

A guide to Berlin - Nabokov - in Wikipedia

In the story the narrator recounts to a friend his visit to the Berlin zoo. In the short sections--"The Pipes," "The Streetcar," "Work," "Eden," and "The Pub"—he describes everyday aspects of life in the city in vivid, typically Nabokovian, detail. In "The Streetcar," he adumbrates his vision of the purpose of "literary creation":

"To portray ordinary objects as they will be reflected in the kindly mirrors of future times; to find in the objects around us the fragrant tenderness that only posterity will discern and appreciate in the far-off times when every trifle of our plain everyday life will become exquisite and festive in its own right: the times when a man who might put on the most ordinary jacket of today will be dressed up for an elegant masquerade."

His "pot companion" (drinking buddy) in the pub pronounces the guide to be poor one of a "boring, expensive city," and does not understand the narrator's preoccupation with streetcars, tortoisés, or the publican's young son's view from the rear annex. The last aspect is the salient one; the narrator believes that the child will always have some manner of dim recollection of this childhood view and time, impregnated by details that will seem to him unique or special. This is exactly how the narrator feels about his own experiences around Berlin that day. He derives great pleasure from the aesthetics and social mechanisms, though others may not. It is the possibility of having experienced objects which might interest, entertain or mould others that so fascinates him.

NB

"The Leonardo" is a short story written in Russian by Vladimir Nabokov in Berlin in the summer of 1933.

Reviews:

1) A Guide to Berlin by Gail Jones review - a shallow tale of Nabokov-reading expats
Jessa Crispin Saturday 23 January 2016 Guardian

Jones adopts the great novelist's prose style and precise word choice, but abandons his piercing psychological insight and historical weight
Shocking stereotypes ...

What Paris was between the wars, and New York was in the mid-20th century, Berlin has been for the 21st century: a beacon for artists, writers and musicians. Not only a source of cheap rents and stimulating creative networks, these cities are a font of inspiration. People come from all over the world to let the city be their muse, and give it great art in return. Paris helped to make Hemingway and the Fitzgeralds, New York Sontag and Arendt, and Berlin has made, well ...

Berlin's influence has been strong in visual art and music, but less obvious in the literary world. The city hosts some of the greatest writers we have right now, from Herta Müller to Imre Kertész, but they were great when they arrived. For all of the anglophone youngsters crowding its rapidly gentrifying borders, the actual output has been slight.

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Cass, the twentysomething Australian protagonist of Gail Jones's new novel, is one such wannabe writer, newly expatriated to Berlin. A devotee of Nabokov, she makes a jetlagged pilgrimage to his former family home in the city and meets similarly obsessed Marco, an Italian academic/real estate broker who leads a Nabokov discussion group. Rather than reading and discussing his work, however, members take turns narrating their life stories in what they call "speak-memories".

Cass is excited about participating in the "new internationalism" that Berlin provides, but this is also the book's biggest problem. The group is made up of two Italians, two Japanese and an American, but their stories revolve around rather shocking stereotypes: each person has managed to become the victim of their nation or city's largest calamity. The Jewish American is the son of Auschwitz survivors; the Japanese man is hikikomori, socially reclusive, because of the Tokyo subway sarin gas attacks; the father of the man from Bologna was killed in the 1980 train station bombing. I kept expecting an Irish survivor of the Magdalene laundries to appear, or a first responder to 9/11.

A Guide to Berlin boasts a glossy surface, but within a few chapters you realise it has all the substance of a cardboard forest backdrop in a school play. Other people's tragedies become plunder for Jones to decorate her novel with and give some weight to her flighty protagonist. The story Cass tells during her "speak-memory" is merely personal, a family tragedy that feels "thin beside the others". How can a lost brother compete against the Holocaust? These stories are meant to provide Cass's training as a writer, rather than her own experiences or studies. She tells the reader she means to be a writer, but we never see her writing, or reading, or even thinking. Convenient, then, that there are others to bring the misery of the world to her to write about.

Berlin's dark history is just another source of plunder. Cass briefly considers the meaning of the sidewalk plaques that memorialise the Jewish families evicted by the Nazis from each building, and in another scene she visits a makeshift camp for refugees in a town square. But never does she attempt to wrestle with the past or present, nor does she ever seem overwhelmed by the weight of all that has happened in the city. Jones similarly takes the most obvious features of Nabokov's writing, the stylish prose and precise word choice, and abandons his piercing psychological insight and historical weight. The sentences in A Guide to Berlin are meant to impress with their stylistic acrobatics, but they are hollow, not to mention improbable. Cass responds to a winter storm with: "Snowing again, yes? All those hexagons."

