



## Pnin

*Vladimir Nabokov , David Lodge (Introduction)*

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**Pnin** Vladimir Nabokov , David Lodge (Introduction)

One of the best-loved of Nabokov's novels, *Pnin* features his funniest and most heart-rending character. Professor Timofey Pnin is a haplessly disoriented Russian émigré precariously employed on an American college campus in the 1950s. Pnin struggles to maintain his dignity through a series of comic and sad misunderstandings, all the while falling victim both to subtle academic conspiracies and to the manipulations of a deliberately unreliable narrator.

Initially an almost grotesquely comic figure, Pnin gradually grows in stature by contrast with those who laugh at him. Whether taking the wrong train to deliver a lecture in a language he has not mastered or throwing a faculty party during which he learns he is losing his job, the gently preposterous hero of this enchanting novel evokes the reader's deepest protective instinct.

Serialized in *The New Yorker* and published in book form in 1957, *Pnin* brought Nabokov both his first National Book Award nomination and hitherto unprecedented popularity.

## Pnin Details

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## From Reader Review Pnin for online ebook

### Anthony Vacca says

Poor, poor Pnin - pronounced pu-neen, or, as one character hears the name, "like a cracked ping pong ball" - is the somber hero and namesake of Nabokov's fourth and bittersweet novel written in English, and was composed partly in conjunction with *Lolita* as a vacation for the Russian writer from the parasitic mind of that particular novel's narrator, everyone's favorite European pedophile, Humbert Humbert, or just H.H. for short. But back to *Pnin* and poor, poor Pnin. Told from the point of view of a nearly omniscient narrator (whose identity is veiled for the majority of the novel and whose affinity for our book's hero is a fairly dubious bit of posturing), *Pnin* relates the travels and travails (which, of both, there are many) of the eponymous Russian scholar, from the cancerous confines of Communist Russia to the petty academic contrivances and professional backstabbing of a New England campus, all the while maintaining his inherent sense of dignity and decency. And that is what this novel is all about: having dignity and decency. Whether being chased off by thuggish political reactionaries, emotionally dissected by a treacherous wife, being cheated and ridiculed by two-faced colleagues, or having every flicker of a meaningful relationship snuffed out by the cruel caprices of an unseen authorial hand, whose five fiendish fingers hide their cold, vampiric touch within a glove of velvet prose. But dignity and decency: these are works of human art that make humanity seem like not such a bad proposition after all. So even though popular instances of humanity often resemble – and with such cavalier ease – the behavior of leeches, lizards, and lice, there are inconsistencies in the programming; and one has to hope these instances count, even in fiction. Maybe not as realized a work as other Nabokovs, nor is it the most structurally sound novel around; but poor, poor Pnin's dignity and decency gave me a pocket of hope to hide my head in from the always descending smother of doom that is you and you and you and mainly always me.

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### Jacob Overmark says

Timofey Pnin ... poor old fellow. You have been analysed to an extent you would otherwise only expect on a couch at the psychiatrist.

After all, you are only a slightly confused middle aged Russian male émigré trying to navigate in scholarly surroundings. You are not without ambition, you are capable in your own field, but you will never reach the halls of Ivy League.

You have taken with you the traditions and schools of thought from your homeland, but it is never enough to secure you the break-through you deep down feel you deserve.

On the other hand, you are somewhat content with what you have, and take some pride in being the stranger, the outsider, if only ... if only you could understand the mechanism driving the circumstances.

Do you have a goal, a quest, somewhere you want to go?

This is the hard part. You are just paddling around in a small boat without rudder, and your compass is not designed for use in the land of the free.

I hope your forward journey will be a pleasant one, that you will find a place where you feel you belong.

When your small car drive into the sunset never to return, I will miss you.

I will miss the way you demonstrate that life is not Instagram-perfect, but even the odd uncle do see glimpses of happiness once in a while.

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### Stephen P says

If in these beginning pages Nabokov is laying out how to read this work I can only smile, which I have been doing unnoticed since I opened the covers, and conclude that beneath the voice of erudition lies the eye wink of humor, underlined by the cunning of acerbic wit. All of this, each line will contribute to the meaning of the narrative, while the narrative itself will be a major event.

I shouldn't forget, even though I don't know what it means at this point, but I am reading it aloud to myself. Not out loud but in my mind I speak the words and again not realizing, am moving my lips around the sounds of the words.

It begins with Pnin on a coach car of a train by himself. We learn he is on the wrong train. There is only one train for him. Will he find it?

The camera fades into his life as a Professor of Russian at a small college. In the professor's Russian class is but a handful of young students. Wanting to add humor he takes out an old Russian book leafing through it for some time to build up the tension that will lead to the guffaws as it did and does for him. As he reads he laughs till tears run down his cheeks. His students who do not have the knowledge of Russian vernacular to get this aging and literary-aligned humor, each in their own style are laughing at him laughing. A contagion. An airborne virus. He is clearly on the wrong...

He and I are back on the wrong train. I may just stay on the wrong train. I never thought how much fun that may be. All the unexpected adventures. Living ones life on the wrong train can be a vital life or... a life isolated and sad. An early sign, this scene of wit yet excruciating pain for the reader, shows that Pnin has been extricated from his life, extricated from time, extricated from himself, in the aloneness of exile. The first shadow is cast though not spreading across the surface of buoyancy .

