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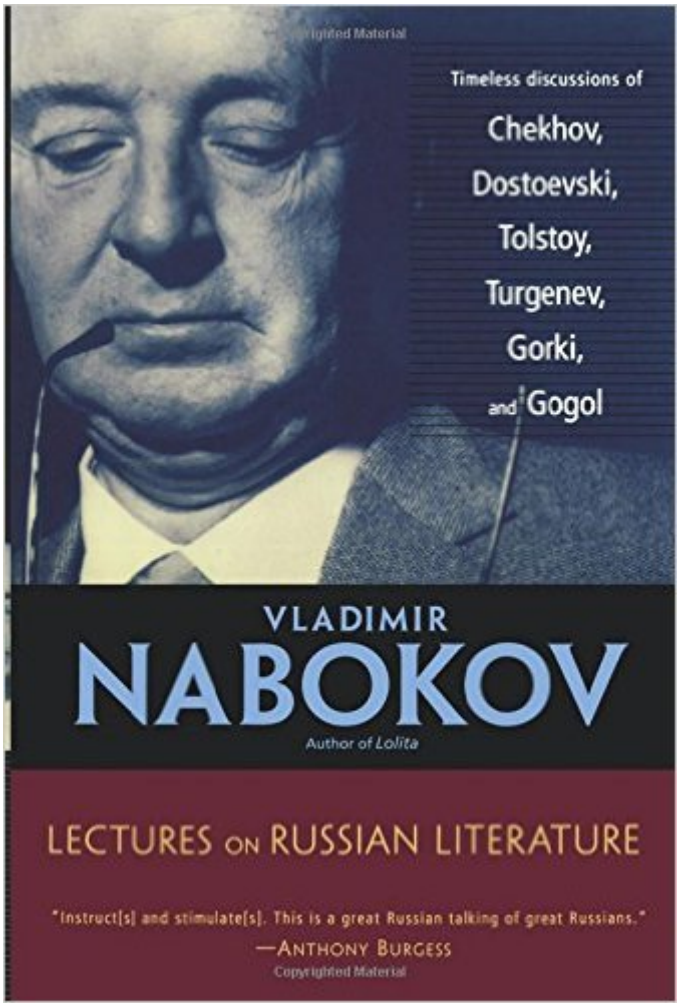
Lectures On Russian Literature



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Synopsis

The authorâ ™s observations on the great nineteenth-century Russian writers-Chekhov, Dostoevsky, Gogol, Gorky, Tolstoy, and Turgenev. â œThis volume... never once fails to instruct and stimulate. This is a great Russian talking of great Russiansâ • (Anthony Burgess). Edited and with an Introduction by Fredson Bowers; illustrations.

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Customer Reviews

Imagine you attend Cornell, you smart devil you. You wander into the Lit class and a hawk-browed very serious tall man with glinting eyes leans out at you over the faded wooden podium. Behind him on the blackboard are a maze of drawings, dates, crisscrossing lines and circles. You look again at your syllabus - Russian Literature in translation. The black bell above the door rings, the tired muted clatter of a halting iron clanger. A rustle of books, restless students, and dead air from the closed winter storm windows rises up for just a second, then, hovering in the room shrinks to silence. The teacher begins, "Tolstoy is the greatest Russian writer of prose fiction. Leaving aside his percursors Pushkin and Lermentov, we might list the greatest artists in Russian prose thus: first, Tolstoy; second, Gogol; third, Checkov; fourth, Turgenev. This is rather like grading student’s papers and no doubt Dostoevski and Saltykov are waiting at the door of my office to discuss their low marks." So begin the lectures on Anna Karenina. By the time Nabokov is done you will know more than you thought possible about the novel. You’ll be comfortably familiar with the inside of an 1872 Russian railroad passenger car traveling as the night express between Moscow and St. Peterburg. To help

you picture it, Nabokov draws a highly detailed sketch, with the position of each occupant, doors, windows, stove; even the direction of travel is rememebered. Wonderful as all this is, for sheer incandescent brilliance, no essay on any work in Russian Literature by any critic comes close to Nabokov's examination of Gogol's Dead Souls. Unlike Nabokov's own listing of Russian prose masters, he also comes in second as well as first, with the fulsomely captivating essay on Anna Karenina.

This is a very good book that offers insights into great Russian authors, their works, and techniques. Chekhov the master of the detail that illuminates the whole character or scene. Tolstoy with his great cinematic eye, for the gestures, and movements of his characters, and whom Nabokov credits for being the first author to use the stream of consciousness technique, although at a very rudimentary level. Gogol who wistfully humanized his descriptions.But despite it's insightfulness , one of the annoying things about Nabokov's book on Russian Literature is his idea that the language of a literature seperates it from "a universal art to a national one," i.e, to fully appreciate literature one must understand its language, which may in fact be true, as Nabokov shows us how various translaters of Russian literature, omit, distort, make banal, and prim the works they are translating. Also Nabokov's requirements of a good translator seem impossible: the translator in Nabokov's opinion must be on the level of the writer whom he is transating. But to create a book on Russian Literature and analyze it only to put up the disclaimer that you cannot truly appreciate or care about Russian literature because you cannot understand Russian seems a poor way to introduce or share insights to Russian Literature.My other pet peeve about this book is his analysis of Dostoevsky. In Nabokov's opinion, Dostoevsky wrote crime novels, about crazy people, and crime novels in Nabokov's opinion cannot aspire to art, and crazy people have no humanity and therefore their actions cannot be taken seriously.

Nabokov is a native of world literature. So it is no surprise that as he is taking the reader on a guided tour of his land, his strong literary opinions easily navigate centuries and continents of literary landscape. However, being an emotional as well as scholarly narrator, Nabokov naturally gravitates to his favorite corners of the world. He is a guide giving a tour of his native city and adding more intimate detail and color when talking about the streets where he grew up. Russian literature must occupy a very special place in his heart, since it permeated his Russian childhood, his longing for which he so beautifully described in "Speak, Memory". In "Lectures on Russian Literature", Nabokov is noticeably closer to the Russian writers than he is to the European writers in

his previous volume, "Lectures on Literature" (itself very enjoyable). His spectrum of vision is wider, embracing multiple works of a writer and his personal qualities. The resulting picture is richer, the contrasts of the temperaments and styles make the writers stand out: Chekhov's altruism and Turgenev's vanity, Gogol's impressionist colors and Gorky's clichÃ©s, Dostoevsky's cold reason overwhelming his art and Tolstoy's "mighty" art "transcending the sermon", the believable and coherent worlds of Chekhov or Tolstoy and Dostoevsky's internally contradicting world or Gorky's "schematic characters and the mechanical structure of the story"...Here Nabokov continues his thought that a writer is mostly a creative artist, rather than a historian or philosopher.

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