I kept hoping that the novel would reveal itself to be a brilliant takedown of cultural appropriation, such as Gwen Stefani's Harajuku Girls controversy, when she hired Japanese girls to follow her around, or the trouble singer Christina Fallin got into for wearing a Native American headdress. When the Japanese woman breaks out the origami during a stressful moment, I waited for a knowing wink to the audience. Disappointingly, A Guide to Berlin is never self-aware enough, and instead it devolves into a ludicrous murder plot.

Berlin is a demanding muse. With its complex history of suffering and evil, it is no wonder some would prefer to skate along its surface rather than delve into its dark heart. The title, then, evokes not the wonderful Nabokov short story of the same name, but simply a pamphlet for tourists, hoping that some of Berlin's glamour will rub off on them as they walk along the city streets.
105 <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/jan/23/a-guide-to-berlin-gail-jones-review-novel>

110 2) A Guide to Berlin by Gail Jones, book review: Heavy-handed take on Nabokov

So long as Jones, a former Booker Prize longlistee, sticks with poignant reflection, the novel is on strong ground

115 Sam Kitchener Thursday 14 January 2016 Independent

Walking around Berlin, you might well trip over a Stolperstein or "stumbling stone", metal paving stones commemorating individual victims of the Nazis. Cass, the young Australian protagonist of Gail Jones's sixth novel, on her way to a meeting of fellow expatriate Vladimir Nabokov fans, finds herself transfixed by these Stolpersteine, and their "brassy glow beneath the coating of thin ice".
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The group of Nabokovians also comprises two Italians, Marco and Gino, American academic, Victor, and a Japanese couple, Yukio and Mitsuko. A Guide to Berlin, which shares its title with a 1925 short story by Nabokov, is as much a guide to the author as the city. And the little group, whose evolving relationships the novel traces, celebrate the ways in which his writing is stippled with its own bright stumbling stones.
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When the narrator of Nabokov's "A Guide to Berlin" notes a starfish in the aquarium at Berlin Zoo, a "crimson, five-pointed star", his "regard for the weird vibrancy of things", as Jones puts it, is also a regard for their weird historical resonance. For him, the starfish prefigures the Soviet red star, a symbol of those Bolsheviks who drove the aristocratic Nabokovs out of Russia, their "topical utopias and other inanities that cripple us today". So many of the arresting details lovingly recalled in Nabokov's short stories are, like that starfish, precious memories stored up against the intervening cruelties of time, which also serve to remind us of them.
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Just so, Cass's group take turns to share a "speak-memory" - the term taken from the title of Nabokov's autobiography. A "densely remembered" story, personal but often historically aware, whose brilliant details redeem and recall past suffering.
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So long as Jones, a former Booker Prize longlistee, sticks with poignant reflection, the novel is on strong ground. Her sensitivity to the vibrancy of things demonstrates a Nabokovian vividness.
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A swerve into The Secret History territory, when the group is torn apart by an unconvincingly telegraphed act of violence, places it on thinner ice, coming far too late for a satisfactory resolution, despite much soulful agonising. Jones' point
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is that certain events are too profound to be "contained within sentences".
Something to which Nabokov, a fan of grisly twists himself, adopted a more
relaxed approach. Take the freak accident which kills Humbert Humbert's mother
in Lolita, glossed by Humbert as, simply, "(picnic, lightning)". It helps to have a
155 sense of humour about these things.

Cass fears "stepping, unbearably heavy upon the names" inscribed on the
stolpersteine. The trick might be to tread a little more lightly.
160 <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/a-guide-to-berlin-by-gail-jones-book-review-heavy-handed-take-on-nabokov-a6813051.html>

3) Contemplating reading a guide about how to write a novel? Forget it. Read Gail
165 Jones's A Guide to Berlin instead.

Independent, Jan 16th 2016 : Matilda Bathurst

The Australian writer meets the criteria for marketable literary fiction, and
170 reveals how things can go horribly wrong.

Taking its title from a short story by Vladimir Nabokov, the novel centres on a
group of six international travellers in Berlin: two Italians, two Japanese, an
American and an Australian, connected by their shared devotion to the Russian
175 writer.

The group meets each week to narrate personal stories in the style of a
Nabokovian "speak memory", scenes dense with opportunities for symbolic
detail. As the characters start to reflect on the literariness of their lives, tensions
180 rise and tragedy strikes.