Interesting, he is described as completely bald tan and vigorous looking. Even as he ages he maintains some of this. There was for me a vast dissonance between this and my internal image of him as a frail old man. An intricacy barely noticed in its passages.

So, now I will turn the page to the actual seventh page of the text. Whew. Who knew? At 185 pages it will take weeks to finish. Weeks of pleasure. Returning to each paragraph read not for analysis but the sheer ephemeral floating amongst the rising words and bliss of cherished sound.

It is never a matter of fighting to remain within the narrative. It flows on in its gossamer weave. Each word though calls for an admiration of its centrally carved space cradling the lone thread of letters sculpted for its fit. The carved space awaits its find for the sonority and the finely honed Nabokovian distinctions creating crystal lines outlining what only can be.

Pnin is a man who lives alone but is not lonely. Renting a room in a house he moves frequently around the area of Waindell and its University. His classes are few and ill attended. He doesn't care. His life of order is structured around his love of scholarship. Slipping into the library following his teaching he quickly vanishes into his research for his project he has been working on for years. He does not avoid reality but chooses to reside within the reality which he knows and understands, has sentimental and nostalgic feelings as well. This is a profound exploration of reality, identity, without the profundity. Rather it is woven within the seamless prose. Did I see an eye's-wink? A wry smile half hidden? I love him being here with me and my living within the prose he offers. It is hard for me to imagine with the news blaring catastrophe nightly that ours is a good world but here for 185 pages it is. It is moments like these when I can't believe how lucky I am. There are books! There are masters of craft! Judging by my shelves, more than I will be able to read in my lifetime.

Even this though is a segue-way into the past. This is what exists for him. The traditions and conventions to join the dots needed for comfort or to who and what he is? Joining other Russian expats means listening to

and be encouraged in assimilating into this new culture. What hails around him is a world which holds no interest. The present and future waver in the gray air with no beckoned finger or lured wink of an eye.

The narrator is under no such constraints and in third person omniscient, we view through such magnificent set pieces that I wanted to place each in its own cushioned box and store beneath the sealed glass of a jeweled display. But then this narrator at brief instances switches into first person without a shimmer in the reader's eye. Then at the end a masterful transition where in first person present, the narrator introduces us to the young Pnin. We discover him as a rose cheeked youth, an excellent student, vital, growing up. It is disconcerting in a lovely way. This sad man we have known for so long was once a youth? Smart and open eyed? But how...

Ah. The revolution in Russia. The war. Displacement from all he knows. Can he continue to hold back time without suffering the abrasions of red slitted wounds? The final passage is a perfect example of Nabokovian prose and a wondrous end to this beloved book.

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### **Agnieszka says**

I had a professor, in fact he had no professor's title, but we always addressed him that way. So, I had a professor who taught me maths. No, actually he was trying to teach me, he was doing his best to familiarize me with secrets of the queen of science. Alas ! I truly felt pity for him since I was stupendously immune to that knowledge. I was standing at the blackboard attempting to solve some mysterious to me equation and professor, waving his hand, would sigh then *get out of my sight, please* . Even today this recollection brings smile to my face. He was extraordinary teacher, demanding when it needed and lenient when he knew that his efforts after all would go down the drain. Fortunately for me he was not a type of crusader and knew which battles were lost before even started.

He used to accompany us to many school outing and I had opportunity to know him also from more private side. I remember, it was shortly after the shooting of John Lennon and we wanted somehow commemorate him, and professor then submitted the plan to plant the trees. So we went to the forest district and planted them. Lennon's oaks. Or our wintry foray to the mountains and New Year's Eve spent in the snowbound tiny church where brethren offered to us hot tea. It tasted exquisitely in that cold night.

He was charming man with great sense of humour. But there was about him, when I come to think about it now, some air of sadness and melancholia. I see him entering the class and throwing a register on his desk to stand at the window without a word for several minutes, sometimes even whole lesson. He came across as someone absent-minded and nonchalant. And a bit careless about his clothes in contrast to our other teacher who was very pedantic and used to wear his socks always under the colour of his shirts ( oh dear, these pink socks !). Oh, happy days.

I'm not sure where this rambling and digressive writing is leading me since I was going to write about Pnin and *Pnin* . But entering pninian universe triggered this stupid device called memory and I bogged down in own recollections. But I've got to say for myself that Pnin himself said *you also will recollect the past with interest when old* .

