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Ada, Or Ardor: A Family Chronicle



Synopsis

Published two weeks after his seventieth birthday, *Ada, or Ardor* is one of Nabokov's greatest masterpieces, the glorious culmination of his career as a novelist. It tells a love story troubled by incest. But more: it is also at once a fairy tale, epic, philosophical treatise on the nature of time, parody of the history of the novel, and erotic catalogue. *Ada, or Ardor* is no less than the supreme work of an imagination at white heat. This is the first American edition to include the extensive and ingeniously sardonic appendix by the author, written under the anagrammatic pseudonym Vivian Darkbloom.

Book Information

Paperback: 624 pages

Publisher: Vintage; Reissue edition (February 19, 1990)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0679725229

ISBN-13: 978-0679725220

Product Dimensions: 5.2 x 1.1 x 8 inches

Shipping Weight: 4.8 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.0 out of 5 stars See all reviews (90 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #60,532 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #107 in Books > Literature & Fiction > United States > Classics #5885 in Books > Literature & Fiction > Literary

Customer Reviews

"Ada" is an unconventional, sci-fi fantasy (no rockets and spaceships here, don't worry) firmly rooted in the late 19th and early 20th century Russia of Nabokov's birth, that takes place on a planet called Antiterra 'parallel' to 'our Earth' which is called Terra. Things have happened there in somewhat similar yet oddly different ways than on Terra (earth), including the fact that the Russian and American land masses are connected. This set-up allows Nabokov as wide a scope as possible to dig into his own memories and also for prose excursions into uncharted territory. "Ada" is certainly his most comprehensive and difficult novel, and definitely his greatest after "Lolita" ("Pale Fire" die-hards can disagree all they want, but they probably haven't taken the time to delve deep enough into "Ada"). "Ada" is also Nabokov's own twist on Proustian memory investigations. It is being written as 'memoirs' by his main character: Van Veen, but also includes certain intrusions by Ada Veen, who is with him as he's writing it (during the time they spend their old age together after years of separation). So, often, especially in the first third or so of the book, two perspectives of the past are

provided. Two memories remember certain things they both experienced or saw, each from its special perspective, and sometimes one adds things the other may have forgotten. Towards the end of the book, Nabokov uses Van's slightly demented but deeply observant writings about the nature of Time to capsulize the thought processes that made Van write these memoirs in this 'odd' way. The main event in Van's memoirs is his secret incestuous relationship with Ada, who is his half-sister. Van is in love with Ada who loves him back and their love affair affects the whole course of their lives. Years later, Ada's younger sister Lucette also falls in love with Van, whose love he doesn't reciprocate because he still loves Ada. In addition Ada and Lucette have had a secret Lesbian relationship since they were young girls. Van is at various times a university student and part-time masked circus acrobat, a psychologist, a novelist, and a lecturer in philosophy. He also seems to be addicted to brothels (especially when away from Ada). An unsuccessful sci-fi novel he writes, "Letters from Terra," unexpectedly and years after its initial publication, is made into a hit movie by a famous director. There's very little that's strictly linear in this book. The best way to look at it is as a gigantic puzzle, the pieces of which are gradually falling into place. Nabokov uses super-long Proustian sentences to put in every detail he can think of and simultaneously provide wide-scoped connections. The longer paragraphs are universes of their own. They have their own little stories and 'sensual delights' going on in them, which no mere cursory examination can reveal. Rereading is a must. This is what usually happened when I was reading: first of all, I definitely had to take a paragraph by paragraph approach (the book's too complex not to require constant rereading as you're going through it). Upon first reading a complicated paragraph, I was often confused (had to skip the long parentheses and come back and reread them, etc.), on second reading a bit more lucid and fascinated, on the third I would often start laughing, on the fourth I'd often become enchanted. That's right, sometimes it takes four readings to even begin to get the drift of the man's wit, but it's hard work that pays off 'big-time.' And every so often, a paragraph doesn't mean much and is just clever wordplay for esoteric readers to figure out. You can ignore some of those, but don't let it become a habit. As for the endlessly annoying eccentricities sprinkled throughout "Ada"? Well, you either appreciate Nabokov's brand of esoterica or you don't, but that doesn't mean the book is ruined by them---far from it---they're a spice you can take or leave according to your taste. This book is his widest in scope and he allows himself every indulgence he can think of, he covers all his 'bases,' so to speak. There are fantastic passages in here that he could never have written if he had stayed more restrained. The book is filled to the brim with sex. Not only do Ada and Van as adolescents have sex up to 4 times a day but they still have an appetite for outside lovers. Only on Antiterra does this lack of repression and complete insatiability co-exist in an environment that is, in

other respects, quite similar to late 19th century Terra (Earth). Later on we find out that Antiterra has somehow bypassed 'modernism' and the tragedies of 20th century Terra (Earth), with its world wars and dictators and carnage. The Antiterrans are fascinated by the sci-fi film "Letters from Terra" based on Van's book, because it deals with the crazy events that happened on that odd planet. Vitry's hit film actually comes very close to describing the actual events that took place on Terra (Earth). Here, Nabokov mocks the absurd history of 20th century Terra (Earth) by making it a subject for a sci-fi film on Antiterra. The main characters aren't exactly 'sympathetic' but not necessarily 'immoral' either (as some readers feel it more comfortable to label them). They're a bunch of erudite, stuck-up, pompous Ameri-Russian aristocrats with their quirks and neuroses and perversions, some of them (like Ada and Lucette) more likable than others (Van and Demon), but none without quite a bit of experience in what would be called 'sinful' behavior by Christians.

