



Strong Opinions

Vladimir Nabokov

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In this collection of interviews, articles, and editorials, Nabokov ranges over his life, art, education, politics, literature, movies, and modern times, among other subjects. Strong Opinions offers his trenchant, witty, and always engaging views on everything from the Russian Revolution to the correct pronunciation of Lolita.

Strong Opinions Details

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From Reader Review Strong Opinions for online ebook

Lee says

Wholly worth it for variations on Vlad's representative themes (especially the sovereignty of specificity over abstraction, theories, ideas) always expressed in playful, oft-alliterative, exquisitely composed rhythmic (ie, Nabokovian) prose. Memorable aphorisms aplenty. Lepidoptera emphasis gets a little presh. Toward the end, editorials settling old scores with critics and nitpicking re: translation literalism paint VN as a bit of an aspergerian twit. Highly recommended WC reading, regardless.

Glenn Russell says

“I have never seen a more lucid, more lonely, better balanced mad mind than mine.”

? Vladimir Nabokov, Strong Opinions

Vladimir Nabokov lets us know directly that his every word recorded in these interviews was carefully and thoughtfully written out after having received, in writing, specific questions from the respective interviewers. In other words, in typical Nabokov fashion, his answers are the result of much reflection and written in solitude. The topics covered range from his childhood in Russia to Hollywood films, from his literary critics to beauties of language. To share a sample of what a reader will find in Nabokov's provocative answers to interviewer questions, below are a number of VN quotes along with my modest comments:

“I pride myself on being a person with no public appeal. I have never been drunk in my life. I never use schoolboy words of four letters. I have never worked in an office or in a coal mine. I have never belonged to any club or group. No creed or school has had any influence on me whatsoever. Nothing bores me more than political novels and the literature of social intent.” ----- No wonder Nabokov enjoyed chess problems, since, unlike an actual game of chess with an opponent, a chess problem permits a person to work out a solution in solitude. Personally, I very much enjoy the fact he preferred to live his life without direct public involvement or a clamoring to be in the limelight, he was never drunk or never had to resort to using four letter schoolboy words, he was never a joiner or ever once affiliated himself with a group or movement.

On writing his novels: “I find now that index cards are really the best kind of paper that I can use for the purpose. I don't write consecutively from the beginning to the next chapter and so on to the end. I just fill in the gaps of the picture, of this jigsaw puzzle which is quite clear in my mind, picking out a piece here and a piece there and filling out part of the sky and part of the landscape and part of the – I don't know, the carousing hunters.” ----- Such a unique approach – I can visualize VN penning a highly artful sentence on an index card and then, like an expert lepidopterist painstakingly pinning a butterfly correctly on a board, carefully placing the card at exactly the right spot in his card box. Observing how a great novelist developed his own highly personalized methodology in writing his novels can perhaps open us up to discover unconventional approaches to our own writing and art.

“I don't think that an artist should bother about his audience. His best audience is the person he sees in his shaving mirror every morning. I think that the audience an artist imagines, when he imagines that kind of a thing, is a room filled with people wearing his own mask.” -----Echoes of the Bard: “This above all else. To thy own self be true.” Ultimately, we have to live with our own writing, our own creation. If we take even a first step in abandoning our vision to placate, accommodate or please others, according to VN, we are no

longer a serious artist.

“A creative writer must study carefully the works of his rivals, including the Almighty. He must possess the inborn capacity not only of recombining but of re-creating the given world. In order to do this adequately, avoiding duplication of labor, the artist should know the given world. Imagination without knowledge leads no farther than the back yard of primitive art, the child’s scrawl on the fence, and the crank’s message in the market place. Art is never simple.” ----- It has been said again and again, if we want to be good writers, we must be good readers, reading widely and deeply. I recall even Stephen King in his book *On Writing* emphatically insists, as a first step in becoming a writer seeking publication and an appreciative audience, we need to make a lifetime practice of daily reading.

“I have no ear for music, a shortcoming I deplore bitterly. When I attend a concert – which happens about once in five years – I endeavor gamely to follow the sequence and relationship of sounds but cannot keep it up for more than a few minutes. Visual impressions, reflections of hands in lacquered wood, a diligent bald spot over a fiddle, these take over and soon I am bored beyond measure by the motions of the musicians.” --- ----- If you are committed to literature and the arts and have a weakness or two or three in any particular area, no need to despair as even the great Vladimir Nabokov didn’t have it all his own way in the world of the arts.