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## Violet wells says

I recently read Doctor Zhivago which Nabokov hated. You could say these two books are the antithesis of each other. Zhivago strives to depict a poetic vision of real life on a huge canvas and find meaning therein; Pnin is self-pleasuring art for art's sake on a tiny canvas. Nabokov isn't remotely interested in "real life" or deep meaning or huge canvases. He passes over the Russian Revolution in a couple of sentences whereas a description of a room that will only feature once in the entire novel is likely to receive an entire long paragraph. Wisdom doesn't interest him much either except as a reliable source of caustic mockery. Psychotherapy is one of his targets in Pnin. Just as he mocks a lot of the devices favoured by novelists. There are two instances in this novel of Nabokov cleverly creating a great deal of sympathy for Pnin and in both he takes away our sympathy as soon as he's got it. These involve Pnin catching the wrong train to an important lecture he's due to give (he makes it there on time regardless) and of Pnin receiving a cherished bowl from his son which he believes he has destroyed when he lets slip a pair of nutcrackers into the soapy washing up water (turns out to be a worthless glass he's broken). Pnin is constantly being misled by subjective interpretations of objective reality but it doesn't really matter, it doesn't do him any real harm. There's a sense Nabokov thinks of everything as a storm in a teacup, even the Russian revolution and Hitler's war, from both of which Pnin emerges unscathed as if they're of little more importance than a thunderstorm. If you're God there's a lot of truth in this point of view and Nabokov can come across as believing himself to be a deity of sorts.

I've just read some of the negative reviews of this and the word "boring" crops up a lot. And depending on the page you're on Pnin is either brilliant or, as these people say, can be a bit boring. That is to say it's boring if you're not a great fan of elaborate description of furniture, landscape or physiognomy. There is a lot of wordsmithery spent on ephemera. In fact I don't think I've ever read a novel that so swiftly and frequently transited me from joy to boredom. There's one of the best comic scenes in literature involving the hapless Russian professor, a squirrel and a water fountain. It's comic genius but on anything but a superficial level it's also meaningless, like one of those cute animal YouTube videos. That one scene maybe sums up this novel better than any review could – the slightly hollow interior behind the brilliant surface.

All in all Pnin is a pale understudy to Pale Fire in which he finds a dazzling form to poke fun at his targets here, exile into a foreign culture and academia.

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## Ritwik says

Coming from the master word-smith, a critic and the dictator of the reading choices of legions of readers comes a book backed by a blurb which compares Nabokov to a standard stand-up comedian with a professional capacity of making the audience laugh hysterically. Sad to say, the humour in the books failed to appeal me and was eclipsed by the unfortunate tribulations that influenced the demure and naive professor Timofey Pnin's reputation amongst his associates and the staff of the University. The book starts with Pnin, an emigre (immigrant) Russian professor struggling with English, sitting in the wrong train while he is already late for his lecture and loses his luggage. He is constantly made fun of and is often undermined by his superiors and colleagues. The humour revolves around such events affecting Pnin. Although frivolous by nature, Nabokov's character and the events bring out sympathy out of me as a reader which overlaps the humour quotient in the book. It might preliminarily seem like Nabokov furtively describing his experiences through the character of Pnin but makes brief appearances himself directly addressing the reader and reflecting on tender topics along life and death in beautiful prose maintained constantly throughout the book-

*I do not know if it ever has been noted before that one of the main characteristics of life is discreteness. Unless a film of flesh envelops us, we die. Man exists so far as he is separated from his surroundings. The cranium is a space traveller's helmet. Stay inside or you perish. Death is divestment, death is communion. It may be wonderful to mix with the landscape, but to do so is the end of tender ego.*

As a Russian literature enthusiast it is heartening to see the names of Turgenev, Pushkin, Gogol, Chekhov, Tolstoy, Lermontov flashing through now and then and I regret not reading 'Anna Karenina' before reading this to completely comprehend Professor Pnin's unbounded admiration for the book reasoned by his concept described as 'relativity of literature' in 'Anna Karenina'. Nabokov makes subtle references to other such great works and takes pot shots at Dostoevsky whom he criticized. There is an episode in which Pnin's step son Victor talks about books

*'Last summer I read Crime and ----' and a young yawn distended his staunchly smiling mouth.*

The author vents his judgements and his reflections on books via the character of Pnin. It seems Pnin is Nabokov himself but he himself makes an appearance as an acquaintance of Pnin in the book.

Nabokov relies heavily on his prose style and is dependant on his verbal contortions where his characters live in a world revolving around objects with an harmonical wholeness which only Nabokov could have conjured with his masterful prose. His gleaming literary insights as shown in his pedagogical approach confounded my bleak understanding of the study of literature as a subject but that seems to be deliberate from the writer's side. It takes time to acclimatize to his writing pattern and the plot might seem stale but his playfulness shines through as he smoothly transitions through multiple digressions and ends in a cyclic fashion which is impressive in itself.

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## Seemita says

The evening lessons were always the most difficult. Drained of ambulating the willing grey cells throughout the carnage of day classes, the young readers, almost resignedly, filled the quiet room at the end of the corridor. A subdued tête-à-tête, almost at once, broke into a charlatan laughter and the very next moment, died in their bosoms as Professor Pnin entered the classroom.

Straightening the meagre crop on his head and adjusting (and re-adjusting) his tortoise-shell glasses, he cleared his throat.

Pnin: Good Evening.

Class: Good Evening, Professor.

Pnin (*cheerily*): I am glad to see the attendance has brimmed to full today. [*Pause*] Alright then. Would all of you open your notes now? We shall take each one of your observations on Turgenev's prose and discuss threadbare their meaning and implications on the Russian Literature fabric.

[*Silence*]

Pnin: Ladies and Gentlemen, please open your notes.

