



Despair

Vladimir Nabokov

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Extensively revised by Nabokov in 1965--thirty years after its original publication--**Despair** is the wickedly inventive and richly derisive story of Hermann, a man who undertakes the perfect crime--his own murder.

Despair Details

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Author : Vladimir Nabokov

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From Reader Review Despair for online ebook

Michael says

Wild, wicked, stylish, funny, in only the way Nabokov could write. On every page you sense the fun he's having, and boy, is it infectious.

Kinga says

The first part of it was tedious. I could see Nabokov was a great writer but still, it was tedious. I struggled through first 80-90 pages and was awarded for my efforts with a brilliant second part of the book. I was actually sitting on the tube going to work, reading it and muttering to myself "Oh, brilliant, brilliant".

Hermann is such a perverse narrator. He plays with you and he is not to be trusted. One of the very few books when I felt I created a relationship with the narrator.

Don't be misled by first 50 pages - the book actually does have a plot.

Boris says

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Stian says

That's it for my seventh Nabokov -- *Despair*, or ???????, a "far more sonorous howl", as Nabokov writes in the introduction to the work. This represents Nabokov's "first serious attempt to use English for what may be loosely termed an artistic purpose."

The writing is, as you kind of expect from Nabokov, stellar. The story is interesting, and it does not require as much from the reader as some of his other books do -- indeed, Nabokov writes that the book has a "plain structure and pleasing plot." Pretty much true: Hermann Hermann, a man who seems at first to be relatively sane, meets what he believes to be his double (a Dostoevskyian theme, which he in fact ridicules more than anything), and then concocts a pretty stupid plan that, needless to say, fails.

One thing is for certain: Hermann Hermann is a thoroughly distasteful character. A self-serving prick and a thoroughgoing asshole. As he loses his mind and his plans utterly fail, it's hard to feel sorry for him. In fact, you kind of rejoice as the whole thing collapses under his feet. Nabokov portrays the whole thing in such an eerie way that it's hard to move away from the thought that perhaps there is some of Hermann Hermann in Volodya too.

In the introduction Nabokov writes about the similarities between Humbert (of *Lolita*) and Hermann:

Hermann and Humbert are alike only in the sense that two dragons painted by the same artist at different periods of his life resemble each other. Both are neurotic scoundrels, yet there is a green lane in Paradise where Humbert is permitted to wander at dusk once a year; but Hell shall never parole Hermann.

But, "in kinship with the rest of my books", there is no social comment to be made by Nabokov; there are no Freudian messages to be found in here; this whole thing is not in "the influence of German Impressionists", as Nabokov writes in the introduction, taking stabs at critics of various literary "schools."

It's just a book. Art for art's sake. And the guy is a brilliant writer: read him.

"Although I do not care for the slogan "art for art's sake", there can be no question that what makes a work of fiction safe from larvae and rust is not its social importance but its art, only its art."

- Nabokov

Sarah says

Only one author on earth can produce from me the following sentence: "Yeah, I'm reading this book called Despair about an insane murderer with no respect for human life, and it is **HILARIOUS**." That author is Nabokov.

In this, one of his lesser-known works, the egotistical and foppish narrator confesses to murdering someone who looks exactly like him in an attempt to collect his own life insurance money (and, more subconsciously, to rid the world of his weird doppelganger). Of course, Vladdy isn't satisfied with a straight-up story, and slowly reveals that the first-person narrative we've been reading is really only just scrapping surface of what actually took place.

As always with Nabokov, the language is beautiful and you are sure to learn at least a few new and awesome vocabulary words. You are also sure to either 1) write a bunch of new fiction with a weak, pseudo-retarded version of Nabokov's style or 2) become paralyzed completely.

Despair was one of his earlier novels, written in Russian in 1932 and then translated into English (by Nabokov himself, the goddamn genius) with extensive edits, in 1965. It's absolutely fascinating to see a younger, less experienced Nabokov write - you can see all of the seeds of his future works. The themes that he returns to so often during the latter part of his career — mirroring, unreliable narrators, unlikable protagonists, mistaken identities, dark humor, botched violence - are here, too, a little more apparent and a little less smooth and adept.

