



## Nabokov's "Pale Fire"

By Brian Boyd

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### Nabokov's "Pale Fire" By Brian Boyd

*Pale Fire* is regarded by many as Vladimir Nabokov's masterpiece. The novel has been hailed as one of the most striking early examples of postmodernism and has become a famous test case for theories about reading because of the apparent impossibility of deciding between several radically different interpretations. Does the book have two narrators, as it first appears, or one? How much is fantasy and how much is reality? Whose fantasy and whose reality are they? Brian Boyd, Nabokov's biographer and hitherto the foremost proponent of the idea that *Pale Fire* has one narrator, John Shade, now rejects this position and presents a new and startlingly different solution that will permanently shift the nature of critical debate on the novel. Boyd argues that the book does indeed have two narrators, Shade and Charles Kinbote, but reveals that Kinbote had some strange and highly surprising help in writing his sections. In light of this interpretation, *Pale Fire* now looks distinctly less postmodern--and more interesting than ever.

In presenting his arguments, Boyd shows how Nabokov designed *Pale Fire* for readers to make surprising discoveries on a first reading and even more surprising discoveries on subsequent readings by following carefully prepared clues within the novel. Boyd leads the reader step-by-step through the book, gradually revealing the profound relationship between Nabokov's ethics, aesthetics, epistemology, and metaphysics. If Nabokov has generously planned the novel to be accessible on a first reading and yet to incorporate successive vistas of surprise, Boyd argues, it is because he thinks a deep generosity lies behind the inexhaustibility, complexity, and mystery of the world. Boyd also shows how Nabokov's interest in discovery springs in part from his work as a scientist and scholar, and draws comparisons between the processes of readerly and scientific discovery.

This is a profound, provocative, and compelling reinterpretation of one of the greatest novels of the twentieth century.

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## Nabokov's "Pale Fire" By Brian Boyd Bibliography

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### Editorial Review

#### Amazon.com Review

Brian Boyd has already chronicled the life of Vladimir Nabokov in two superlative volumes, one devoted to the author's silver-age youth in Russia and the other to his American maturity. Now Boyd turns his attention to the great enchanter's trickiest and most unlikely triumph in *Nabokov's Pale Fire*. With its oddball structure--which shackles an epic poem in heroic couplets to an increasingly loony, enveloping commentary--this 1962 novel has always been a bone of contention among diehard fans. Some consider it less a work of art than a Rube Goldberg contraption, onto which Nabokov has brilliantly bolted his favorite motifs. Others call *Pale Fire* the author's true masterpiece, and Brian Boyd falls quite emphatically into the latter camp, arguing that the book is no mere satire on literary parasitism:

It is a reflection on the whole history of literature, on the shift from romance to realism, from the old kind of hero with whose glory the reader is invited to identify ... to the modern image of everyman as artist, the suburban Shade, in the modest circumstances of the real, coping with courage and self-control, with imagination, curiosity, tenderness, and kindness, with the fact of his mortality and his losses past and still to come.

Boyd's study is at once a shrewd and eloquent guidebook to the intricacies of *Pale Fire* and a revisionist argument as to its meaning. After all, Nabokovians have spent the last three decades feuding over the ultimate authorship of this double-decker narrative: could the poet, John Shade, have created both the poem and commentary? Or should both be chalked up to that nutty exegete Charles Kinbote? As he wades into this factional war, Boyd can sometimes appear only nominally less insane than Kinbote. ("The prominence of the Shadean or Kinbotean or 'undecidable' readings had not gone unchallenged. D. Barton Johnson, attending to verbal and subverbal detail, stood largely outside the Shade-Kinbote opposition when he focused on the Botkin behind Kinbote." Help!) Yet his hypothesis--which involves a ghost feeding lines to the living like a posthumous Teleprompter--makes perfect sense. And it reminds us that for all Nabokov's vaunted irony and scientific passion, he was fascinated throughout his entire career by the afterlife. Volodya as theologian? Boyd is smart and persuasive enough to make the concept stick, and to send every last one of us back to *Pale Fire*--immediately. --James Marcus

#### From Library Journal

Interest in Nabokov has been kept up in recent years by such work as Boyd's monumental two-volume biography and Stacy Schiff's *V?ra* (Mrs. Vladimir Nabokov). These two new studies will only enhance interest in Nabokov for some time to come. Boyd's new book is an intensive examination of Nabokov's *Pale Fire*—a book that many scholars consider his masterpiece, since it lends itself to a variety of interpretations. Boyd looks at these interpretations and offers his own insights, some of which have changed over the years. He argues that the genius of *Pale Fire* is that while it can be read easily in a straightforward manner, further readings reveal a multilayered story that prompts the reader to dig for deeper meanings. Boyd skillfully peels away the layers of this novel in a feast of literary detective work. He recommends that one read the novel before taking on his book. On the other hand, one need not read any of Nabokov's work to prepare for Johnson and Coates's *Nabokov's Blues*. Though he had no formal training in biology, Nabokov became an acknowledged expert on Blues—a diverse group of Latin American butterflies. Here Johnson and Coates examine his butterfly studies in the context of recent scientific expeditions to South America. They succeed in presenting both a biographical and scientific study that brings new understanding to both Nabokov's writing and his place in science. Taken together, these books should keep the most ardent Nabokov reader busy for some time. Recommended for academic collections. ARonald Ratliff, Emporia P.L., KS