[*Silence*]

Pnin (*in a mildly concerned tone*): What is the matter? I can see your notes sitting pretty on your tables and yet you do not touch them? May I please be privy to your thoughts?

Josephine: Professor, we do have notes but they do not concern Turgenev's prose.

Pnin: What do they concern then?

Josephine: You.

Pnin: Me?

Charles: Indeed Professor.

Pnin: But why?

Charles: Because that's what is the homework we got – to analyse *your* publication on Turgenev's prose, "Fathers and Sons – A Literary Bond".

Pnin: No, no! I wanted you to read "Fathers and Sons" by Turgenev for analysis!

Eileen: Professor, you have given us the name of the wrong book then. Or perhaps we misunderstood your intentions. *Again*.

Pnin: What? But how is this..... (*and his voice took a u-turn and trudged inside his mouth and jagged right into his head.*)

Eileen (*excitedly*): But we have made some fascinating observations about you, Professor! You may like to hear them!

With the opportunity to assess the literary quotient of his class vanished like the hair on his head, he settled for the less worthy evaluation of their intelligence quotient.

Pnin (*reluctantly*): Very well then. You may show me the mirror, Miss Eileen.

Eileen: Actually, you began with the mission of dissecting Pushkin's oeuvre but never got the book since you yourself had blocked it from issuing it to anyone else! I mean Professor Pnin had Pushkin allotted to himself in the system which he never got and could neither reallocate it to Professor Pnin since it was always out of library!

Pnin: Yees. It was an obscene revenge of the computer against my disdain for it.

Eileen (*suppressing laughter*): And it happened often! But the university still kept you since *it was fashionable to have atleast one distinguished fr\*\*\* on the staff*.

Pnin: Fr\*\*\* ??

Josephine: Leave that, Professor! See, what I have found! Even your prodigal son, Victor, who delved in scholastic art from a tender age of four, could not decorate your limping English. Your reference to a noisy neighborhood as *sonic disturbance*, house-warming party as *house-heating party*, could pass, at best, as puerile. *If your Russian was music, your English was murder!*

Pnin: Why should I be a custodian of English when I know that Russian is a far superior language?

Charles: Perhaps because the former is more widely spoken?

Pnin: Ah, yes. (*cheekily*) My wife was good at it.

Charles: (*competing cheekily*) A little too good, may I add, Professor. She affirmed her proficiency by alluding an American Psychoanalyst in its lucid fold.

Pnin: Mr. Charles, you may refrain from making personal remarks.

Charles: Its *YOUR* publication we are taking about, Professor!

Pnin: I know, I know. Miss Josephine, do you have any more value additions?

Josephine: You went to great length to spread the sumptuous roots of Russian Literature; why, you took to Cremona on a wrong train! But your passionate erudition got you patient listeners and appreciative academicians.

Pnin: Thank you, Miss Josephine.

Josephine: You were also a strong and loving father to Victor as both of you, in abundance, were each other's reflection – non-confirmists, impulsive, passionate and unrecognized scholars.

Pnin: Yes, I tried to be Victor's shadow. He liked me, I think. Because I understood him. His artistic ebullience needed channelling into the right skies and I attempted to hold him aloft when he started stepping up.

Eileen: But you lost your link with Russian Literature, its prospective followers and your dear ones owing to your diminutive circle, subservient approach, vanilla judgement and ill-placed magnanimity.

Pnin (*pensively*): Yes, I have. But I haven't lost my link with life. Yes, I have abandoned many parts of me; rather many parts of me have abandoned me like an ugly aberrant. But I believe there was some purpose in all of it. The purpose got clearer as the power of my spectacles increased; ironic as it may sound. Life is still like a long, beautiful Pushkin's poem which I can read, once again, from the beginning and find new meaning in it. And if I ever struggle, I will have you good Samaritans to adjust my antennae.

Class (*in unison*): Yes Professor.

Pnin: Alright then. I thank you for spending precious time out and understanding my life.....

Charles (*curtly*): It was a homework, Professor.

Pnin: Ah yes. My apologies. Well, I will see you in three days then. Good night.

Class: Goodnight Professor.

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**umberto says**

Reading "Pnin" by Vladimir Nabokov would require our familiarity regarding his writing style and his sense of humor. We may start with his "Collected Stories" (Penguin Books, 2010) since we can start with any story in which we can be interested and thus find its reading enjoyable. I would like to recommend the following:

1. A Letter that Never Reached Russia,
2. A Nursery Tale,
3. The Visit to the Museum
4. Solus Rex, and
5. First Love, etc.

Linguistically, this 169-page novel has presented Pnin, an assistant professor emigrated from Russia to teach in an American campus, who daringly uses English "a language he has yet to master" (back cover) in different contexts and we can't help being amused, for instance:

" ...

'Information, please,' said Pnin. 'Where stops four o'clock bus to Cremona?'

'Right across the street,' briskly answered the employee without looking up.

...

And with the national informality that always nonplussed Pnin, the young man shoved the bag into a corner of his nook.

'Quittance?' queried Pnin, Englishing the Russian for 'receipt' (kvitantsiya).

'What's that?'

'Number?' tried Pnin.