As a writer, I was happy to see a lower-level Nabokov - unlike in say, *Pale Fire*, where it is hard to pinpoint how he is pulling off the literary tricks he pulls off, in *Despair*, it's a little easier to look into Nabokov's mind and see the blueprints he was working with. For example, while it is hard to tell how he so subtlety reveals that *Pale Fire*'s protagonist is delusional, in *Despair*, I could pick up on specific techniques he was using to create Hermann, the book's unreliable narrator. It's sort of like watching a magic trick before the magician has perfected it — you can maybe glimpse a trap door or a string and get a clue as to how to execute it yourself.

And while the exacting and masterful art of his later books is partially missing, his weird, twisted humor is on full display from the first page to the last. It might be the best kind of joke - 240 pages of non-stop dramatic irony which becomes more and more obvious with each page (all while the “author” is forced to continue complicating the story in order to continue deluding himself). And even while Nabokov can pull off a novel-length leg-pull, he also appreciates and condones the lowest forms of humor - puns and fart jokes. There truly was never a greater writer, and I mean that from the bottom of my heart.

Hossein Sharifi says

SPOILER ALERT!

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David says

Vladimir Nabokov is a genius. In *Lolita* his genius is manifest in the perversion of human sympathies, the seduction of language, the durability of art (yet also the mortality of beauty). In *Despair*, one of Nabokov's first forays into English prose, there is an early adumbration of what will become the enchanting monster, Humbert Humbert, found in the narrator-murderer Hermann. But aside from the faint outline of what is to come, *Despair* is a brilliant novel in itself, removed from the nympholeptic successors which follow in the Nabokovian oeuvre. The narrative is a simple one, Hermann happens upon a man whom he believes is his perfect double, and resolves to commit the "perfect murder" - killing his double and cashing in on his own life insurance. But like Humbert, and their mutual progenitor, Hermann is an aesthete: *Despair* is not merely a novel of mistaken identity, of false doubles, of murder-plot high-jinx, but a novel about art - the reach of art beyond medium into life. Is not the "perfect murder" as much a work of art, of deliberate purpose and imagination, as the "perfect novel" or the "perfect painting"?

To anyone with a passing interest in the masterful Nabokov, his extreme views on literature should be no mystery. He was a combative proponent of "art for art's sake," he believed that the purpose of fiction is to enchant and not to evoke empathy. In his lectures on literature at Wellesley and at Cornell he examined literature as he examined his lepidopteran specimens: with a microscope. Art in fiction, for Nabokov, is the

successive accumulation of detail, of a fractal perfection which pervaded through all layers of the narrative and opened a world before the reader which has an almost tactile realism, but which also enchanted, which was fantastic, which was *beyond reality*, which was art. Hermann represents a perversion of this view on art, for though he seeks the perfection down to the detail, he fails to view with honesty the overall picture. His art is never perfection because while he is a devil for details, he is lost in the greater art of life, which he fails to appreciate.

Throughout Nabokov, we see the butterfly, his passion, as a symbol for the complete cycle of artistic creation. When Lolita is playing tennis, her fleeting poses are beautiful but manifestly useless in the pursuit of victory - a sportsman's manifestation of art for art's sake - and while she plays "*an inquisitive butterfly passed, dipping, between us.*" (This scene parallels the interloping butterfly in the ultimate episode of *Pale Fire*) The butterfly as a symbol for the ideal art - life imitating art, imitating life, so to speak - coincides with the belief that art is mortality. "*Death is the mother of beauty,*" as Wallace Stevens said, a claim with which Nabokov was sure to agree (note the fateful end of *Lolita*'s titular character). To pervert this belief, to parody his own views on art, Nabokov brings forth Hermann, who sees a beauty in death, in destruction of life (much like Humbert's destruction of Lolita's innocence and life):

...what is death, if not a face at peace – its artistic perfection? Life only marred my double; thus a breeze dims the bliss of Narcissus; thus, in the painter's absence, there comes his pupil and by the superfluous flush of unbidden tints disfigures the portrait painted by the master.