“I could never explain adequately to certain students in my literature classes, the aspects of good reading – the fact that you read an artist’s book not with your heart (the heart is a remarkably stupid reader), and not with your brain alone, but with your brain and spine. “Ladies and gentlemen, the tingle in the spine really tells you what the author felt and wished you to feel.” ----- Food for thought. I suspect the heart can play a large part, even a huge part, for many readers of fiction. My sense is Nabokov was warning his students of being overly sentimental in their assessment of literature.

“There are some varieties of fiction that I never touch – mystery stories, for instance, which I abhor, and historical novels. I also detest the so-called “powerful” novel – full of commonplace obscenities and torrents of dialogue.” ----- Tastes are so individual. *Kiss of the Spider Woman* by Manuel Puig is written almost entirely in dialogue. Does this disqualify it from being an excellent work of literature? My own judgement is “no” as each work should be assessed individually.

“I have never been able to see any generic difference between poetry and artistic prose. As a matter of fact, I would be inclined to define a good poem of any length as a concentrate of good prose, with or without the addition of recurrent rhythm and rhyme. The magic of prosody may improve upon what we call prose by bringing out the full flavor of meaning, but in plain prose there are also certain rhythmic patterns, the music of precise phrasing, the beat of thought rendered by recurrent peculiarities of idiom and intonation.” ----- Anyone familiar with *Lolita*, especially read by Jeremy Irons, knows Nabokov’s novel is pure poetry.

"Galsworthy, Dreiser, a person called Tagore, another called Maxim Gorky, a third called Romain Rolland, used to be accepted as geniuses, I have been perplexed and amused by fabricated notions about so-called “great books”. That, for instance, Mann’s asinine *Death in Venice* or Pasternak’s melodramatic and vilely written *Zhivago* or Faulkner’s corn-cobby chronicles can be considered “masterpieces,” or at least what journalists call “great books,” is to me an absurd delusion, as when a hypnotized person makes love to a chair.”----- Strong opinions, anyone? Ouch! That can really sting, Vladimir. William Faulkner’s bold innovations, including his novelistic construction and weaving of time, has provided inspiration for many first-rate authors, including a number of Latin American writers of magical realism. I included this VN quote as an example of just how lively and contentious his views and opinions.

White to play and mate in three. Nabokov enjoyed the icy solitude of chess problems.

Liina Bachmann says

The interviews are brilliant. In fact so good that the other two parts (letters to editors and articles) pale in comparison, although they are obviously well above average too.

Deary Darling says

No really, Dear N., tell us what you really think!

This is priceless for those fools among us who insist upon trying to know more of the author. Does he relent and allow us even a peek? Ever?

No.

It's fun, however, watching him NOT let us in. He is, and always shall be, the Master!

Jeff Jackson says

Nabokov as Mandarin, considerably less appealing than in his fictions, dishing out stentorian judgments from on high. The absolute worst place for a newcomer to start. For fans, there's no shortage of intentionally provocative opinions that should be taken with a barrel of salt (savaging such "mediocrities" as Doestoevsky, Thomas Mann, etc). He also offers the odd dazzling insight into his own work and brilliantly rips asunder decades worth of received wisdom. Worthwhile but proceed with caution.

s.penkevich says

I know more than I can express in words, and the little I can express would not have been expressed, had I not known more.

Vladimir Nabokov is a lion of literature. His writing is sleek, menacing and beautiful as it confidently marches through the savannas of languages. His words have claws and deadly jaws, and when he pounces it is a jaw-dropping display of sheer powerful grace with devastating results. *Strong Opinions* is a collection of Nabokov's interviews, essays and letters to editors that captures the charismatic brilliance of his words poised at non-fiction and biography. The title is quite fitting, as Nabokov doesn't shrink from loudly lambasting the works of those he dislikes¹ or proudly proclaiming his own opinions. Through this collections, Nabokov lets is glimpse the man behind the curtain—a very controlled glimpse, mind you—and offers incredible insight into the mind, life and thoughts on his own work.