... (p. 10)"

And this one: "... If his Russian was music, his English was murder. He had enormous difficulty ('dzeefeecooltsee' in Pninian English) with depalatization, never managing to remove the extra Russian moisture from t's and d's before the vowels he so quaintly softened. His explosive 'hat' ('I never go in a hat even in winter') differed from the common American pronunciation of 'hot' (...) only by its briefer duration, ... (pp. 54-55)"

Or this one, indeed, it's sheer hilarity: "...

'You are very hungry?'

'No, sir. Not particularly.'

'My name is Timofey,' said Pnin, as they made themselves comfortable at a window table in the shabby old dinner. 'Second syllable pronounced as "muff", ahksent on last syllable, "ey" as in "prey" but a little more protracted. "Timofey Pavlovich Pnin", which means "Timofey the son of Paul." The pahtronymic has the ahksent on the first syllable ... (p. 89)"

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## Steven Godin says

Whilst a certain novel featuring a middle-aged man infatuated over his seduction of a 12-year-old girl was causing a storm in the literary world, along came the gentle breeze that was Pnin. Another remarkable character in a career littered with remarkable characters. After arriving in America in 1940, with wife Véra, and son Dmitri, as virtually broke refugees from Nazi-occupied France, Nabokov was able to find employment as a university teacher of Russian and comparative literature, first at in Massachusetts, then Cornell University in upstate New York. This clearly influenced Pnin. From an early stage in the development of the character of Pnin, Nabokov planned to write a series of stories about about the comical misadventures of an expatriate Russian professor on his way to deliver a lecture to a women's club in a small American town, which could be published independently in the New Yorker, which later was strung together

to make a seriously good book. This proved to be a shrewd professional strategy. It also partly explains the unusual form of Pnin and how best to describe it. A short novel? a collection of short stories of set pieces? anyway, Nabokov poignantly sets about tracing Timofey Pnin's quest, which is ultimately frustrated, to find a home, or to make himself at home in the alien small town of Waindell.

Taking the small world pastoral campus setting, and removing the hustle and bustle of modern urban life, Pnin contains the fictional elements of different subgenres, but ultimately, this is quintessentially true Nabokovian territory, which goes about having a family resemblance to his other works without being exactly like any of them. For those who know their Nabokov well, it is full of allusions to and foreshadowings of those other works, especially *Pale Fire* (my personal favourite) where Pnin reappears, happily ensconced in a tenured professorship at Wordsmith College. Nabokov does not aim simply at a perfect match between his language and his imagined world. There are always strong reminders in his work where reality is larger, denser, and full of everyday occurrences encompassing his vision. Moments when the discourse suddenly seems to take off on its own and break through the formal limits of the story into the world outside the story, where the author and reader coexist.

Pnin himself is lots of fun to read about, even if he struggles to understand American humor, making this one of Nabokov's most joyous reads, he is particularly sensitive to noise and always hopes that the next house he moves to will be free of this nuisance. He is charming in his rambling ways and lectures, but cannot deliver a prepared speech without burying his head in the text and reading in a soporific monotone. He is obsessively careful, but still manages to get himself into awful jams. It's a character just so easy to fall in with. *Lolita* will always be the novel for which Nabokov will be best known, it went on to sell millions worldwide, and completely eclipsed Pnin in the public consciousness, but reading this again for the third time, just goes to set in stone Nabokov's very high standards, and a status of being one of the top novelists of the 20th century.

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### Duane says

I would call this 1957 Nabokov novel a tragicomedy, leaning more to the comedy. Timofey Pnin is a likeable Russian emigre, a nice man, maybe too nice for his own good. Pnin is an assistant professor at fictional Wainsdell College, probably modeled after Cornell University where Nabokov taught. Even though Pnin has become an American citizen, he still struggles with the English language. He has difficulty being understood by his students and his colleagues. He makes his way through life in an honest and but prideful manner, but things never turn out quite the way Timofey would like them too. I imagine most of the academics and professors who read this novel see a little of themselves in Timofey Pnin, or at least in someone they know.

Wonderful character, excellent writing. 4 stars

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### Geoff says

If one wanted to undertake a neat little study of Nabokov's fictional prowess, they should read *Lolita* and *Pnin* back to back. They were written concurrently, in little middle-American roadside motels (the ones that are chronicled so abundantly in *Lolita*) during Nabokov and Véra's summer-long butterfly hunting tours. Pnin was Nabokov's antidote and respite from Humbert's grotesqueries, the opposite pole of character, and we should marvel at the achievement that while he was creating the most erudite predator in the history of literature, he was at the same time moulding this Pnin from his most gentle clay, birthing his most sympathetic creature. The punning savagery of *Lolita* could not be farther away from Pnin's sadly sweet sentimentality, and *Pnin* the book is the most touching Nabokov work I've encountered. Nabokov clearly

