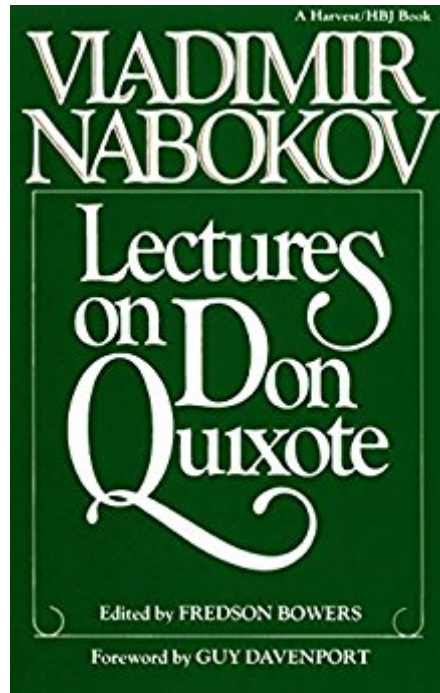




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Lectures On Don Quixote



Synopsis

A fastidiously shaped series of lectures based on a chapter-by-chapter synopsis of the Spanish classic. Rejecting the common interpretation of Don Quixote as a warm satire, Nabokov perceives the work as a catalog of cruelty through which the gaunt knight passes. Edited and with a Preface by Fredson Bowers.

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Customer Reviews

I bought and read Nabokov's "Lectures on Literature" which is based on his European literature course that he taught at Cornell in the 1950s. That is an excellent guide to seven well known novels: "Mansfield Park, Bleak House, Madame Bovary, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, The Walk by Swann's Place, The Metamorphosis, and Ulysses." In that set of course notes he dissects each book and spends about 40 pages or so on each novel discussing style, structure, etc. He spends more time on Ulysses and less on Kafka's "The Metamorphosis." The present book is a bit different. He prepared only six lectures that he gave in the spring of 1952 at Harvard for the course Humanities 2. The aim is to describe and give an overall context for the work "Don Quixote." The notes still exist in six manilla folders and they are the basis of the present book edited by Fredson Bowers. The course

starts with a very brief introduction in the same style as the Cornell lectures with sketches of maps, etc. Next, he describes in detail the character of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza. Those are the first two chapters, or about 24 pages. Then he describes the structure of the book for another 25 pages, again with copies of Nabokov's actual class notes. Cruelty and mystification are covered in a similar but lengthy analysis, followed by The Chronicler's Theme, and Victory and Defeats. The second half of the book is a chapter by chapter summary of both volumes I and II. In total, it is just over 200 pages of notes. As Guy Davenport states in his introduction, the book puts most other teachers to shame who attempt to teach Don Quixote in a week. It is refreshing and detailed, and as Nabokov points out, this is an analysis of a book that evokes cruel laughter.

"... one of the most bitter and barbarous books ever penned" said Nabokov about "Don Quixote". Exposing the flood of physical and emotional abuse inflicted on the half insane knight and his largely average squire is at the heart of these lectures. In the early 50's, when Nabokov delivered his lectures on "Don Quixote" at Harvard, this was a radically new take on the classic novel which most critics considered good-natured and almost pastoral. For Nabokov, however, this position was quite in line with his signature irreverent views. He has always been sensitive to human suffering and considered pity for human condition one of the main attributes of art (in his "Lectures on Literature", for example, he especially noted compassion for the lame girl in "Ulysses" and Gregor's quiet suffering as a beetle in "Metamorphosis"). Building up on the themes of cruelty and insanity, Nabokov points out that in 1600's both were enjoyed as entertainment. The raw cruelty of 3,000 lashes that Sancho is to receive, or Don Quixote's suspension by the hand for two hours during which he "bellows like a bull", or the sick pleasure that many of the book's characters derive from Don Quixote's insanity and from playing into it - all that was run of the mill fun in Cervantes's Europe. Nabokov believes that this crude entertainment was the main source of the book's appeal for the readers when the book came out. The novel's structure (which in Nabokov's world is second only to style) is really nonexistent: "The book belongs essentially to a primitive form, to the loosely strung, higgledy-pickled, variegated picaresque type". Nabokov notes that the many inconsistencies in the book Cervantes seems to either ignore or simply attribute to magic.

This is another great publication from Nabokov's "Lectures on Literature" series. In "Lectures on Don Quixote", Nabokov examines many of the themes that he would revisit in later works of fiction - most notably cruelty (Invitation to a Beheading, Bend Sinister, Lolita), madness (The Defense, Lolita, Pale Fire, Look at the Harlequins, Ada), the conflation of illusion and reality (again The

Defense, Lolita, Pale Fire), and the nature of identity (Real Life of Sebastian Knight). In fact, as Guy Davenport deftly points out in the forward, Don Quixote almost seems like the initial template for Lolita given the treatment of similar themes such as the "generative power of delusions" and obsessions combined with the "journey" as the "harmonizing intuition" of the two works. I might add that Cervantes' parody of chivalry is similar to Lolita's parody of the detective novel and that elements of the Humbert/Lolita relationship can be found in Don Quixote's interactions with Sancho Panza. One quibble is that Nabokov seems convinced that Cervantes' cruel/sadistic humor at Don Quixote and Sancho Panza's expense is meant to be funny rather than illicit the disgust which Nabokov emits - although I am not so sure. As Cervantes' narrator states, "in his opinion, the deceivers are as mad as the deceived, and that the duke and duchess came very close to seeming like fools since they went to such lengths to deceive two fools." Elsewhere he writes that "jests that cause pain are not jests and entertainments are not worthwhile if they injure another." Perhaps Cervantes was toying with his readers' internal sense of morality as Nabokov would do some 350 years later.

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