the obscure German work by Lichberg that foreshadows "Lolita" in terms of subject matter and title.

This volume of Nabokov's letters to Véra, his wife of over 50 years, is literally that: his letters to her, none in return. She destroyed all hers. She was also a lazy correspondent, as per his complaints. We can't verify that. Why write letters at all? After the couple met in Berlin in the 1920s, there were periods of separation, some due to his work, or visits to his mother, some due to her health. After the family had escaped to America, separations became rare, due to stable jobs and then the Lolita wealth. In consequence, the major part of the letter collection is from the younger, European years. What stands out is the intensity of endearments. The couple never 'matured' out of that stage. Good for them. It doesn't do equally much for the reader though. We notice the magic, and we are happy for them, but did we need to keep peeping? What does he write to her about? Mostly about his days. Weather. Food. Family. Books. People. Places. Tennis. Swimming. And he sends her puzzles, cross words, word riddles. This is sometimes interesting, in bits and pieces, but it doesn't show us new sides of the man. We do get the occasional fireworks of words, and that

aspect is very fine. By the 1930s, more and more letters read like business letters: she had gradually become more than his confidante, but would also be more and more his manager, assistant, secretary, agent, organizer, driver, understudy. These business letters may be valuable for historians of detail, but I find them rather dull. That changes in 1937, which is the dramatic high point. He is looking for a place to move to, in England or France, and she must leave Berlin with the little son. They will move out of Germany and then out of France 'just in time'. There is tension in his letters.

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