loved this man, and while it is inevitable from page one that Humbert is a doomed, delirious soul, Pnin, whose doom seems always a hair's width away, is almost kept from calamity by the reader's sympathies for him alone- I challenge you to give this book a go and not get misty-eyed at Pnin giving water to a chirping squirrel (Pnin's ever present squirrels; squirrel, from the Greek meaning "shadow-tail"; the "shade" behind Pnin's heart; which Shade reminds one of that other novel where Pnin appears); Pnin ineptly attempting to extricate his automobile from a gravelly road; Pnin recollecting his beloved Misha under a sky stained red by sunset as he strolls among adumbral New England pines; Pnin dreaming his ghost father's taking of a rook in a phantom chess match; Pnin breaking into hot tears at the cinematic depiction of a sun-struck Russian arbor; Pnin's defenestration of an unwanted soccer ball from a bedroom window; Pnin attempting to attain sleep through a backache as the wind ripples a puddle in the street, making of a telephone wire's reflection the jagged angles of an ECG monitor; Pnin mustering quiet dignity and meticulously washing the dishes. Anyone acquainted with Nabokov's biographical particularities can easily identify parallels between Pnin's history and the author's; but for Nabokov the private world was an impenetrable fortress, and any similarities that feed Pnin's past should only be taken for what they are- inverse parallels, plays of imagination, refractions of a shared history that could be the story of many Russian expatriates who fled Fascism farther and farther west. Russia Abroad in the twentieth century is among the most fascinating literary diaspora, an inexhaustible well of insight into the limits of historical endurance. *Pnin* is a tenderly executed work by the man who continues to prove that he was the colossus of these wanderers- those who kept untouchable Russia alive and intact, at least in memory and imagination, wherever they might have been scattered.

## David says

*The accumulation of consecutive rooms in his memory now resembled those displays of grouped elbow chairs on show, and beds, and lamps, and inglebooks which, ignoring all space-time distinctions, commingle in the soft light of a furniture store beyond which it snows, and the dusk deepens, and nobody really loves anybody.*

Poor Professor Timofey Pnin! He just can't catch a break! I really enjoyed reading *Pnin*, as I enjoy reading just about everything by V. Nabokov, but I feel an inadequacy in reviewing his work, because it feels so reluctant to be reviewed. On the surface, the story is a simple sort of Russian, Saul-Bellovian mid-life crisis; on a character level, Pnin is a sort of lost flotilla at sea, and no one wants him, not his colleagues nor his expatriot friends nor his ex-wife. But in typical Nabokovian fashion all that sympathy is flipped upon its head when we discover that the narrator is someone from Pnin's past, someone with a bitterness or disdain for the pathetic Pnin, with his bald head, stocky build, and suffocating misfortune. How much of *Pnin* can we believe?

I feel strange sometimes reading mid-life crises novels. I feel a sort of detachment because I am only half way to mid-life myself, and I think when I turn the last page "I need to read this again with another 20 years of perspective." But *Pnin* is a different animal entirely, sure I will read it again when I'm 40, but I'll likely read it again in a year or two anyway, because it is bliss. Pnin, though middle aged, is almost childlike: physically he strikes no imposing figure, emotionally he is quite immature and inexperienced in the areas of love, friendship, etc., and his clumsiness is irresistibly sympathetic and redolent of playground follies. I don't see myself in 20 years as a Pnin, but rather I see my Pnin-ness 10-15 years back! But Pnin's childlike-ness is not accompanied by a childish-ness, we see in Pnin a cohabitation of youthful *esprit* and *gaucherie*, but a solemnity and remorse of agedness:

*Pnin had taught himself...never to remember Mira Belochkin - not because...the evocation of a youthful love affair, banal and brief, threatened his peace of mind...but because, if one were*

*quite sincere with oneself, no conscience, and hence no consciousness, could be expected to subsist in a world where such things as Mira's death were possible. One had to forget - because one could not live with the thought that this graceful, fragile, tender young woman with those eyes, that smile, those gardens and snows in the background, had been brought in a cattle car and killed by an injection of phenol into the heart, into the gentle heart one had heard beating under one's lips in the dusk of the past.*

I apologize for the extensive quotation, but it is observed here in this remembrance of Mira both his childlike solipsism and also his age-wrought sensitivity. He has *taught himself* to ignore reality, to ignore what has happened to him, to live outside the gates of truth in the chaos of fleeting bliss, evading reality's magnetism. This solipsism, this evasion of all which contradicts one's sangfroid and contentment, is something so puerile, so immature, that the reader feels a sympathy and also a condemnation on Pnin. At once it seems that he blocks out Mira's death because his love for her is so strong, but then he reminds us that it was only a brief affair. It is not Mira's death which perturbs Pnin, but death in general. It's not necessarily a fear of his own death creeping towards him, but an aversion to the existence of death. But these concerns over death, Mira's death, are parleyed with such a knowing solemnity, one which speaks from a life lived, and a life not quite buried in the past, but which reaches into the present, which elucidates the present even if involuntarily.

Memory, life-lived and life-past, are very central to this novel of Nabokov's, as with many of his other novels; though the past is cosseted with a softer, if not more serious, touch than, say, *Pale Fire*, where past-life is mixed with a question of delusion, or *Lolita* where childhood experience is held up as a funhouse mirror excuse for perversion. In *Pnin* the past is a solemn, though still humorous, thing. And the beautiful writing radiates with both festivity and ceremony at alternating turns: humor and tragedy commingled.

