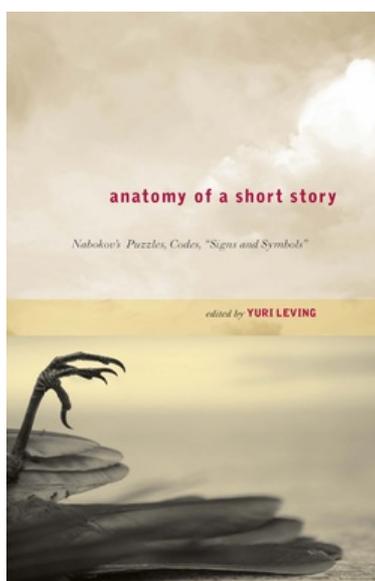


Anatomy of a Short Story. Nabokov's Puzzles, Codes, "Signs and Symbols," ed. by Yuri Leving, with an afterword by John Banville, New York-London: Continuum Press, 2012. ISBN 9781441142634. Alternative Tables of Contents. Credits. Bibliography. Index. xix+410 pp.



A *natomy of a Short Story* presents a vast array of pieces of varying length on Nabokov's "Signs and Symbols", first published in *The New Yorker* in 1948. The volume is substantial by its size, and rich in contributions by established and young scholars alike. It also includes contributions by people from non-literary or non-fictional fields (such as psychiatry, mathematics and drama). John Banville wrote the (short and lyrical) final piece, where he claims that "Signs and Symbols" is Nabokov's "saddest story". In his introduction, Yuri Leving insists that this is not simply "a recycled product" (2), an anthology of previously published pieces. Some of the articles have not been printed before, and the same is true of the archival correspondence between Nabokov and his *New Yorker* editor, Katherine White (presented by Olga Voronina).

The underlying philosophy conferring coherence to the volume is provided by the "anatomy" exercise. The definition of anatomy is given on the title page: "*Anatomy*: from Latin *anatomia*, Greek *anatome* (*ana*: separate, apart from, and *temnein*: to cut up, cut open)." The text of the short story appears as "the heart" of the volume, with "bone structure," "vascular system," "muscles," "DNA testing," etc., surrounding it. Such an "anatomical" approach may run the risk of fragmentation and excessive foregrounding of individual details,

the effect of dissection often being a loss of cohesiveness and wholeness of perception. On the other hand, it might be argued that a comprehensive, holistic vision is a utopia and that a kaleidoscopic plurality of visions is the only viable option, especially in the case of a collective volume that brings together a vast gamut of responses to a highly ambiguous text like “Signs and Symbols.” The critical plurality of readings and distinct focuses feeds on the ambiguity of the text, on its tantalizing inconclusiveness, on the shocking brevity of its ending that leaves the reader dangling without any explicit and explanatory landmarks. It is the huge merit of Yuri Leving, the editor, to have assembled so many texts that illustrate the difficulty of making sense of “Signs and Symbols.” A collective volume of this kind is always an inevitable mixture of more or less convincing pieces (to my mind, one or two articles are too thin to deserve publication), but taken as a whole it is a praiseworthy enterprise that will leave its mark on Nabokov studies owing to its comprehensiveness.

Quite short and enigmatic, “Signs and Symbols” has been widely read and analyzed in scholarly articles, due mainly to Nabokov’s comments on the hidden structure of the text (which presents, according to him, “an inner scheme,” “a system of mute responses,” which many readers have tried to unveil). Treating the text as a riddle or a series of riddles is not unusual for Nabokov’s readers, who start from Nabokov’s own pronouncements about the riddle-like nature of some of his texts. “The Vane Sisters” is another example of a Nabokovian riddle, more limited in scope than “Signs and Symbols” because it is more easily identifiable and circumscribed (an anagram concealed in the final paragraph introduces an unexpected twist in the plot). It should be noted that other (longer and canonical) works by Nabokov have been subjected to the same riddle-solving treatment and read with the idea that a hidden plot parallels and undermines the manifest one. The discordance in the chronology of *Lolita* has led to a series of interpretations about the supposed death of Dolores Haze early in the plot and Humbert’s imagined projection of the novel’s ending. Such a reading posits that all details in Nabokov are loaded with significance and are necessarily part of a coherent and veiled web of significance buried in the text. Authorial intention is at the heart of such interpretations. Besides, in such readings the author is beyond suspicion: he never makes mistakes, and what one might be tempted to call “mistakes” should be read as markers of hidden meaning. By contrast, Brian Boyd argues that the discrepancy in the chronology of *Lolita* is due merely to the author’s mistake and has no hermeneutic consequence, but it is difficult for some to accept that Nabokov could make unintentional mistakes that are not meant to distort the plot at a covert level. *Pale Fire* has also been unsurprisingly read as a