It's worth noting that Gail Jones has previously been longlisted for both the
Booker and the Orange prizes, and she's a writer who knows her trade.

The book promises eclectic back stories, a defining event, and a dose of
185 postmodern self-consciousness: think of it as a hybrid of Ben Lerner's Leaving the
Atocha Station (the plight of a posturing poet let loose in Madrid) and Donna
Tarrt's The Secret History.

The question is whether the publishers made it past the synopsis - the book
190 doesn't seem to have made its way to an editor.

The characters suffer from "a universal affliction", that is the desire to be
writers. Judging from the account of the novel's Australian protagonist, 26-year-
old Cass, the symptoms include a rash of adjectives and a burdensome ability to
195 think in similes.

The significance of each action is weightily explained, every bit of dialogue is
dutifully decoded.

200 Descriptions arrive in indecisive pairs ("an indolent and hedonistic soul", "an air

of self-containment and enclosure”), and physical appearances remain strangely indistinct: a face might be “slightly florid”, “almost elegant”, or “somewhat drawn”.

205 “Every tale is bound to fail”, the author wails. By inviting comparison with Nabokov, Jones is setting the bar quite high. However, she could have got away with it if she’d had a little more faith in her characters.

210 Instead, she indulges in their pretentiousness while wryly undermining them. The plot is nothing short of parodic, jeopardy nipped in the bud before you can say “happily ever after”.

215 To fill in the gaps, an ad-hoc social conscience is introduced between scenes. Our prancing artists are submitted to sobering encounters with beggars, Sri Lankan chefs and generic refugees.

220 Writers. Keep this book with you at all times. Refer to it when you find yourself settling for cliché or killing off your characters in place of a plot. Let Gail be your guide.

A Guide to Berlin, by Gail Jones. Harvill Secker, £14.99

<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/gail-jones-a-guide-to-berlin-an-indulgent-nabokov-affair-book-review-a6802631.html>

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4) Brenda Walker : The Monthly Sept 2015

230 Guide to Berlin is the sixth novel by Gail Jones, an Australian novelist whose fiction consistently interleaves literature and the visual arts with the oppressive histories of colonialism and 20th-century military conflict. The protagonist in her writing is usually a young woman - passionate, solitary, watchful - who seems aligned in temperament with Jane Eyre, or with Lucy Snowe in Charlotte Brontë’s other great novel, Villette. This self-contained and observant character gives us a model for intelligent femininity, pitting friendship and personal action against the desperate sweep of history. Jones’ novels and two short-story collections have
235 been exceptionally highly acclaimed. Sixty Lights, her second novel, was listed for the 2004 Man Booker Prize.

240 In A Guide to Berlin, Cass, a young Australian, joins a group of other foreigners in a circle dedicated to sharing stories. This is the ancient structure of clustering stories we find in The Decameron and The Arabian Nights, and like these older fictions, which are shadowed by the plague and the threat of execution, the world of A Guide to Berlin is extremely dangerous. Berlin itself has historically been a zone of horror, and there are perpetual reminders of this: a mysteriously empty furnished apartment, the stumbling stones commemorating victims of the
245 Holocaust. It is also one of the places identified with Vladimir Nabokov, and a fascination with the work of the Russian-born writer connects the storytellers in this novel. Berlin is currently fashionable and brilliant, and the novel gathers together the contemporary and the historical city with great economy.

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Initially A Guide to Berlin seems to be a dance of stories: an exhibition of the way they and their audiences meet and intertwine. However, it is much more than this. Members of the group know one another through stories, but they are also lovers, friends, adversaries and wanderers of the great city. The stories are refracted through these interactions and the novel becomes, at one level, a remarkable investigation of reading and speaking, and of the interaction between high literature and immediate human experience. This interplay is given particular urgency because of the dangers the characters face towards the end of the novel, when the circle of storytellers is dispersed.

The novel is a demonstration of both the power of storytelling and its limitations. There is no sentimentality about literary affinities here, and in A Guide to Berlin patterns of loss in 20th-century European history - of friends, lovers, location and literature - appear as part of the celebration of reading and story. Our assumption that we are exempt from literary and historical tragedy is challenged. This is one of the reasons why A Guide to Berlin is so very fine - it is a full and moving exploration of the experience of knowing others through literature and life. <https://www.themonthly.com.au/issue/2015/september/1441029600/brenda-walker/guide-berlin-gail-jones>

5) A Guide to Berlin by Gail Jones

Reviewed by Mark Rubbo 28 Jul 2015 readings.com

I've always felt that Gail Jones is yet to receive the recognition she deserves. This is her sixth novel and it is, I believe, a masterpiece. It is a beautifully constructed novel that builds slowly to its horrific and violent conclusion. The title comes from a short story by the Russian writer Vladimir Nabokov. In Jones' novel, a young Australian woman, Cass, arrives in Berlin in the middle of a cold winter. She's not exactly sure what she's there for or what she wants to do with her life. She has come to be fascinated by the life and work of Nabokov.