But that ceremony is reversed, nothing can be taken seriously because the man telling us about Pnin, is perhaps the least qualified to do so. He is the man who replaces him at school, he is the man who replaces him in his wife's affections, he is the man who displaces him, who drives him away. He is the sinister schemer behind Pnin's story, trapping him in at every labyrinthine turn, chasing him off in the direction he pleases. He is a shadowy figure, whispering his *modus operandi*: "Some people-and I am one of them-hate happy ends. We feel cheated. Harm is the norm. Doom should not jam," as he ensures that our (and his own) *schadenfreudig* appetites are appeased.

Playful Pnin, pathetic Pnin, persnickety Pnin, paunchy Pnin, Pallid Pnin and the Summer Sunburn, philosophic Pnin, philological Pnin, Pnin the picayune, and plenary Pnin and all the panoply of Pnins in the masquerade of tragicomedic *Pnin*. Yes, *Pnin* is both sentimental ceremony and Bacchic festival of post-modernist games, and it's one I recommend to anyone who has a few hours to devote to logophilic frolicking, tragi-parodic gameplay, and the alliterative altercations between life and *logos*.

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## Rebecca Foster says

This was my first experience with Nabokov since *Lolita*, which I read in perhaps 2008 and didn't particularly appreciate. I was surprised just how funny and readable it was. I picked it up in a charity shop for the description: a comic novel about a Russian professor on an American college campus. And while there are indeed shades of *Lucky Jim* – I certainly laughed out loud at Timofey Pnin's verbal gaffes and slapstick falls – there's more going on here. In this episodic narrative spanning 1950–4, Pnin is a figure of fun but also of pathos: from having all his teeth out and entertaining the son his ex-wife had by another man to failing to find and keep a home of his own, he deserves the phrase Nabokov originally planned as a title, "My Poor Pnin".

One interesting thing to keep in mind is that the novel is narrated by an unnamed friend of Pnin's from his

days in Russia and Paris; according to Michael Wood, who contributed an afterword to my Penguin edition, we are to understand this as Nabokov himself. I'd picked up one self-referential moment ("‘Pity Vladimir Vladimirovich is not here,’ remarked Chateau. ‘He would have told us all about these enchanting insects.’") To this Pnin replies "I have always had the impression that his entomology was merely a pose.", but hadn't made any further connection. In any case, whether the narrator is Nabokov or "Nabokov," his abundant delight in the English language is evident. I also enjoyed the frequent appearances of squirrels – Elizabeth McKenzie's *The Portable Veblen* doesn't come out of nowhere.

### **A couple favorite lines:**

“Like so many ageing college people, Pnin had long ceased to notice the existence of students on the campus”

“‘Our friend,’ answered Clements, ‘employs a nomenclature all his own. His verbal vagaries add a new thrill to life. His mispronunciations are mythopeic. His slips of the tongue are oracular. He calls my wife John.’”

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## **Fionnuala says**

### **The Revenge of Timofey Pnin**

The traffic light was red. Timofey Pavlovich Pnin sat patiently at the steering wheel of his blue sedan directly behind a giant truck loaded with barrels of Budweiser, the inferior version of the Budvar he'd enjoyed in his Prague student days. On the passenger seat of the sedan, his paws resting on the open window, sat Gamlet, the stray dog Pnin had been feeding for the past few months, slowly encouraging the timid animal's trust. Gamlet had been unsure about the trip, reluctant to enter the car after Pnin had loaded the last boxes and suitcases and finally locked the door of the house he'd lived in for such a brief period. The dog ran around the yard in circles hesitating between going and staying until finally, much to Pnin's relief, he jumped on board.

But now Gamlet was looking back in the direction they had come with increasing anxiety.

Pnin glanced in the wing mirror. On the sidewalk, a man with a large and angry dog was hurrying towards them. The dog was straining at the leash, barking aggressively. Gamlet became more anxious and yapped madly in retaliation. Pnin recognised the dog immediately. It was Kykapeky's dog, Kykapeky, the strutting director of the English Department, whose speciality was not Shakespeare or Milton or Wordsworth, but rather the impersonation of his unfortunate colleagues. Pnin knew himself to be the most unfortunate of the entire list. He had walked in on such impersonations many times, heard the sudden silence, seen people attempt to assume serious expressions. He'd felt the tension of modest guilt in the air, but noticed that some, like Kakadu from the French Department, didn't even try to hide their sneers.

But the man holding the dog was not Kykapeky.

No, not Kykapeky, and not Kakadu either.

It was Kukushka!

Pnin had hoped to be well clear of Waindell University before his old rival arrived to take over the Russian

Department, a department that Pnin had built by himself from nearly nothing. Pnin didn't suppose the man had changed much. He would be the same old Kukushka, taking, always taking, leaving nothing but discards.

And now Kukushka would take Gamlet too. The dog would surely jump out of the car window. When he did, Pnin would not stop to retrieve him. No, he would leave Gamlet on the sidewalk, leave him to Kukushka just as he'd surrendered many beloved things to that man in the past.

At that very moment the lights changed and the dog hesitated and Pnin accelerated as soon as the truck moved off and he was away, striking west as so many times before. But this time, he was heading towards real freedom. As the blue sedan picked up speed, the dog stopped barking and lay down on the passenger seat and Pnin allowed himself to relax. He had escaped Kukushka finally and forever, leaving him to rot, alongside Kykapeky and Kakadu and the rest of the ptitsa, in the brackish backwaters of the miserable university town of Waindellville.