This is a telling insight into the creation of Hermann - the pleasure he sees in death, the reference to Narcissus and to "artistic perfection," are all relevant to the character of Hermann, and significant to the novel's thematic development.

The great irony of Hermann as an artist is his poor consistency with his own dogma. Despite his search for artistic perfection, despite his attention to detail, it is precisely the details which he overlooks, and in doing so gives himself away completely. Rather than devising the perfect murder, he devises the perfect blunder. Not only does he fail to achieve his financial goals, but he ensures his identification as the murderer. He is not a poor bluff, but rather plays cards with his cards face up on the table. The pivotal element, the crux of his entire plan, is the similarity of himself with his victim. He is convinced he has found his *perfect Doppelgänger*, only to discover that he is the only one who sees any similarity at all. Isn't this the great crisis of artists? The fear that no one will appreciate their art but themselves? For many artists, this is not a hindrance, they create art for themselves - it is a release - it is *for its own sake*. Hermann, while having a seemingly genuine appreciation for artistic perfection, prostitutes his artistic efforts for financial gain, and as a result of doing so is doubly foiled.

Despair is not Nabokov's greatest, I cannot argue that. It pales next to florid perfection of *Lolita*, next to the experimental risks of *Pale Fire*, and next to the playful game of history and nostalgia, fiction and biography, in *Speak, Memory* - but it is a great novel, it is worthy of the Nabokovian credit. It is immensely enjoyable to read, as a parodic game on the *Crime and Punishment* legacy, and also as a mock-treatise on the failures and purposes of art.

John Pappas says

Nobody writes like Nabokov. Nobody can ape his style, or fake his psychological acuity, both of which are on pyrotechnic display here. Taking us on a winding journey through self-aggrandizing memories and fantasies, Nabokov's pompous and foppish narrator carefully and gradually, but also gleefully and proudly,

reveals his plot to fake his own death by killing his double. Though ostensibly the motive is to gain the insurance money, Hermann, the narrator, has deeper and more chilling motives. An amazing and thought-provoking immersion into the nature of identity and character by a master craftsman.

Invidia says

I hate Nabokov. He's a bleedin' megalomaniac interested in nothing other than proclaiming the invention of paper and ink as an exclusive gift to himself.

I take deep breaths of exasperation reading every fourth sentence this guy writes. What, can he just go on playing with my feelings? As if he's never gonna call back? He's not, is he?

Despair was just such a declaration. Fool tries to fool people, and you say, "Ah! This is his first book. It'll show his immaturity and I'll not have to gasp in pain every time I hear his name."

But oh no. In the last two pages, he gives you enough shock as to arm you with a knife you would drive through him right after you have finished rethinking the entire book and telling yourself, "Damn! I'm the one who got fooled."

Shame on you, Nabokov. I gave you the wrong number anyway.

Nancy Oakes says

Thoughts forthcoming; for now, yes! An amazing novel. I have a feeling it will take a while for me to go over it in my head, so stay tuned.

Cody says

The discerning reader of my Nabokov reviews will have undoubtedly noticed how they are shelved. "Nabo-Wabo" is, indeed, a tip of the hat to two unparalleled language masters of the 20th-century. The first, of course, is Vladimir Nabokov himself. The second, as you have so obviously deduced (clever bastards), is *Monsieur* Samuel "Sammy" Hagar—late of international stardom as the robin-haired vocalist-frontman of one Van Halen and champion of all things Cabo San Lucas, aka "Cabo Wabo" in Hagarese. If the duality of the shelving eludes you, allow me to explain.

Everyone reading this has undoubtedly familiarized any number of VVN pages/chapters to heart for impromptu recital at social gatherings. Repeating them here is thus to impinge upon your time. Let us proceed in agreement that his ability was without peer.

Or was it?