One day her wanderings take her to the apartment building that Nabokov lived with his wife Vera from 1932 to 1937. Outside she is approached by a handsome Italian, Marco, who quotes a line from Nabokov to which Cass responds in kind. Marco is delighted and takes Cass for a coffee where he asks her to join his group of fellow Nabokov devotees including his friend Gino; an American academic, Victor; and a Japanese couple, Yukio and Mitsuko. He instructs Cass, 'Come tomorrow at 5pm.'

Over the course of six evenings, each member of the group, in homage to Nabokov's autobiographical novel Speak, Memory, reveals something deeply personal, something deeply hidden. Separately, Cass explores relationships with each member of the group learning about them, about herself and about Nabokov. Marco has crazy theories about everything, says Gino; 'Don't trust him,' he implores Cass, aware that she is attracted to Marco. In the background is the cold, ice-bound city, dangerous and with hidden secrets. The bonds that form as they tell their stories become stronger as they reveal themselves, but even those revelations conceal mysteries. Each 'speak memory' is complete in itself, and

each is intensely interesting and compelling. This is a great novel with complex, fascinating layers upon layers; I can't recommend it enough.

<http://www.readings.com.au/review/a-guide-to-berlin-by-gail-jones>

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6) Booktopia: "A Guide to Berlin" is the name of a short story written by Vladimir Nabokov in 1925, when he was a young man of 26, living in Berlin.

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A group of six international travellers, two Italians, two Japanese, an American and an Australian, meet in empty apartments in Berlin to share stories and memories. Each is enthralled in some way to the work of Vladimir Nabokov, and each is finding their way in deep winter in a haunted city. A moment of devastating violence shatters the group, and changes the direction of everyone's story.

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Brave and brilliant, A Guide to Berlin traces the strength and fragility of our connections through biographies and secrets.

Caroline Baum's Review

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Named after a short story written by Vladimir Nabokov in 1925 when he was a young man, this enigmatic novel brings together six international visitors to midwinter Berlin who meet in city apartments to share stories about their lives and their love of the great Russian author.

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The newest member of their group is a young Australian woman, Cass, who is tentative and unsure about these encounters (Jones wrote the novel while on a residency in Berlin and the book is suffused with observations of the city that feel very personal).

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A cool, cerebral and intriguing exploration of the impact of past events and of the slender threads that bind us.

About the Author

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Gail Jones is the author of two short-story collections, a critical monograph, and the novels Black Mirror, Sixty Lights, Dreams Of Speaking, Sorry and Five Bells. Three times shortlisted for the Miles Franklin Award, her prizes include the WA Premier's Award for Fiction, the Nita B. Kibble Award, the Steele Rudd Award, The Age Book of the Year Award, the Adelaide Festival Award for Fiction and the ASAL Gold Medal. She has also been shortlisted for international awards, including the IMPAC and the Prix Femina. Her fiction has been translated into nine languages.

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<http://www.booktopia.com.au/a-guide-to-berlin-gail-jones/prod9780857988157.html>

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7) On mean reviews, and 'A Guide to Berlin,' written by 'Cassi' 11/02/2016

a guide to berlin I nearly didn't read this book.

When I heard about the Nabokovian inspiration for it, I was immediately daunted.

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Confession: I have not read Nabokov. I understand his writing is sublime, and that may be the problem. I'm intimidated.

355 Therefore, when I heard that Gail Jones' A Guide to Berlin was named after one of Nabokov's short stories and contained many Nabokovian allusions, I assumed this book would not be for me.

360 But then it popped up at the library. And when a new release presents itself to you at the library, you take it. So I did.

Wow!

Wow! Wow! Wow!

365 This is a beautiful book. Not only is the writing quite mind-blowing (and accessible) but things happen. Actually, something very, very big happens.

370 Over the summer, I read another piece of literary fiction where, again, the writing was lovely. But the plot went nowhere.

