



Mary

Vladimir Nabokov, Michael Glenny (Translator)

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Mary is a gripping tale of youth, first love, and nostalgia--Nabokov's first novel. In a Berlin rooming house filled with an assortment of seriocomic Russian émigrés, Lev Ganin, a vigorous young officer poised between his past and his future, relives his first love affair. His memories of Mary are suffused with the freshness of youth and the idyllic ambience of pre-revolutionary Russia. In stark contrast is the decidedly unappealing boarder living in the room next to Ganin's, who, he discovers, is Mary's husband, temporarily separated from her by the Revolution but expecting her imminent arrival from Russia.

Mary Details

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ISBN : 9780679726203

Author : Vladimir Nabokov , Michael Glenny (Translator)

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Genre : Fiction, Cultural, Russia, Classics, Literature, Russian Literature, Novels

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From Reader Review Mary for online ebook

Dale Jr. says

Memories and shadows. Images of the past that roll through the mind like smoke escaping the bellies of locomotives. A photo. A certain scent. Mary. Mary is coming.

Nabokov's first novel has cemented his place on my list of favorite writers. His writing is consistently and incredibly beautiful. In his preface to this printing, he discusses the process of translating "Mary" to English and the problems with the story he refused to fix in the process, retaining every bit of the original writing as possible, save for a few cultural differences.

Problems? Where, Mr. Nabokov? No, "Mary" is not as polished or mature as, say, "Lolita", but I hardly found anything detrimental to it. Except maybe the fact that it was over too quickly and left me wanting more, but in a good way. Hungry for more of Nabokov's incredible prose.

"Mary" is a dream. A ghost. Even when we're presented the present reality instead of Ganin's reconstruction of his past love life with the ethereal beauty of Mary, it is as though we're in a surreal dream state. We wait to wake up in anticipation of Mary. But sometimes our memories and dreams are sweeter than the reality.

This short novel is chalk full of vivid descriptions so skillfully written, I have a feeling they'll be seeping into my own dreams, placing the shade of Mary in my own memories. Maybe I'll find myself waiting on the platform of a train station. Waiting to see the slightly-frayed ends of Mary's black ribbon in her hair, or to catch a glimpse of her enchanting eyes.

A small dose of Nabokov (just over 100 pages), I'd recommend this to anyone, really. New or familiar with the Russian's writing. If you're new to Nabokov, know that his writing, as far as I've experienced, only becomes more beautiful with his age.

I'm off to daydream of Mary.

Marcus says

It's not like the Nabokov I know to write a Russian book, but despite its Berlin setting, this is a very Russian book. There's a Dostoyevsky-like dinner scene, mentions of revolutions and Cossacks, stealing money from drawers and of course plenty of drunkenness. It's strange to get so much of it from an author that despite his origins, feels so American. Still, amidst all the uncharacteristic Russianness, there is a definite hint of what was to come in later Nabokov novels.

There's some of the cynicism:

"Vulgar little man," thought Ganin as he watched Alfyorov's twitching beard. "I bet his wife's frisky. It's a positive sin not to be unfaithful to a man like him."

The cleverness:

Back in his room he tried to read, but he found the contents of the book so alien and

inappropriate that he abandoned it in the middle of a subordinate clause. He was in the kind of mood that he called 'dispersion of the will.'

And of course the descriptions that you have to read twice, both to understand them and to re-experience the chills you got reading them the first time:

And in those streets, now as wide as shiny black seas, at that late hour when the last beer-hall has closed, and a native of Russia, abandoning sleep, hatless and coatless under an old mackintosh, walks in a clairvoyant trance; at that late hour down those wide streets passed worlds utterly alien to each other: no longer a reveler, a woman, or simply a passer-by, but each one a wholly isolated world, each a totality of marvels and evil.

In short, it's early Nabokov but it's still Nabokov and as such, will bear reading and re-reading.

Parthiban Sekar says

Not all loves come together; Not all loves fade away; some remain dormant as an indelible image of memory within us and gnaws at us from inside only during the loneliest hours. Especially, the first love!

This is such a story of a loving image which lives forever in the shadow of an ill-fated lover. It has been years that *Ganin* saw *Mary* lastly. But her smiling eyes, her twitching lips, and her halo in the evening sun remain as fresh as morning's rain in his memory. The past is irretrievable but also unforgettable and the future is uncertain, while the present offers nothing but a hopeless, dull reality. *Mary* seems to be the only medicine for his never ending, isolated living.