We think not in words but in shadows of words.

Nabokov's genius grasp of language is relentless, even when removed from his fiction writing. It is humbling to know that English is not his first spoken language, though he deftly configures the English

Language to its maximum potential far more impressively than native English speakers. Even in his interviews (granted, some are formed by questions written to him to which he had the time to consider his responses and write them out in response) he is consistently mesmerizing in word choice and cadence, spurting out responses that even the most seasoned novelist would envy upon the page. Through *Strong Opinions*, we get Nabokov's views on his own works (the insight into *Lolita* is quite interesting, as well as learning that Nabokov wrote the screenplay for Kubrick's film and only spoke highly of it and the musical stage adaptation [I wish I could have seen that!], as well as defended the choice of a pre-teen actress in the roles), his teaching methods, his likes and dislikes in literature, and many autobiographical elements especially concerning Lepidoptera

Any reader always comes to their favorite authors wondering what their influences are. Who doesn't want to read the favorite novels of a favorite novelist? Nabokov not only gives you his opinions on what he loves, but more often than not examines what he despises.

Ever since the days when such formidable mediocrities as Galsworthy, Dreiser, Tagore, Maxim Gorky, Romain Rolland and Thomas Mann were being accepted as geniuses, I have been perplexed and amused by fabricated notions about so-called "great books." That, for instance, Mann's asinine "Death in Venice," or Pasternak's melodramatic, vilely written "Dr. Zhivago," or Faulkner's corn-cobby chronicles can be considered "masterpieces" or at least what journalists term "great books," is to me the sort of absurd delusion as when a hypnotized person makes love to a chair. My greatest masterpieces of twentieth century prose are, in this order: Joyce's "Ulysses"; Kafka's "Transformation"; Bely's "St. Petersburg," and the first half of Proust's fairy tale, "In Search of Lost Time.

Other authors that don't make the cut are Joseph Conrad (much time is spent on dissecting Conrad as a 'juvenile' writer only worthwhile to budding adolescents) and, shock and gasp for me too, Dostoevsky. However, when considering Nabokov's opinions on what makes a good book it is evident why Nabokov dislikes Dostoevsky². Nabokov often expresses distaste for any novel with a moral or social ideology as it's beating heart, and Dostoevsky often falls under criticism for having characters that are stand-ins for morals or ideas than being flesh-and-blood characters.

My advice to a budding literary critic would be as follows. Learn to distinguish banality. Remember that mediocrity thrives on "ideas." Beware of the modish message. Ask yourself if the symbol you have detected is not your own footprint. Ignore allegories. By all means place the "how" above the "what" but do not let it be confused with the "so what." Rely on the sudden erection of your small dorsal hairs. Do not drag in Freud at this point. All the rest depends on personal talent

Nabokov shys away from interpretation of his own works, refusing to accept any critiques, even positive ones, as being true to the creation. Nabokov wishes us to view it all as a game, a simple 'aesthetic bliss' and laughs off any insistence on underlying meaning. This calls into question the deconstructionist interpretations where we must remove the author and asses only the text. It also seems like Nabokov enjoys playing games with readers beyond the printed word, much like David Lynch who claims nobody has ever had an accurate interpretation on *Mulholland Drive*. This keeps the game alive and fresh and keeps us guessing. It also seems a bit of a screen, and we have to accept that not only do we read works like *Lolita* through an unreliable narrator, but also through an unreliable author³.

Many will walk away from this collection viewing Nabokov as a pompous ass, though that is the sort of thing that made me love him all the more. Apparently he was also a difficult professor and admits to failing students for spending time bothering with the relationship between Ulysses and The Odyssey without knowing who the man in the brown coat is. His teaching methods are of great interest, however, as Nabokov

insists on strict attention to detail. The same sort of attention to detail must be adhered to in understanding and decoding his own novels. Nabokov often mentions that he felt maps of Dublin or Gregor Samsa's room were pivotal to the understanding of their respective books.

I have never seen a more lucid, more lonely, better balanced mad mind than mine.

A must for any Nabokov fan, *Strong Opinions* is exactly what its title promises. From butterflies to belittling the classics he disliked, this collection is a great glimpse into the mind of one of the greatest novelists of all time.