However, no mention is ever made of a Christian morality dominating on 'Antiterra' where the story takes place. And if some readers base their label of 'immorality' only on Van and Ada's incestuous romance (or Ada and Lucette's lesbianism), it is not a closed case at all. How much are Van and Ada hurting themselves or others? They love each other deeply, there's no age-difference manipulation going on like Humbert's with Lolita, they don't plan on having any children that might come out deformed (Van's even sterile), they're not influenced by how society might view them, so what's the big deal? Certainly no one would call it 'immoral' if they had been separated and met by chance, not knowing they were related? The only way they can be hurt (or hurt others in their family) is through social ostracism. In fact, that necessary discomfort in maintaining secrecy is their only real hurt. Van's endless philandering over the years (engaged in mainly when separated from Ada) with numerous young prostitutes is much more degrading and 'immoral' than his 'pure' case of incest with Ada. And Ada and Lucette's Lesbianism? There's not much manipulation there either. It's mutually engaged in for mutual pleasure. Of course the great thing is that all this can be seen as one big Nabokovian joke on the hypocrisy, philistinism, and superficiality of some or even most of his readers (who simultaneously love his books but reserve their praise because they don't know how to deal with the 'immoral' or wretched characters). Far from trying for some easy 'moral message', Nabokov uses these 'unsympathetic' and semi-grotesque setups because, as he mentions in "Strong Opinions," he likes to "compose riddles with elegant solutions." Once the elegant solutions are found the work transcends any superficial considerations such as 'sympathetic characters.' To stay detached, understand and laugh at all of society's hypocrisies, and through art, expose, ridicule and transcend them: this is not easy. Many are pretentious enough to try it but only a few ever succeed. Nabokov succeeds so well, it's SCARY. Even the people who call what he

does high-brow pornography are forced to realize how high a brow they're dealing with.

This tragic story of love and obsession is written as if it is the true life memoir of fictional character Van Veen. V.V. is a Russian-American aristocrat born to extreme wealth in the late 1800's on a fictional world called Antiterra. Antiterra is almost identical to Earth, except for minor details, such as the place names are different and some conveniences such as airplanes, telephones, and motion pictures were in existence as early as 1884. That fateful year of 1884 provides the novel with its chief building block. Our narrator spent that summer, his 15th, at his aunt's summer house, Ardis, where he and his 12 year old cousin Ada Veen ended up falling in love with the mad insatiable passion that is typical for teenagers. Shortly after falling in love, though, the pair learns that due to a much more complex family tree than either initially realized, they are actually brother and sister casting a tragic shadow over their intoxicating relationship. These facts are presented to us, although obscurely, within the first 30 pages of the 589 page book, so don't think that I have just given away any key plot points here. In fact, this novel is all about Van and Ada's refusal (or inability) to ever grow out of their idyllic, though incestuous, summertime romance. The summer of 1884 grows to haunt the rest of their lives, and this book for the most part is the story of that haunting. The story is remarkable and for those who end up getting emotionally involved in the story, it is the type of novel that will seep into your soul unlike just about any book you may ever read. Unfortunately, a highly complex writing style is likely to act as a very major hurdle that will prevent a lot of people from ever getting through the book. Nabokov fills his novel with many extremely long sentences, complex parentheticals, and a sometimes confusing chronological structure. If you aren't ready to pay attention to what you are reading, then this book is likely to simply confuse you to the point of frustration. Personally, I read this book while on a week-long beach vacation in Hawaii. It was the perfect setting, because my mind was gloriously free of distraction and I was able to spend the time necessary to digest what I was reading. Being on a beach, however, meant that I was not able to look up every single odd word I came across or investigate all the literary allusions the author included in the book. If you are reading about this book, you are sure to learn that the book is extremely dense with such allusions. I am happy to report that one need not get bogged down with tracking down such literary references in order to appreciate this book. To find out if the book is right for you, luckily, you only really have to read the first 3 or 4 chapters. The first chapter is typical of the author's densest most complex style. It is a great first chapter, but it will likely take much time and effort to fully comprehend. The second and third chapters are a bit more straightforward and are a very good representation of how most of the rest of the book reads. In my case, after reading the

first chapter, I was drawn in because it was exactly the kind of complex writing I was looking for. There is a lot of French and Russian used throughout the book. In the Vintage paperback edition, there are helpful end notes that provide translations for most of the crucial foreign language passages. I found my knowledge of French to be quite helpful, though, because a lot of the incidental French is not translated. Luckily almost all the Russian in the book is translated in the text itself, so those passages ultimately are not a problem at all. Suffice it to say that this book is filled with literary wordplay and many puzzles to solve. If that is your cup of tea, then you are likely to love this book. Even if you do not pursue answers to all the literary puzzles presented in the book, you can still be rewarded with an emotionally complex epic tale that at the very least is going to provide you with some very serious food for thought. If you are like me, however, this book will also provide you with one of the most moving and emotionally harrowing stories you may ever come across. I can't remember feeling so satisfied after finishing a book, nor can I ever remember finishing a book so ready to re-read it. I recommend it highly.

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