To this end, I submit the following excerpt from Messrs Hagar and Van Halen's (Dutch brothers and possibly illegal émigrés) magnum opus "Poundcake:"

*"Lemme get on, lemme get on, lemme get on some of that
Shake it up, bake it up nice, uh
Lemme get on, lemme get on, lemme get on all that
I so love my baby's poundcake"*

Need I say more? What else can I, humble reporter of Art and not participant, add to that which is so obvious? Notice the pentameter; the use of simile sublimity its very self. Duly recognize the wordplay of this coeval prose stylist as he appropriates the English 'let me' into his own, delightful Hagarese as "lemme." Coals to Newcastle: the metaphorical 'poundcake' is actually no culinary dessert at all, rather, his paramour's *derriere*! Thusly, S. Hagar, cad, is espousing the virtue of sexual congress with his lucky lady of the night in the fashion most commonly associated with the lesser animals, specifically *Canis lupus familiaris*! Does the man's imagination know *no* bounds?!? As with Nabokov, we mortals can only contemplate the stars and the possible populations on them.

(psssstt: by the way, this was one of my absolute favorite of the Russian novels. truly vile in the way that only Nabo can conjure.)

Hadrian says

One of Nabokov's first forays into English fiction. Many of his favorite tricks are here - literary allusions, intricate and dazzling prose, false identities, unreliable narrators. Pure Nabokov - nothing wrong with that at all.

Paquita Maria Sanchez says

Wow. This is the most arrogant, self-aggrandizing, intellectually snooty indictment of literary criticism I've ever read. Wow. This is the most self-flagellating, masochistically interior, intellectually crushing self-indictment I've ever read by an artist. What a contradiction. What a clever little motherfucker. What a way to illuminate the disconnect between self and perception-of-self by others, of artistic expression v. reception.

How dare you be you. I'm glad you're dead, Vladimir Nabokov*. No, I'm not, and everything I just said was hyperbolic. But only because I think you would've appreciate the fireworks given that you were such a fancy-britches and all. You card!

But hey, if it makes you feel any better, even your mediocre-in-comparison-to-your-better-books books are better than most books I've read. (And I actually meant that part verbatim.)

*Not me, but every living author probably is, considering your effortlessly incisive prose = a ruler striking the knuckles of their self-confidence and motivation to write, forever. You had a better command of the English (your second) language than approximately 95% of the "English as a first language" people I've met in my whole life. More fireworks! For you!

Asshole.

Adam Floridia says

Doubles. Doppelgangers. Duplicity. Distortion. A Demented disposition. Deviation. Deflections. Disguise. Disorder. Design. Deception. Deftness. Dynamic descriptions. And Art. That's *Despair*.

That pretty much covers the novel proper. It starts as such a wonderful meta-fiction whose "author" is a real nutter with the absolute least sense of "self" ever (ironically, he, of course, feels that he is totally self-aware with a complete understanding of not only his identity, but of others'). Despite that, the veracity of his tale is opened to doubts right from the beginning: he admits that he "doubted the reality of what [he] saw, doubted [his] own sanity" (7).

From here you've got a drawn out "William Wilson" for a while. (I think I compare anything with a doppelganger to Poe's story because that's where I first learned the word, so maybe this isn't really a drawn out "WW" because I don't remember much about that story actually.) Of course throw in the normal dash of Nabokov exploring the limits of self-hood and the various means of escaping that inexorable prison of consciousness: "I have grown much too used to an outside view of myself" (19). Then there's the odd pacing of the story—the mundane parts are really dragged out, mounting action/suspense leads to digressions, and the truly action-packed parts are glossed over. Yet, for some reason this works. That reason is probably Nabokov's mastery of prose, I mean I could read two hundred pages about paint drying if they're written by VN.

I need to throw in something about the real author's (VN's) arrogance. I just love it. And this isn't any type of attempt to read Hermann (arrogant narrator/pseudo-author) as a doppelganger for VN; it's based on VN's preface. As is standard with these reissues and self-translations, Nabokov tells his readers how to read the book and how not to (the book "has no social comment to make" and he scoffs at "the attractively shaped object or Weiner-schnitzel dream that the eager Freudian may think he distinguishes"). What a dick, right? And the dickish-ness of talking about how "Lucky" students of comparative literature should be for this gift, and how even the "plain readers" will welcome its "pleasing plot," "many entertaining conversations," and "great fun." Why do I love this dick? I'm not sure, but Freudians please don't read too much into it!