4/5

"Many accepted authors simply do not exist for me. Their names are engraved on empty graves, their books are dummies, they are complete nonentities insofar as my taste in reading is concerned. Brecht, Faulkner, Camus, many others, mean absolutely nothing to me, and I must fight a suspicion of conspiracy against my brain when I see blandly accepted as "great literature" by critics and fellow authors Lady Chatterley's copulations or the pretentious nonsense of Mr. Pound, that total fake.

¹ One thing I greatly respected about Nabokov was that he refused to speak ill of currently publishing writers and even refused to write reviews as he hated to think his opinion could damage their current career. It does seem like an unspoken message that he believes their careers are damaging enough to themselves.

² Aside from Tolstoy, Nabokov seems to have very few positives to say about Russian literature, refusing to agree with interviewers when they ask about his Russian biographies as indication of affinity with those authors. However, Nabokov seems to refuse to admit to any influences beyond his own creativity and after being asked what he learned from Joyce he responds 'nothing.'

³ An extra special Thank You to Warwick for providing that brilliant analysis.

Dhandayutha says

[However, I could never explain adequately to certain students in my literature classes, the aspects of good reading—the fact that you read an artist's book not with your heart (the heart is a remarkably stupid reader), and not with your brain alone, but with your brain and spine. "Ladies and gentlemen, the tingle in the spine really tells you what the author felt and wished you to feel."]

Nathan says

"I think like a genius, I write like a distinguished author, and I speak like a child." Thus begins the author's introduction to this late life collection of exuberant l'esprit d'escalier.

The interviews are, as he rarely misses an opportunity to point out, ultimately another one of his creations. More revealing of his quotidian goings-on than his memoir, one is still presented the information in the same manner as in his novels and lectures: precise, lapidary, preserved, controlled. Nabokov's boastful comment that his position at the lectern was so regular as to be superannuated by a tape recorder is made repeatedly manifest here. The questions are reviewed and approved of ahead of time, and his answers, never allowed to wander too far in the direction of the conversational or confessional, change from interview to interview only in the direction of aesthetic improvement – and even then only at a glacial pace. The largely unvarying answers to common questions are a collection of animatronic devices Nabokov gleefully employs along a closed circuit to both satisfy and frustrate the questioners' various tactics. The reader is thus forced to approach his life - his wit, observations, loves, vexations - as a literary product, a carefully crafted verisimilitude that, though given the illusion of respiration, is in reality an obligate anaerobe of Nabokov's literary world.

The parts regarding his friend Edmund Wilson's attempt to dismantle his Eugene Onegin translation are the most striking example and exception of outside elements getting into Nabokov's closed system – albeit still in forms of his own choosing. Without losing the cool of his lofty intellect, he is confronted in Wilson's piece with a more hot-tempered and much less scrupulous mind, and forced to publicly touch upon issues outside his treatment of EO. Besides the scholarly, linguistic, and aesthetic points of dispute - dispatched methodically and with his usual jujitsu wit -, Nabokov is forced to confront a much less logical problem: a resentful colleague and a friendship that seems to have been frictious for some time before it came to a head in this dust-up, which seems like a proxy war for larger (smaller?) issues.

That Wilson – an American who seems to have attained a basic level of competency in Russian – would publicly challenge Nabokov – a trilingual native Russian – over matters he clearly had no serious understanding of is a potently surreal display of professional resentment. None of his disagreements are borne out – and often end up exposing his own deficient understanding of the language and the literature in ways seemingly too perfectly ironic to be overlooked by a scholar and intellectual of his stature – and the review ends up functioning on some level as the beginning of a desperate gambit to smuggle bizarre, often Kinbotian, criticisms of Nabokov's private life into a public debate.

The image from Wilson's published diaries of himself, a guest in Nabokov's house in upstate New York, glowering at his host from across a modestly crowded room is the one that seems to typify their later friendship. Here was the native American – former host to this formerly obscure foreign writer when he first crossed the Atlantic seeking refuge in the early 40s – now a decade or so on watching his fusty Russian friend achieve artistic, scholastic, and monetary success in this surrogate homeland, while his only success was, and was to remain, as critic.