Now, beautiful words and language are fine and all, but in a story, things need to happen, and they certainly happen in A Guide to Berlin.

375 On her first trip to Berlin, Cass, a twenty-something year old aspiring writer from Australia, visits one of Vladimir Nabokov's houses, where she meets Marco, a 39 year old real estate agent from Italy.

380 Marco runs a book group, of sorts, for Nabokov aficionados to which he invites Cass to join.

'It was a new kind of community, no academic, not social, but some new species linking words and bodies with an occult sense of the written world.'

385 Also in the group is Victor, the Jewish-American college professor, 'the lovers' - Yukio, the Japanese blogger and his English/Japanese translator girlfriend, Mitsuko, and finally, Gino, an old friend of Marco's who is travelling for a year and trying to write an undefined story.

390 So far, so normal 'ish.

395 Each week, the group gathers and shares a 'speak-memory', a kind of literary speed-dating device where an intensely remembered life event is articulated in rich, spoken prose. These people, like Nabokov, are noters and observers, able to read meaning into symbols and recurrences and see the world as if it were magnified.

400 Victor speaks of the shame and grief he experienced at the deaths of his holocaust-surviving parents, and how the discovery of Nabokov's writing fulfilled in him a '...longing for a pure and concentrated reality.'

Mitsuko details her love for her father's work as a 13th generation potter and her theory of objects carrying time.

405 'I like this idea - that an object sucks in the memory of its use.'

Yukio relays how the sarin-gas attack on Tokyo's subway caused him to become a recluse, hiding away in his room for 4 years in his 'double-click' world, until meeting his 'rental sister' Mitsuko - who talked him out of his room, introduced him to Nabokov and inspired his return to normal life.

410 'I wanted little shadow things. Another person's hands, and something playing between us.'

415 Gino recounts the day of his father's death from injuries at a train station bombing, coincidentally on the day Gino was born.

Marco describes the shame of his epileptic fits and the way Nabokov inspired his desire for 'silent propinquity' or 'seeing and notating with care.'

420 Lastly, Cass, talks about her childhood - a 'rough kind of utopia' in Australia's remote reaches, northwest of Broome. However, she cannot speak 'the unspeakable' - that is - the death of her brother.

425 She is not the only one keeping secrets.

430 After the group experiences an extreme trauma, Cass comes to understand that while the group's speak memories were 'startling... how they overlapped and repeated in their private fixations..' they were ultimately a mediated version of the truth. 'The most earnest and open story still meant nothing assured. This was the surprise of other people: their wealth of remorseless secrets.'

A Guide to Berlin is a book of thoughts and ideas, of literary allusions and beautiful writing.

435 Most striking is Jones' conjuring of Berlin itself - the ceaseless cold and the sense of a city that is yet to resolve its traumatic past.

440 'The white sky was menacing. The plates of ice on the Spree, uneven and jagged, resembled a spray of shattered glass after wartime bombing.'

One of the positives (for me) of this work, is that you don't need to have read Nabokov to appreciate this book. In fact, it may help if you haven't.

445 I was shocked to read a terribly mean review in The Guardian in which Jessa Crispin derided the book as having 'all the substance of a cardboard forest backdrop in a school play'. (I will not link to the review, as I don't want it to receive any more clicks than absolutely necessary).

450 Crispin is neither a fan of the story, nor the writing, and claims that Jones 'takes the most obvious features of Nabokov's writing, the stylish prose and precise

word choice, and abandons his piercing psychological insight and historical weight.'

455 Not only do I disagree with nearly everything Crispin says, it also strikes me as being terribly unfair to judge one writer's work against another. A novel should be reviewed on its merits alone. Not against the merits of others' work.

460 I'm not saying that all reviews must be positive all the time. Reviewers should be honest, but constructively honest, and never derisive.

Reading is, after all, a relatively subjective business. What I like, others may loathe, and vice versa.

465 However, I wholeheartedly believe that there is an audience out there for every book that's published. Sure, it might be a small audience, but to me, every reader matters.

470 When I write about books, I see my role as helping the reader to understand whether this book is for them. I want to inspire people to read, not publish click-bait take-downs of reputable writers. The market for fiction, especially literary fiction, is hard enough without authors having to contend with dreadfully negative and disrespectful reviews.

475 If I don't like a book, or I don't finish it, I don't write about it, mainly because I'm fairly sure there will be others who do like the book. I'd hate to turn-off anyone from picking up a book, of any kind.

Fortunately, in this case, I think Jones will have the last laugh.