Want some zeugma? Here's some zeugma for ya! "her legs had started to clamp me, the ashtray toppled off the bed table, the universe followed" (27).

Quotation I couldn't fit elsewhere: "for the real author is not I, but my impatient memory...Thus the future shimmers through the past" (37).

Chrissie says

Seriously, I didn't like this. Yeah, I like how Vladimir Nabokov writes but this book just doesn't have the sparkle, the humor or the polished writing of *Lolita* or *Speak*, *Memory* or other books by the author. It feels like a piece that still needs more work....or maybe you can work something to death. Look at the history of this book. *Despair* first came out in 1934 as a serial in the Russian literary journal *Sovremennye*. It was published as a book in 1936, translated by the author into English in 1937, but what exists today is the

author's reworking of 1965. Clearly he did have time to rethink this.

Why doesn't it work for me? Despair not only was a forerunner to Lolita, published in 1955, but it feels like that too. One can compare Hermann of this novel with Lolita's Humbert Humbert. Both are unreliable first-person narrators, but one is a shadow of the other. Not in who they are but in the strength of their characterizations. Lydia, Hermann's wife, doesn't come close to Lolita's Dolores.

So what is the theme of this one? It is a murder story, but more! It is really about doubles, about identity and what connects one person to another. Hermann is delusional. Anything he says has to be questioned. Of course that is true too of Humbert Humbert, but there it is easier to just see the facts presented as his point of view. In Despair the story is so much more complicated; you are thrown between the writing of a story, how authors write stories and what actually happens, i.e. the events of the tale. Too complicated! Not properly thought through. Similar themes but quite simply not as good.

There are also funnier and more noteworthy lines in Lolita. More to chuckle at. More to think about on all sorts of themes, having nothing to do with sex or murder.

Christopher Lane does a good job with the narration, even if occasionally when he personifies dubious characters of Russian origin it was practically impossible to hear the lines. Arrogance, self-satisfaction and delusional traits, as well as furious explosions of temper all are well intoned.

For me this was quite simple a forerunner to Lolita. That I gave five stars.

Adam Dalva says

Intensely good writing, with the unique Nabokovian feature of phrases we've never heard before somehow moving propulsively. Unfortunately, after a promising start, the plot turns flimsy, with the "twist" at the end telegraphed far too often to be anything other than a disappointment. This is an iceberg novel, but what's beneath the surface (the book jacket copy) is likely more interesting than the ramblings of our lead, Hermann, who (in the Zweigian conceit of the novel) has written and sent the prose to Nabokov for publication.

Nabokov has an interesting line in the introduction (coming some 30 years after he wrote DESPAIR in Russian): "Hermann and Humbert are alike only in the sense that two dragons painted by the same artist at different periods of his life resemble each other. Both are neurotic scoundrels, yet there is a green lane in Paradise where Humbert is permitted to wander at dusk once a year; but Hell shall never parole Hermann."

This seems odd - though both are unreliable narrators who commit a vile crime, the insidiousness of Humbert is far more extreme, and not just because LOLITA is a superior novel. Humbert's charm makes him disturbing, while Hermann is so unlikable that we can never be immersed in his mind. Though he is fully in control of the narrative, he is mainly a source of derision.

Now, there is much pleasure here in what the reader knows and the narrator doesn't - the relationship between Ardalion and Hermann's wife is a brilliant piece of writing, with lots of great humor coming out of Hermann's not knowing what is so obviously happening. This book also has the strangest supporting character I can remember, a man named Orlovious who is somehow instrumental to the plot, in a large

percentage of the book's scenes, and never once explained or described. I enjoyed the many digs at Dostoyevsky too ("Dusty") - the whole thing can be read as a Dostoyevsky parody, now that I think about it. But despite the evident strengths, this is a minor book by a major writer -3.7 stars.