I can't imagine a person unfamiliar with at least most of Nabokov's oeuvre would enjoy this book in its entirety. Much of it deals with the author's art, scholarship, politics, hobbyhorses, and biography in a way that would probably be alienating to the uninitiated. However there is a lot here for anyone interested in either an introduction to Nabokov or a view of a generously explicated creative process – the challenge is finding it. Unfortunately there is no index, but interviews 6 and 15 are standouts both for the information they provide, and also for the acumen and thoughtfulness of the interviewers themselves.

Omololu Adeniran says

Strong Opinions indeed. Nabokov has a lot to say about his art, art in general, his process, his views on other writers and his literary feuds. One gets the sense that he's a highly intelligent, and openly eccentric man of

many talents.

What makes this book especially great in my opinion is his unwillingness to pander to those less educated than he, and to the 'school of resentment' as Harold Bloom calls it i.e those whose sole passion is to take offense on the world's behalf.

There's no shortage of wit and insight. Phrases and sentences like these litter the book:

“There is only one school, that of talent,”

"Satire is a lesson, parody is a game.”

“Genius still means to me, in my Russian fastidiousness and pride of phrase, a unique, dazzling gift, the genius of James Joyce, not the talent of Henry James.”

“Freedom of speech, freedom of thought, freedom of art. The social or economic structure of the ideal state is of little concern to me.”

“I have never belonged to any political party but have always loathed and despised dictatorships and police states, as well as any sort of oppression. This goes for regimentation of thought, governmental censorship, racial or religious persecution, and all the rest of it. Whether or not my simple credo affects my writing does not interest me.”

“We must also remember—and this is very important—that the only people who flourish under all types of government are the Philistines.”

“But what do you think of Sartre’s remark?

Nothing. I’m immune to any kind of opinion and I just don’t know what an “anti-novel” is specifically. Every original novel is “anti-” because it does not resemble the genre or kind of its predecessor.”

The mixture of unreality and illusion may have led some people to consider you mystifying and writing full of puzzles. What is your answer to people who say you are just plain obscure?

“To stick to the crossword puzzle in their Sunday paper.”

"I pride myself on being a person with no public appeal. I have never been drunk in my life. I never use schoolboy words of four letters. I have never worked in an office or in a coal mine. I have never belonged to any club or group. No creed or school has had any influence on me whatsoever. Nothing bores me more than political novels and the literature of social intent.”

Eric says

A book for cultists. Non-cultists hold this book up as Nabokov at his arrogant, disdainful worst. They miss the real human drama here: Nabokov's fierce adherence to the aristocratic ideal of his youth--an ideal of unflappable poise and "manly" composure--in the face of the death, exile, material deprivation and incalculable emotional loss that marked his adult life. Hold your head high, remember you're a nobleman. He admirably eludes all attempts to get him to complain, to Oprah-ishly broadcast his private suffering. My favorite exchange comes when one interviewer touches a particularly tender point of Nabokov's pain, asking

him how he feels about that fact that all of his books are banned in the country of his birth. With superhuman sang-froid, he replies: "It is Russia's loss, not mine."

Domenico Fina says

A un critico in erba direi: impara a distinguere la banalità. Ricorda che la mediocrità prospera sulle idee. Guardati dai messaggi alla moda. Domandati se il simbolo che hai scoperto non sia l'impronta del tuo piede. Ignora le allegorie. Metti a tutti i costi il "come" al di sopra del "che cosa". Fidati dell'improvvisa erezione dei peluzzi sulla schiena. A questo punto non tirare in ballo Freud. Tutto il resto dipende dal talento personale. (Vladimir Nabokov, *Intransigenze*. 1973)