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Index of Russian words used in the review:

Gamlet = Hamlet, the prince of hesitation.

Kykapeky = the sound a cockerel makes in Russian. The Head of the English Department in Waindell was called Jack Cockerell.

Kakadu = cockatoo. Kaka sounds like 'caca' which means 'shit' in French making the word particularly fitting for Blorengé, the Head of the French Department, who could barely speak French and thought Chateaubriand was a famous chef.

Kukushka = cuckoo, the robber bird, used here to stand in for the new Head of the Russian Department who had ousted Pnin.

ptitsa = fowl as in barnyard fowl

None of these names appear in Nabokov's novel - I've simply imagined what the very observant Pnin might have called his unpleasant colleagues, and his beloved dog, in the safety of his own mind.

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Edit: October 6th

Pnin was my first Nabokov. I'm now reading *Pale Fire* and I'm glad to see Pnin turning up on page 221 wearing a Hawaiian shirt. So he did go west!

And there's an index of foreign words at the end of *Pale Fire*, and lots of references to birds...

Edit: October 9th

I'm now reading *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* and on page 62, there's a reference to a possible book title, 'Cock Robin Hits Back', which along with the ornithological parallel echoes 'The Revenge of Timofey Pnin' a little...

Edit: November 25th

In *The Gift*, the narrator mentions a review writer (he calls him a 'critique-bouffe') who liked to... *provide the book with his own ending*...

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## AC says

Pnin may give the appearance of being a 'slight' work -- compared, at any rate, to Nabokov's alleged ( -- I say 'alleged', only because I have not yet read either *Lolita* or *Pale Fire*... I'm working up to them --) masterpieces. And so I see a lot of four and three stars. But in my (and it is not allegedly, but often



sheer delight.

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## Cody says

So a friend says to me, What are you reading? I says, *Pnin*. Then this guy says, and I quote, “poorly written.” So I says, you gotta be fuggin’ kidding me—we’re talking about fuggin’ Nabokov here. Guy says, “shitty book.” That’s when I knew for sure that being dropped on his head repeatedly during his childhood and adolescence had had an effect on my friend, Mickey. Whatareyougonnadoaboutit? He’s a good guy. Jersey kid. Maybe that explains it...

[DISCLAIMER: The above was in no way meant to offend through implication individuals that have suffered cranial injury as a result of negligent parenting and/or parents that have/had a deficiency in gripping/catching. As for New Jerseyans, you're on your own.]

*Pnin* is a big ball of fluffy, fuzzy comfort. Its titular protagonist is impossibly likeable and, methinks, not too dissimilar to a lot of us in this specialized corner of GR (anal-retentive). Having now read a handful of both his English and Russian novels, I’m amazed at how assiduously complex the prose construction is in the former compared to his earlier efforts. (Well, at least they are for me. I’ll never know for sure as I do not read/speak Russian and am thus robbed of enjoying them in their mother tongue.)

The greatest accomplishment of *Pnin* is the way Nabokov alters his signature (and singular) fluidity to mimic the the halting, faltering hero’s own navigation of the émigré experience, both linguistically and in everyday circumstances. The sentences are a clutter of commas, digressions, chopped bits of prosody that left my literary feelers all tingly-like. Who says there’s something wrong with somewhat lighter fare as an occasional slider to the constant fastballs we swing for the fences with via Big Important Books? To paraphrase S. Moore (channeled through Nathan): a book’s qualifications are not merited solely by high page counts (though we do love them—we do, we do).

If you only read one Nabokov, read *Pale Fire*. If you only read two, make the second *Lolita*. But do find space for *Pnin* somewhere in the ever-growing stacks marked ‘to-be-read’ that grow around each of us like Saturn’s spectral rings.

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## Sandra says

Ciascuno di noi ha il proprio metro di misura per valutare un libro letto. A onor del vero la sottoscritta ne ha più d’uno, perché spesso è d’istinto, quando ancora sto sotto l’effetto della lettura appena terminata, che assegno le stelline, senza rifletterci (e magari ripensandoci dopo). Nel caso di “Pnin”, non è andata così, ci ho pensato e mi sono detta: “Come posso non dare cinque stelle a un romanzo che durante la lettura mi ha deliziato per lo stile raffinato e brillantissimo, mi ha divertito e al contempo reso triste, mi ha fatto affezionare al protagonista e portato a schierarmi dalla sua parte in ogni disavventura che gli capita sopra? Come posso non dare cinque stelle quando durante la giornata, nel mezzo di una qualsiasi incombenza quotidiana, mi sono trovata a pensare a Pnin e a quale altra sventura gli potesse ancora capitare?” Pnin è un piccolo (inteso come poco voluminoso) capolavoro, il cui protagonista -l’imbranato, distratto, maniacale, ingenuo, innamorato, puro di cuore professore universitario Pnin, nato in Russia, emigrato in Francia allo scoppio della rivoluzione e poi negli anni ’40 trasferito in America ad insegnare il russo- è un personaggio indimenticabile, un vero e proprio “uomo qualunque”, un ometto buffo che non si nota se non