Mike Puma says

Just a word or so on this one—then a warning of sorts. Neither will be particularly useful, and neither should be given much weight. If your Read list is lacking an adequate Nabokov presence, if it lacks gravitas, pick this up, read it, pat yourself on the back, give it the obligatory 4 stars, and try to forget, as quickly as you can, that you saw the ending coming. It's Nabokov, it matters, probably more than you will; certainly, more than I. There are funny bits, and sinister bits, and clever bits, and the world's a wonderfully complicated place in which to live. But, you'll probably be able to find much more engaging reads at any corner. Grab one, enjoy it, move on. Or, read this one, enjoy it (more or less), and move on. Even with constant reference to YOU, the reader, you'll likely remain at a remove from the narrator and his story. It's good (enough), and funny (enough) and clever (enough), and then over (but not quite soon enough).

Now, for the advice. Be cautious, very cautious, when raiding other people's To Read list with the silly inclination of 'beating him (or her) to the punch,' by snagging a short one. It could bite you in the ass. Whatever the short lived joy of said beating is, it remains complicated by the bitten ass. The ass you'll be unable to sit on right away while trying to read something else. Isn't that just the way things work out? My Advice Part II: read your own damn To Read list—you know, the one you have an interest in and from which you'll likely feel greater reward. That said, next in line: The Lord Chandos Letter, from Vila-Matas' reading list. I've known me too long to take my own advice.

Kalliope says

Little silly kalliope, upon entering the pages of this despairing novel, wonders at her existence. This is all about her, or rather, about not being herself at all, but just the unoriginal existence of doubles. How come is she called like the Grand Kalliope, the Muse? They are clearly not the same. One is the doppelgänger of the other. She is clearly not the 'one', so she must be the 'other'? But how can she refer to herself as the 'other'? This baffles her and sends her mind into a spiral. She is in despair.

For a way out she looks for a mirror. Mirrors are terrifying. May be Alice will give her the clue. But no, it doesn't; or at least not any more than any of the other books. She lives only through her reading; the only world little kalliope knows is this virtual GoodReads, where many other members of its fleeting population also have their own muses, their own shadows.

Nabokov, who also seems to be haunted by mirrors, may tell her to use cynicism and sarcasm as her path with his alluring and magical writing. The detachment that those acrimonious tones provide, help in separating one from one's self. But no, rebuts little kalliope, that is a tiresome choice and besides it is not the separation of the 'one' from the 'one' that she is looking for but from that elusive 'other'. Little kalliope cannot imitate what seems to be one of Nabokov's signatures, that fine derisive tint that fascinates and captures her while also gnawing at her patience. For quite a few pages she felt also somewhat lost, were it not for those constant strokes of violet or lilac colour that keep emerging out of the black print on white paper.

She also feels somewhat uncomfortable, for in spite of this Despair dealing with doubles, two "I" ("I" + "I" – there does not seem to be a plural for the single "I"), she does not recognize herself in this very male tone. Had Nabokov read ROOM? Asks herself kalliope as she still feels as if she just walked out of that famous Room also of her own. Although she feels she is no 'androgynous' reader either. She would have disappointed Woolf too.

Eventually the lilacs do lead her to find a sense in the novel, the structure or path or plot takes shape, and the light shines. She then sees Nabokov's brilliance: the stars begin to glow. Some of the guiding posts are also literary, and these give a humorous glitter, in particular Turgy and Dusty. Are these also a Pair un-Paired?

Observing Hermann Karlovich, though, kalliope eventually realises that for her to find herself, to uncouple herself without des-pair, from that one from which she is the doppelgänger, the solution is not what he proposes in the uncanny plot. Instead, it is Nabokov's wizardry with words, and his literary cleverness what constitute the vignettes that make her literary visit worthwhile. Little kalliope can forget the doubts on her identity and continue to follow the auspices emanating from the Grand Kalliope. – her Muse.

With or without lilacs and violets, and certainly without Despair.