Nabokov era considerato un uomo ritroso, elitario: detta così non significa niente, ma per fortuna lui lo spiega meglio. Nelle interviste Nabokov vuole sapere prima le domande e si prepara con anticipo le risposte, ammette di non essere portato per l'improvvisazione, non è un grande parlatore, invidia la spontaneità nel parlato. Questo, dice, lo sa anche sua moglie, quando le si mette a raccontare un sogno o un fatto del giorno si blocca a metà racconto, facendo dei lunghi e ripetuti ehm ehm, in cerca di un'immagine esatta. L'intervistatore gli fa notare che il suo 'impaccio' non gli impedisce di essere un validissimo professore universitario di letteratura. Risponde che sono lezioni che ha imparato a memoria, preparato ed elaborato in decenni, quindi non improvvisa mai niente. Questo aspetto di Nabokov mette l'interlocutore a suo agio, fa quasi tenerezza, come un personaggio di Nabokov stesso, Pnin, uno dei suoi romanzi più toccanti, oppure come quando ammette di non avere orecchio per la musica e di affaticarsi ai concerti, una cosa che lo rammarica profondamente; poi Nabokov torna ad essere l'intransigente, quello che non sopporta la sciatteria, le parolacce, non le dice e non le scrive, non si è mai ubriacato in vita sua, non ritiene di essere un uomo interessante per il pubblico, non fa parte di nessun circolo, "le cose che odio sono semplici: stupidità, oppressione, crimine, crudeltà, musica leggera". Ama le farfalle e la scrittura. Come lettore non legge gialli, fantascienza, fantasy, noir. Il volume pubblicato da Adelphi è una lunga, splendida, anomala, lezione di letteratura. Perentoria come Nabokov sapeva essere. I suoi libri del Novecento sono "L'Ulisse" di Joyce, la prima parte de "Alla ricerca del tempo perduto" di Proust, "La metamorfosi" di Kafka. Dei romanzi russi ama "Anna Karenina", non sopporta alcuni grandi scrittori che ritiene umorali e sentimentali, di Dostoevskij dice che era un giornalista portato per la scrittura, sovrabbondante, maldestro e volgare, che le sue prostitute dalla grande anima e i suoi assassini dal cuore tenero non si possono sopportare. Trascura il fatto che Dostoevskij, piaccia o meno, ha scritto anche opere brevi di grande precisione come *La mite* o *Memorie dal sottosuolo*. Ama Flaubert. I romanzi più grandi dell'Ottocento come *Madame Bovary* e *Anna Karenina* sono storie di immaginazione finita male. Con Faulkner è particolarmente ingiusto, quando fa riferimento alle 'pannocchiesche cronache di Faulkner', alludendo allo stupro in Santuario (1931) in cui una ragazza viene violentata con una pannocchia. Dimentica che Faulkner aveva scritto nel 1929 un libro geometricamente perfetto come "L'Urlo e il furore", ancora oggi tra i capolavori del Novecento, nel 1930 aveva pubblicato "Mentre morivo" e nel 1932 "Luce d'agosto". Romanzi impressionanti per potenza espressiva. Non cita mai "L'uomo senza qualità" di Robert Musil, uno dei libri più importanti del Novecento. D'accordo è un romanzo di digressione che non si chiude, in cui un ipercritico non si accontenta della vita terrena di relazione e neppure dei messaggi religiosi di un dopo vita. Doveva intitolarsi *l'Incontentabilità*, forse, ma resta tra i più pressanti e acuti di tutti.

Nabokov torna e ritorna sul concetto di *Poshlust*, un termine vasto, che riprende da Gogol, difficile da definire. *Poshlust* per Nabokov è tutto ciò che manovra e risiede nelle menti contemporanee pigre, inclini agli automatismi, compresi il richiamo ai miti e al simbolismo Freudiano, "il filsteismo in ogni sua fase, le profondità fasulle, la pseudoletteratura rozza, idiota e disonesta, la *poshlust* si annida nei commenti sociologici, nei messaggi a favore dell'umanità, nell'attenzione eccessiva alla razza o alla classe e nel genericume giornalistico che tutti conosciamo."

- In che lingua pensa? (domanda l'intervistatore).

- Non penso in nessuna lingua, penso per immagini. Non credo che la gente pensi in una lingua. Io penso per immagini e di tanto in tanto la schiuma delle onde cerebrali forma una frase in russo o in inglese, ma questo è tutto.

Hadrian says

"Strong Opinions" is a very fitting title for this meandering collection of Nabokov's interviews, essays and even a selection of his work in lepidoptery.

