

---

**From:** Ed [REDACTED]  
**Sent:** Thursday, February 14, 2013 3:02 PM  
**To:** Epstein, Jeff  
**Subject:** For your amusement

Hi Jeff

Here is my diary entry on VN  
Nabokov  
September 14, 1953

I wandered into Lit 311 soon after I arrived at Cornell in September =953. It was not that I had any interest in European literature, or any =iterature. I was just shopping for a class that met on Monday, =ednesday, and Friday mornings so I wouldn't have any Saturday =lasses and "literature" also filled one of the requirements for =raduation. It was officially called European Literature of the =ineteen Century, but unofficially called "Dirty Lit" by the =ornell Daily Sun, since it dealt with adultery in Anna Karenina and =adame Bovary.

The professor was Vladimir Nabokov, an emigre from Czarist Russia. =bout six feet tall and balding, He stood, with what I took to be an =ristocratic bearing, on the stage of the 250 seat lecture hall in =oldwin Smith. Facing him on the stage was his white-haired wife Vera, =ho he identified only as "my course assistant." He made it clear =rom the first lecture he had little interest in fraternizing with =tudents, who would be known not by their name but by their seat =umber. Mine was 121. He said his only rule was that we could not leave =is lecture, even to use the bathroom, without a doctors' note.

He then described his requisites for reading the assigned books. He =aid we did not need to know anything about their historic context, and =hat we should under no condition identify with any of the characters =n them, since novels are works of pure invention. The authors, he =ontinued, had one and only one purpose: to enchant the reader. So all =e needed to appreciate them, aside from a pocket dictionary and good =emory, was our own spines. He assured d us that the authors he had =elected— Leo Tolstoy, Nikolai Gogol, Marcel Proust, James Joyce, =ane Austen, Franz Kafka, Gustave Flaubert and Robert Louis =tevenson— would produce tingling we could detect in our spines.

So began the course. Unfortunately, distracted by the gorges, lakes, =ovie houses, corridor dates, and other more local enchantments of =thaca, I did not get around to reading any of Anna Karenina before =abokov sprung a midterm exam called a "prelim." It consisted of a =ingle essay question: "Describe the train station in which Anna =irst met Vronsky." Initially, I was stymied by this question because, having not yet read =he book, I did not know how Tolstoy had portrayed the station. But I =id recall the station shown in the 1949 movie starring Vivien Leigh. =aving something of an eidetic memory, I was able to visualize a =ulnerable-looking Leigh in her black dress wandering through the =tation, and, to fill the exam book, I described in great detail =everything shown in the movie from a bearded vendor hawking tea from a =ot-bellied copper samovars to two white doves nesting overheads. Only =fter the exam I learned that many of the details I described from the =ovie were not in the book. Evidently, director Julian Duvivier had =sed some poetic license in filming it. Consequently, when Nabokov =sked "seat 121" to report to his office after class. I fully =xpected to be failed, or even thrown out from Dirty Lit.

What I had not taken into account was Nabokov's theory that great =ovelists create pictures in the heads of their readers that go far =eyond what they describe in the words in their books. (Perhaps this =heory accounted for the set decor and Vivian Leigh's sexy dress in =he movie.) In any case, since I was the only one in the exam to confirm his theory =y describing what was not in the book, he not only gave me an "A," =ut offered me a one-day-a-week job as an "auxiliary course =ssistant." Oddly enough, it also involved movies. Every Wednesday, =he movies changed at the four theaters in downtown Ithaca, called by =abokov "the near near," "the near far," "the far near," and "the far =ar." My task was to see all four new movies on Wednesday and Thursday, =nd then brief him on them on Friday morning. He said that since he had =ime to see only one movie, this briefing would help him decide which =ne of them, if any, to see. It was a perfect job for me, I got paid =or seeing movies.

All went well for the next couple of months. I had caught up with the =eading, and greatly enjoyed my Friday morning chat with Nabokov in his =ffice on the second floor of Goldwin Smith. Even though it rarely =asted more than 5 minutes,

it made me the envy of other students in dirty Lit. Vera was usually sitting across the desk from him, making me feel like I had interrupted their extended study date. My undoing came that November, just after he had lectured on Gogol's "Dead Souls."

The day before I had seen *The Queen of Spades*, a 1949 British film based on Alexander Pushkin's 1833 short story. It concerned a Russian officer who, in his desperation to win at cards, murdered an elderly Russian countess to learn her secret method of card picking method. He seemed uninterested in my recounting the plot, but his head shot up when I said in conclusion that it reminded me of "Dead Souls." Vera also turned around and stared directly at me. Peering intently at me, she asked "Why do you think that."

I instantly realized I had made some connection that resonated with a view he had, or was developing, concerning these two Russian authors. At that point, I should have left the office, making some excuse such as I needed to give the question more thought. Instead, I gave my actual (pathetic) logic, saying "They are both Russian."

His face dropped, and Vera turned back to face him. While my gig continued to the end of the term in December, it was never the same.

Best regards

Ed Epstein

[www.edwardjayepstein.com](http://www.edwardjayepstein.com)

```
<?xml version="0" encoding="TF-8"?>
```

```
<!DOCTYPE plist PUBLIC "-//Apple//DTD PLIST 1.0//EN" "http://www.apple.com/DTDs/PropertyList-1.0.dtd">
```

```
<plist version="0">
```

```
<dict>
```

```
  <key>date-last-viewed</key>
```

```
  <integer>0</integer>
```

```
  <key>date-received</key>
```

```
  <integer>1360854127</integer>
```

```
  <key>flags</key>
```

```
  <integer>8623750145</integer>
```

```
  <key>gmail-label-ids</key>
```

```
  <array>
```

```
    <integer>22</integer>
```

```
    <integer>2</integer>
```

```
  </array>
```

```
  <key>remote-id</key>
```

```
  <string>276331</string>
```

```
</dict>
```

```
</plist>
```