Tom Mathews says

True confession: I have never read a Vladimir Nabokov novel until now. A month ago the only one of his novels that I could name was Lolita. While I'm sure it is a good book (165,000 GR readers can't all be wrong), books with pedophiles as main characters don't usually make it to the top of my TBR list so I was interested in finding another Nabokov book that would give me a taste of this renowned author's style.

Enter Despair.

The title of this novel is deceiving. One would expect that a novel named Despair would be depressing book full of gloom and doom, a tale about sad and hopeless people. Who needs a novel about that? As we are already assured of getting all that and more from November's election, there is no need to get one's despair from fiction.

Fortunately, Despair is not like that. Written in the 1930s in Russian and subsequently translated to English, Despair is the quintessential unreliable narrator story. Hermann, an unsuccessful businessman with dreams of becoming a successful writer, encounters a vagrant who could be Hermann's twin and concocts the 'perfect' crime, intent on creating a literary masterpiece by chronicling his crime.

"Oh, Conan Doyle! What an opportunity you missed! For you could have written one last tale concluding the whole Sherlock Holmes epic; the murderer in that tale should have turned out to be ... the very chronicler of the crime stories, Dr. Watson himself. A staggering surprise for the reader."

Conan Doyle isn't the only author Hermann aspires to. He mentions another Russian novelist more than once, referring to 'old Dusty' and his 'great book, *Crime and Slime*'.

When it comes down to it, Hermann's crime is neither perfect nor original. What does make the story unique is Nabokov's story-within-a-story approach, writing as Hermann writing his criminal masterpiece. This in itself makes Despair a classic work of crime fiction. I recommend it highly.

FYI: On a 5-point scale I assign stars based on my assessment of what the book needs in the way of improvements:

*5 Stars – Nothing at all. If it ain't broke, don't fix it.

*4 Stars – It could stand for a few tweaks here and there but it's pretty good as it is.

*3 Stars – A solid C grade. Some serious rewriting would be needed in order for this book to be considered *great or memorable*.

*2 Stars – This book needs a lot of work. A good start would be to change the plot, the character development, the writing style and the ending.

*1 Star - The only thing that would improve this book is a good bonfire.

Bettie? says

Re-visit 2016 is the film recommended by Karen.

Plotline: *The narrator and protagonist of the story, Hermann Karlovich, a Russian of German descent and owner of a chocolate factory, meets a homeless man in the city of Prague, whom he believes is his doppelgänger. Even though Felix, the supposed doppelgänger, is seemingly unaware of their resemblance, Hermann insists that their likeness is most striking. Hermann is married to Lydia, a sometimes silly and forgetful wife (according to Hermann) who has a cousin named Ardalion. It is heavily hinted that Lydia and Ardalion are, in fact, lovers, although Hermann continually stresses how much Lydia loves him. On one occasion Hermann actually walks in on the pair, naked, but Hermann appears to be completely oblivious of the situation, perhaps deliberately so. After some time, Hermann shares with Felix a plan for both of them to profit off their shared likeness by having Felix briefly pretend to be Hermann. But after Felix is disguised as Hermann, Hermann kills Felix in order to collect the insurance money on Hermann on March 9. Hermann considers the presumably perfect murder plot to be a work of art rather than a scheme to gain money. But as*

it turns out, there is no resemblance whatsoever between the two men, the murder is not 'perfect', and the murderer is about to be captured by the police in a small hotel in France, where he is hiding. Hermann who is writing the narrative switches to a diary mode at the very end just before his captivity, the last entry is on April 1.

Fraudio: Read (brilliantly) by Christopher Lane

From wiki: *originally published as a serial in the politicized literary journal Sovremennye zapiski during 1934. It was then published as a book in 1936, and translated to English by the author in 1937. Most copies of the 1937 English edition were destroyed by German bombs during World War II; only a few copies remain. Nabokov published a second English translation in 1965; this is now the only English translation in print.*

narrator: Hermann Karlovich

his wife: Lydia

his business: chocolate

doppelgänger: Felix

setting: Prague

musical backdrop: Tango in Prague - Milonga Prague Castle

5* Pale Fire

4* Sebastian Knight

3* Lolita

3* The Eye

3* Despair

2* Transparent Things