While the countries were making war, they were waging love in the autumnal evening, careless of sneaky eyes behind the tainted glasses. He has been dragging his shadow to all places but part of him, he thinks, always belongs to *Mary*. *Ganin*, now, in a foreign city, recollects everything about *Mary*, and grows drunk with her memories. Now, even the memory of her cheap perfume seems luxurious to him. But, an old, faded photograph in a neighbor's table-drawer announces to him that she is not *his* anymore.

Imagine, what *Mary* would mean to someone who is living in an exile from his home land and who lost everything. Her arrival gives him hope for a promising escape from his bleak life in his dull *lodge*. To doubt her love for him, after all these years, is pointless, he thinks. She has always loved him. But, *what-if* can't be excluded. Here, he awaits the arrival of *Mary* with the memory of her image, sitting on a cold, park bench.

(view spoiler)

This is not only a story of a first love but also the first book of Nabokov. Another strong example which portrays the unmatched writing ability of Nabokov. There are paragraphs where he can make you get lost in the woods and get caught by the lovers for observing them closely. Purely magical!

Manny says

Nabokov's first novel is a thinly fictionalized account of his first serious love affair. He then presented it as straight autobiography in one of the chapters of *Speak, Memory*, and finally did another, heavily stylized, fictional version in *Ada*.

I wonder if he would have returned to this theme again if he had lived another few years? Also, if the woman in question read any of them? I'm trying to imagine how I'd have experienced it. Would I have been deeply touched? creeped out? taken great pains to make sure my husband didn't read the books? left them lying around so that he was sure to notice them? Never having been stalked by a literary genius, I must say that I'm at a loss.

MJ Nicholls says

Vladimir's debut, pictured here in resplendent pink, is the slight tale of arch git Ganin remembering his first love—the obeisant Mary with the Tartar nose. The novel suffers from lingering descriptions of almost every strange nuance to each individual scene, written before Nabokovian prose was truly Nabokovian. This problem dogs some of his earlier work, among them *Invitation to a Beheading* and *The Luzhin Defense* in its snoozier moments.

This general qualm aside (well, it's quite a large qualm, but fans, keep reading) the characters are rendered with good humour—several of them caricatures from older Russian novels (the sick poet, the bored daughter, the tedious man)—and the nostalgic throb of lost love is palpable: many fans of this book empathise with the summertime setting and the ebbing away of affection. Alas, however, the ending is an amateurish drop-off, barely worth the slog through long passages of seasonal flux and ponderous pining.

Tfitoby says

I've not read any Nabokov, and neither my wife nor I were willing to accept responsibility for bringing this book home at some point in the last five years, but it looked pretty and it's very slight (two of my favourite things to consider when under pressure to pick a new book before rushing off to catch a bus) and on top of that the premise sounded loaded with melancholia and miserabilia so I felt guaranteed a good time and to look cool whilst having said good time. And despite it being his first novel, not quite juvenilia however, I did indeed have a good time in the seedy Berlin pensione with Lev and his memories of Mary and at least one beautiful woman commented on how incredibly cool I was to be casually reading Nabokov in a coffee shop whilst waiting for a tedious lecture on management theory to begin. What a brilliant pick this turned out to be. Could easily be situated alongside the boarding house literature of Hamilton, Orwell, Fremlin et al, only is lacks the true horror and despair felt from the greats of that sub-genre. Found in the Penguin Great Loves series I was surprised at the lack of love, romance, amour fou, despair, longing, pining, wasting away, delirium and all of those other delightful things that come with the first flush of love.

Jim says

For a book called *Mary* there's precious little Mary in it. Mary is—or rather was (time has marched on)—a fifteen-year-old girl the novel's protagonist fell in love with when they both lived in Russia. Years later much has happened. For starters Lev Glebovich Ganin (the name on our hero's fake Polish passport) has relocated to Berlin and it's been a long time since he's had even a letter from Mary. He's currently holed-up in a *pension*, a guest house offering full board run by the diminutive Frau Dorn, along with a motley crew of ex-pats: Podtyagin (an old poet on his last legs), Klara (a typist with a bust deserving of several mentions in the text), Kolin and Gornotsvetov (two giggly ballet dancers) and, most importantly, the effusive Aleksey Ivanovich Alfyorov who, by pure chance (well, author's contrivance), Ganin discovers is now married to his Mary whose arrival in Berlin is due in a week's time. From that moment he can think of nothing else.