riddle of authorship, given its insistence of the notion of a “web of sense.” Are the poem and the commentary products of two distinct authorial instances or one?

Unlike “The Vane Sisters,” “Signs and Symbols” is a harder nut to crack because of the “systematic” nature of the supposed “riddle,” which could lie anywhere. Echoes and details respond to each other across the text. The “referential mania” of the protagonist has certainly contaminated the readers and critics, who have attempted to crack the code of the short story. Leving’s introduction to the volume is appropriately entitled “Breaking the code: Nabokov and the Art of Short Fiction.” The present volume amply illustrates this tendency. There are two dangers inherent in the riddle-solving approach. The first is the danger of closure (once the riddle has been solved, the reading process is over). The second consists in an exclusive and compulsive drive to annotate the text. Characters’ names, numbers, details such as the types of fruit jellies are explored, their literal and symbolic meanings unraveled. Annotation leads to fragmentation, with meanings accumulating but not always forming a coherent or clear picture.

Anatomy of a Short Story illustrates two major approaches to “Signs and Symbols”. One concentrates on its fundamental elusiveness, ambiguity and elliptic nature, on the kinds of literary and historical problems it raises (determinacy and indeterminacy, the meaning of omission as a literary device, the role of history in the short story). The other attempts to solve the riddle in the text, to crack its code. A few articles from the first category – such as Michael Wood’s “Consulting the Oracle” and Leona Toker’s contribution on the role of the Holocaust in the story’s background – stand out through their distinct approach to the text, away from annotation and riddle-solving.

As for the “cryptic” tendency of reading “Signs and Symbols”, it is always based on the identification of textual details that are read as ciphers and gates of entry into the text. For example, no less than three pieces in the volume are devoted to the jars of fruit jellies. Such pieces can be appreciated for the role they play in the collective effort to interpret “Signs and Symbols,” but it seems to me that some of the notes exemplify a tendency of focusing on decontextualized details; the ten jars of fruit jelly tend to form a web of sense of their own, a terrain into which the critic delves with infinite gusto but with little conclusive strength: thus, we find out that “if one removes the crab apple, the names of the jellies in the story – apricot, grape, beech plum, quince – form an anagram. That is, by taking the final letter in each name and reconfiguring the letters, one can create the word ‘theme’” (143). While some readers and critics may appreciate the astuteness of this anagrammatic reading, others (like myself) are left baffled by the arbitrariness of such a comment. Moreover, we are further embarked upon

a reading of “crab apple jelly” as related to “the forbidden fruit” (143): it is difficult to see how such a general, conventional comment linking the crab apple to the tree of knowledge could be profoundly meaningful beyond the mere exercise of annotation and association.

As a whole, the volume will certainly prove extremely useful for students and critics alike. Given the plethora of responses the story has elicited, such a volume offers a complete picture of the types of critical reaction to “Signs and Symbols,” and will prove indispensable to anyone interested in Nabokov’s short stories and in modernist fiction in general. The volume is professionally edited, with virtually no typos, but some editorial slippages subsist: two of the contributors do not appear in the list of biographical notes. I would also like to express my admiration for the elegant book cover, which is both despondent and striking; the outstretched claws of a dying or dead bird, pointing in several directions at the same time seem a befitting visual counterpart to the bleakness and indeterminacy of the story itself.

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