His distinctive aristocratic tone is easily heard - he speaks nostalgically of his life in White Russia, his facile musical comprehension of English-French-Russian, and he sneers down upon an astonishing array of writers, from Dostoyevsky to Hemingway to Pasternak to Pound. When he is asked on his opinions on the literary word, he remarks, without a hint of irony, "It's a wonderful view from up here."

Yet despite, or because of, these bull-dog snarls, there is still much to like about him. His fierce devotion to his twin crafts, writing and butterflies, and what little writing he does praise. He admires Borges, Anna Karenina, and some of Gogol, and adored Kubrick's adaptation of Lolita.

If you don't like Nabokov to begin with, this will make you despise him. If you're already a fan, you might have a change of heart anyway, but there is also the chance that you will recognize his faults, cherish them, and venture forwards anyway. V.N., of course, has to have the last word: "I can quite understand people wanting to know my writings, but I cannot sympathise with anybody wanting to know me."

John says

Stubborn old man carried his bulk-dictionary everywhere.

Even when the newer edition came out.

John David says

I read this mostly to supplement my reading and, I was hoping, my understanding of "Lolita," which I've also recently read. "Strong Opinions" is a good choice if you want to get an idea of Nabokov's ideas and preferences and where he's coming from as a writer of fiction. And "strong opinions" is really no joke. The man has some of the most unorthodox opinions, especially concerning the relative merit of other writers, I've ever read. The last third contains several "Letters to the Editor" of various publications (most of which are negligible, in my much more pusillanimous opinion) and articles, a few of which cover his interest in Lepidoptera, which I assume most people will simply skip. I always read an entire book cover to cover before rating and reviewing it, but I openly admit to skimming over these contributions. In many of them, including an overly lengthy article on his opinion of Edmund Wilson's relationship with and translation of "Eugene Onegin," he delights in being particularly pedantic, tetchy, and cruel.

As I said, the most important part of this will be, for most people, the interviews. While the themes of the interviews tend to become a little repetitive, I found them important in thinking about Nabokov's fiction. He

hates the classical “novel of ideas” with a passion. He thinks many of his Russian novelist confreres have been guilty of the moralism that so often accompanies these ideas, especially in the cases of Gogol and Dostoyevsky. (He abhors Gogol’s fascination with religion, and Dostoyevsky’s clunky, bumbling characters.) He thinks that Hemingway and Conrad are “writers of books for boys,” and he thinks that Faulkner is horrible – and this is only the tip of the iceberg regarding authors on whom he has rather unusual opinions. He thinks that “Anna Karenina” can’t be understood apart from a thorough knowledge of the shape of a particular kind of trolley car, and “Ulysses” is meaningless if you don’t have a detailed mental map of Joyce’s Dublin at the ready. Ideas and history are for the birds as far as fiction is concerned; heightened, unadulterated aesthetic enjoy is what really fascinates him. His politics, if you’re interested in them at all, he describes as “liberal,” yet seems to be a rather ardent defender of intervention in Vietnam and American interests broadly speaking. He thinks Freud is a joke, and constantly makes him of him in his fiction. (Okay, perhaps at least a few people can agree on that last point.)

What’s most surprising about this collection is that the pieces were chosen by Nabokov himself, and he obviously couldn’t care less about coming off as a caviling, bitchy curmudgeon, or advertising that he didn’t mind ending a decades-long friend over differences in translating a nineteenth-century Russian poem. If you don’t share his opinions, he has no problem calling you a philistine. But why should he care? “What’s your position in the world of letters, Mr. Nabokov?” “The view is pretty good from up here,” he replies. It’s good to be the king.

Lee Kofman says

Nabokov is such a true individual, such a wonderful grump. I found myself agreeing with so many of his opinions – on identity politics, on Death in Venice, on the stupidity of extreme left in America and even on what he calls ‘soft music’. Although I’m sure if I met him in real life I’d not have liked him much – his lack of modesty, his lack of hedonism. But then he’s hilarious and his humor is wonderfully redemptive. The book is terribly serious, particularly when it comes to word-by-word issues and yet the big picture is infused with irreverence, with a sort of mad joissance. There were so many places where I laughed out loud. This is one of those books that I’ll probably return to, plus a book that made me feel I became a 'bettered' human being for reading it.