Ganin is, we learn, not as straightforward a character as he first appears...

[H]is personality was surrounded by mystery. And no wonder: he never told anybody about his life, his wanderings and his adventures of recent years—even he himself remembered his escape from Russia as though in a dream, a dream that was like a faintly sparkling sea mist.

...but little by little a picture emerges and it all revolves around his relationship with Mary. She sounds like the love of his life. What could possibly have happened to drive a wedge between them? Whatever it was none of that seems to matter to Ganin. He's quite convinced that once he gets Alfyorov out of the way—no, he doesn't murder him but he does get him blind drunk the night before his wife's arrival—Mary will fall into his arms and be perfectly willing to transfer to another train taking them off to a rosy future together. Like that's going to happen.

Of course the more we learn about their relationship, the meetings and letters and phone calls, the more it does seem that he might have a shot. War seems to have gotten in the way:

Perekop tottered and fell. Wounded in the head, Ganin had been evacuated to Simferopol; and a week later, sick and listless, cut off from his unit which had retreated to Feodosia, he had been caught up in the mad, nightmarish torrent of the civilian evacuation. In the fields and on the slopes of the Heights of Inkerman, where once the uniforms of Queen Victoria's soldiers had flashed scarlet among the smoke of toy cannon, the lovely and wild Crimean spring was already blossoming. Smoothly undulating, the milky-white road flowed on, the open cover of the car rattled as the wheels bounced over bumps and holes—and the feeling of speed, the feeling of spring, of space and the pale green of the hills, suddenly fused into a delicious joy which made it possible to forget that this light-hearted road was the way leading out of Russia.

These things happen. Families get torn apart. Life goes on and most of us don't get second chances. But if this love is all it appears to be to Ganin why not? When Penguin published their Great Loves collection they included *Mary* (with one of the ugliest covers ever) alongside the likes of *The Virgin and the Gypsy* by D.H. Lawrence, *Eros Unbound* by Anaïs Nin and *Giovanni's Room* by James Baldwin. Maybe this was going to one of the great unsung love stories. Or maybe not. This is Nabokov after all, the guy who some thirty years later would go on to write *Lolita*. It takes time to refine a writer and so I was only expecting traces of the Nabokov I've got to know of the years but I was a little surprised to see how much was familiar; juvenilia this is not.

This is a story about first love but it's not really a recounting of first love but a tale of the lasting effects first love can have. Of course, in the course of the book we do find out how they got to know each other and I couldn't help feel for him when I read:

She lived in Voskresensk and would go out for a walk in the deserted sunny evening at exactly the same time as he. Ganin noticed her from a distance and at once felt a chill round his heart. She walked briskly, blue-skirted, her hands in the pockets of her blue serge jacket under which was a white blouse. As Ganin caught up with her, like a soft breeze, he saw only the folds of blue stuff stretching and rippling across her back, and the black silk bow like two outstretched wings. As he glided past he never looked into her face but pretended to be absorbed in cycling, although a minute earlier, imagining their meeting, he had sworn that he would smile at her and greet her.

Been there. Done that. I was quite a bit younger than Lev when I fell in love for the first time but this book's set in the 1920s and we have to remember how much longer it took kids to grow up back then. But it doesn't matter. I remember my Mary and how I felt a few years ago when I learned she died. The sense of loss was quite disproportionate; this was a woman I'd not even nodded to on the street in over twenty years. I really got how Ganin could've lost himself in memories and fantasies that week but as the pages kept dwindling I couldn't help wondering what the hell Nabokov was going to do. The climax when it came was a surprise but it shouldn't have been. Not really. I mean there were so many things he could've done. She could've got off the train and walked right by him or seen him and changed direction to ignore him or she might've put on five or six stones and he might've ended up diving into the Gents to avoid her. Or they might've spoken, politely like old friends and parted without him giving away what his plans had been. It's none of those but it was an ending that made me want to go back and reassess what I'd just read to see what I'd missed. Because surely there were clues. Nabokov likes his clues and, what we call these days, his Easter eggs. (To that end you might enjoy reading 'Repetition and Ambiguity: Reconsidering Mary' by Akiko Nakata.)