Review

**One of *Choice's* Outstanding Academic Titles for 2000**

"My award for Novel of the Century goes to Nabokov's *Pale Fire* . . . . The book that prompted these reflections and confirmed me in my choice for Novel of the Century was Brian Boyd's remarkable, obsessive, delirious, devotional study."--**Ron Rosenbaum, *New York Observer***

"It seems impossible for any scholar to write about *Pale Fire*, Nabokov's novel disguised as a poem and a pseudo-scholarly consideration of that poem, without appearing to be offering a mimicry of the great work. Nabokov's *Pale Fire* is no exception. Writing with an intensity that would suit *Pale Fire*'s own narrators, Brian Boyd, a leading authority on Nabokov, gives an exquisitely detailed reading of the book and advances a new thesis about which fictional character (or characters) is supposed to have written the book."--**Publishers Weekly**

"Brian Boyd's strength as a critic . . . is that his compendious knowledge of Nabokov's biography and writings, especially those in English, is matched by his level-headedness and attention to detail."--**Catriona Kelly, *Times Literary Supplement***

"[Boyd] is far and away Nabokov's best-informed and most subtle critic. . . . [He] bases his new interpretation on a staggering wealth of textual and extratextual detail and is clearly right on every major argument."--**Choice**

"A readable, elegantly written and witty guide through [the] process of discovery to which Nabokov himself invariably invites us, in what is arguably his finest novel."--**Helen McLean, *The Globe and Mail***

"This critical study . . . is not merely a brilliant search for the 'truth' of *Pale Fire*--it is also a study of the way we read texts and think about existence."--**Irving Malin, *Review of Contemporary Fiction***

"[E]ye-opening. . . . Boyd's singular reading . . . suggests a novel that is in fact startlingly harmonious, one in which life and death blend in seamless unity."--**Daniel Zalewski, *New York Times Book Review***

"Writing with an intensity that would suit *Pale Fire*'s own narrators, Brian Boyd, a leading authority on Nabokov, gives an exquisitely detailed reading of the book."--**Publishers Weekly**

"This startling new theory is not only hard to refute--it makes it impossible for anyone to see *Pale Fire* under the same light. . . . For the discoveries that lie ahead we are now indebted to Boyd's scrupulous research and pertinent interpretation. Nabokov's *Pale Fire: The Magic of Artistic Discovery* is truly the essential companion/mode d'emploi to one of the greatest masterpieces of the 20th century."--**Alexandre O. Philippe, Bloomsbury Review**

"Boyd's *Pale Fire* will change how we read Nabokov's. Boyd brilliantly shows the intensity with which the three parts of the novel 'recall' one another. . . . Above all, Nabokov's *Pale Fire* is a manifesto for close reading. There can be no better recommendation than that."--**Eric Naiman, Slavic Review**

## Users Review

### From reader reviews:

#### Jennifer Jones:

Have you spare time for any day? What do you do when you have considerably more or little spare time? Yep, you can choose the suitable activity with regard to spend your time. Any person spent all their spare time to take a walk, shopping, or went to the Mall. How about open or even read a book allowed Nabokov's "Pale Fire"? Maybe it is to be best activity for you. You recognize beside you can spend your time with the favorite's book, you can cleverer than before. Do you agree with it is opinion or you have other opinion?

#### Brenda Fairfax:

Information is provisions for those to get better life, information today can get by anyone at everywhere. The information can be a information or any news even an issue. What people must be consider when those information which is in the former life are challenging to be find than now is taking seriously which one works to believe or which one the resource are convinced. If you have the unstable resource then you buy it as your main information we will see huge disadvantage for you. All of those possibilities will not happen with you if you take Nabokov's "Pale Fire" as the daily resource information.

#### Whitney Ortez:

Reading can called head hangout, why? Because when you find yourself reading a book mainly book entitled Nabokov's "Pale Fire" your brain will drift away trough every dimension, wandering in most aspect that maybe unfamiliar for but surely will end up your mind friends. Imaging each and every word written in a guide then become one contact form conclusion and explanation in which maybe you never get previous to. The Nabokov's "Pale Fire" giving you yet another experience more than blown away your thoughts but also giving you useful information for your better life in this era. So now let us present to you the relaxing pattern

at this point is your body and mind will probably be pleased when you are finished looking at it, like winning a. Do you want to try this extraordinary wasting spare time activity?

**Audrey Mack:**

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