The book's main weakness, however, is not something Nabokov would work out: his descriptions although creative and inventive and, well, descriptive can drag on and slow down the narrative. You can maybe argue the case for them in a long novel but not in something this slight. It's a shame and it would've been nice when the book was published in English in 1970 if he'd maybe trimmed it a bit (like Beckett did four years later with *Mercier and Camier*) but I can see why he'd leave it too.

Amir says

Darwin8u says

“He was powerless because he had no precise desire, and this tortured him because he was vainly seeking something to desire.”

? Vladimir Nabokov, *Mary*

Amazing to think Nabokov was starting his journey here. While Nabokov's first novel purports to be about Mary, it is really about memory, nostalgia, that yearning for the past. It is also about anticipation: the exile's return, the lover's arrival, all the emotions of expectancy. *Mary* centers on émigré Lev Glebovich Ganin. He is trying to separate himself from Lyudmila (a woman he no longer loves or even likes), while waiting for fellow pension dweller, Alfyorov's wife (an early love?) to appear. Yes, Mary is much anticipated. All the while, Ganin basically ignores Klara, the eponymous 'girl next door', who adores him.

This tangle of relationships all takes place in a small setting -- a Berlin pension filled with Russian expats. The setting (almost a closed circle mystery sans mystery) reminded me a bit of Eric Ambler's *Epitaph for a Spy* in that it all takes place largely among a hotel/pension with various characters interacting. Anyway, it was good Nabokov ... just not great.

You see the beginnings of what will eventually pupate and make Nabokov great, but there just isn't enough. His prose is almost there. His themes are almost ready. His voice is shaky, but strong and young. But just you wait: *Speak, Memory*, *The Gift*, *Ada*, or *Ardor: A Family Chronicle*, *Lolita*, *Pale Fire*, *Pnin* and many more are just about to eclose from the puparium of Nabokov's brain.

Fatma Akthum says

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Stephen M says

There's nothing particularly wrong with Nabokov's debut, but it left me underwhelmed. Sure, there are some beautiful descriptions and a handful of enjoyable characters, but the whole time I wondered, *what's the point?*. Because essentially, this is a story about lost love and moving on; which it's possible that at the time this was written, it was not as much of an over-used cliché as it is now. I expected a lot more out of the genius that gave us *Lolita*.

Reading first books have always been fun for me because you get to see where the author began and how his style evolved. And maybe because I am an aspiring writer myself, I think that reading first book will unlock the secret to writing the "big one". In this case, though, I wouldn't recommend this much beyond the die-hard Nabokov fans. I would call it more of a "homework" read suitable for a boring day-in because it's snowing outside and you can't leave the house. It's barely beyond 100 pages, so it wouldn't take you very long either. Thinking about it now, if the book was any longer, I may have hated this book. I feel ashamed to say that about good ole' Vlad, but this was the "arm-shrugged" of the year.

Anthony Vacca says

Aw, even Nabokov had to write a first novel. A first novel about first love and the passing of time and the power of memory. Nabokov writes about the languors and lashings of lost love and listless life at 27. A lesser, sometimes lyrical work. How adorable.

Here's a second (and ~~German~~ Dutch) opinion of the work: <http://joostpollmann.nl/boeken/a-cold...>

Take that, my fellow Goodreaders!

Guzin Tanyeri says

Bu müthi? kitab?n Türkçesini (Esra Birkan çevirisini) y?llar y?llar önce Telos basm??t?, o haliyle Ma?enka tam bir küçütük f?ç?c?k içi dolu tur?ucuktu. Kim bilebilirdi ki, kitab?n al???lmad?k inceli?ine, farkl? kapa??na, sayfa kalitesine bakarak tamamen ?ekilci bir be?eniyle sat?n ald???m bu kitap y?llar y?llar geçse de en sevd?im kitap olmaktan geri durmayacak. Ma?enka "az ki?inin bildi?i harika kitaplar" dand?r. Nabokov ülkemizde çok bilinmesine ra?men Ma?enka az bilinir. Ma?enka, Nabokov'un tak?nt?l? oldu?u "hat?rlayarak tekrar ya?ama", "ya?anm??? haf?zada sakl? tutarak istenen zaman ya?am?? kadar olma" halinin ilk ve çok de?erli örne?idir. Kendinin tabiriyle Lolita'n?n ayak sesleridir. Nabokov'un ne h?nz?r oldu?unu bilirsiniz. Bu ilk roman?nda da t?pk? di?erlerinde oldu?u gibi anlat?c?yla bir olur, onun hesaplar?n? yapar, onun yapacaklar?n? bilir, onunla k?s k?s g?uersiniz. Sonra kurgu öyle bir yere gelir dayan?r ki, bütün h?nz?rl?k son bulur. Beni her roman?nda neredeyse hüzne bo?an sonlar bu kitapta -her okumamda- tepe yapm??t?r. Nabokov'un çok zeki bir yazar oldu?unu dü?ünüyorum ve okurunun zekas?n? asla küçümsemi?ini. Ma?enka ile bize ?öyle der gibidir, bak?n bir a?k hikayesini nas?l anlatt?m. Gerçekten de daha sonraki romanlar?nda el at?p abartaca?? ve say?s?z detaya bo?aca?? bu ilk a?k konusu bu kitapta tam tad?ndad?r bence. Ömrüm boyunca binlerce kitap okumaktansa, çok de?erli birkaç kitab? tekrar tekrar okumay? tercih ederim. Ma?enka da o kitaplardan biri benim için.

Ahmad Sharabiani says

???????? = Mashenka = Mary, Vladimir Nabokov

Mary (Russian: ???????, Mašen'ka), is the debut novel by Vladimir Nabokov, first published under pen name V. Sirin in 1926 by Russian-language publisher "Slovo".

Mary is the story of Lev Glebovich Ganin, a Russian émigré and former White Guard Officer displaced by the Russian Revolution. Ganin is now living in a boarding house in Berlin, along with a young German girl, Klara, an old Russian poet, Podtyagin, his landlady, Lydia Nikolaevna Dorn and his neighbour, Aleksey Ivanovich Alfyorov, whom he meets in a dark, broken-down elevator at the onset of the novel. Through a series of conversations with Alfyorov and a photograph, Ganin discovers that his long-lost first love, Mary, is now the wife of his rather unappealing neighbour, and that she will be joining him soon. As Ganin realizes this, he effectively ends his relationship with his current girlfriend, Lyudmila, and begins to be consumed by his memories of his time in Russia with Mary, which Ganin notes "were perhaps the happiest days of his life". Enthralled by his vision of Mary and unable to let Alfyorov have her, Ganin contrives schemes in order to reunite with Mary, who he believes still loves him. Eventually, Ganin claims that he will leave Berlin the

night before Mary is to arrive and his fellow residents throw a party for him the previous night. Ganin steadily plies Alfyorov with alcohol, heavily intoxicating him. Just before Alfyorov falls into his drunken sleep, he asks Ganin to set his alarm clock for half past seven, as Alfyorov intends to pick up Mary at the train station the next morning. The infatuated Ganin instead sets the clock for eleven and plans to meet Mary at the train station himself. However, as Ganin arrives at the train station, he realizes that "the world of memories in which Ganin had dwelt became what it was in reality the distant past... other than that image no Mary existed, nor could exist". Instead of meeting Mary, Ganin decides to board a train to France and "move on".

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Tsvetelina Mareva says

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Kristen says

[contented sigh]

Just to be clear, a few days ago when I said "99% of human civilization is bullshit," it should be understood that the whole of Nabokov's work falls into that rare 1% which makes life worth living.

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Marianna Neal says

Short and sweet, Nabokov's first novel is impressively strong. What at first glance may seem like a nostalgic (and occasionally humorous) story of first love is actually a very personal reflection of the author's feelings on the displaced lives of emigrants. Mary isn't just a girl—she is the idealistic image of Russia, something that exists only in memories of those who left the country. The themes and characters could definitely have been explored deeper, which is something the short length of the novel didn't allow for, but this doesn't take away from how thought-provoking *Mary* (a.k.a. *Mashenka*) can be for a reader who is willing to look beyond the surface. Of course, Nabokov's prose is vivid and masterful, even though he was only getting started here.

Jonfaith says

I read this in 1999 and then again a few years ago. THIS is what first novels should aspire towards. Instead every MFA wants to Pynchon-it over the fence and we have reams of bad puns and pop culture references all alluding to some Grand Joke. Well, that wasn't funny, was it?

This is a tome about estrangement, when the ideas and habits of home are exiled, what's left?