480 This week, *A Guide to Berlin* was named on the longlist for Australia's most prestigious literary award for women - The Stella Prize.

485 I hope it does well, for so many reasons, not least of which is that it may cause Crispin to re-consider her views, although this may be unlikely. After some basic research, it has become clear to me that Crispin has 'form' in relation to negative reviewing, and has even cultivated a level of 'celebrity' for what she does.

She is welcome to it.

490 <http://bookbirdy.com/2016/02/11/on-bad-reviews-and-a-guide-to-berlin-by-gail-jones/>

8) The following are all from GoodReads:

495 This novel is narrated by Cass, an Australian in Berlin. One day, whilst going to see the apartment where Vladimir Nabokov once lived, she is approached by Marco Gianelli. He tells her of a group who meet in the city; all lovers of literature and Nabokov, they meet up to talk and relate their 'speak memories.'

500 "Speak, Memory," was an autobiography of Nabokov's early life, while "A Guide to Berlin," was a short story, written in 1925 and published in a collection called, *Shelves*: own-read, net-galley, arc, read-on-kindle, literary-fiction, 2015-release

Written by Vladimir Nabokov in 1925, his *A Guide to Berlin* is a short story; it was translated into English with the help of his son, Dmitri Nabokov and included in a collection of short stories - *Details of a Sunset and Other Stories* (published 1976)

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Aussie author Gail Jones has written of six travellers who came together in Berlin through their mutual love of Nabokov's work - Victor, Marco, Mitsuko and Yukio, Gino and Cass. Every so often they would meet in an apartment where each of the friend ...more

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Narrated by Cass, the only Australian in the group the six meet in an empty flat where each them take turns to deliver a "speak-memory, essentially the story of their lives. Whilst I know little of Nabokov, the book has made me track a copy of his "guide" (see l ...more

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Five international travellers, Marco and Gino from Italy, Yukio and Mitsuko from Japan, and Victor from America meet regularly, inspired by a shared interest in the work of Vladimir Nabokov. Marco invites Cass, from Australia, to join their meetings. It is winter in Berlin, and Cass finds the city somewhat inaccessible. Cass has come to Berlin to write. She hasn't started ...more

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Catherine Davison rated it liked it · review of another edition

I really wanted to enjoy this book and thought I'd be giving it more than three stars but I just can't. I must say up front Liam introduced me to Gail Jones's writing years ago when he gave me *Sixty Lights* and told me he found her to be a good writer so I was already primed to appreciate her literary style. Also as Berlin was where Liam had spent his last two weeks before that fateful flight so I was drawn to, and wanted to be, as it were, in the city of Berlin itself. However the narrative arc ...more

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While the first part of this novel is sometimes a little tedious and self-indulgent, it may be worth persevering. Some of the ideas raised are really interesting. Gail Jones explores how memories are often made up of small observations, like the tiles on a train station wall; how courage may be more a matter of putting yourself in a position where you can't turn back; how it is to grow up with silent holocaust survivors as parents and how a recluse 'hikikomori' can be lured from his bedroom by h ...more

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The book focuses on a group of six Berlin-based Nabokov fans from around the world – two Italians, a Japanese couple, an American and an Australian – who meet regularly to tell a "densely remembered story or detail" about their lives, what they dub "speak-memory disclosures".

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The narrative largely revolves around Cass, the 20-something Austr ...more

550 Oh. Berlin. How I love that city and when I saw the title of this book I couldn't

wait to read it. And also Nabokov, whom I admire.

Then I started to read and was semi interested.

555 It's about Cass who has moved from Australia to Berlin and finds a group of Nabokov fans (the title comes from Nabokov's short story with the same title). They meet and share a "speak memory" where each of them share a part of their life, usually with how they f ...more

560 Many writers have used the device of a group of people who meet to share stories with each other, and this conceit is used very cleverly by Jones. The group consists of six people: the Italian Marco, who is the convenor of the group, and his Italian friend Gino; the American Victor; the soul-pair Mitsuko and Yukio from Japan; and the Australian girl Cass. All find themselves in Berlin, in the dead of
565 winter, with ...more

570 I thought I'd at least like, if not love, Gail Jones's A Guide to Berlin. I have intellectual respect for Jones and I love the dreaminess of her voice. I adore Nabokov who is one of the main subjects of this novel and is intrinsic to its main premise, and I love books set in, and engaging with, major European cities. But this book was a crushing disappointment. It was pretentious, felt emotionally untrue, its main protagonist was a precious, irritating, self-important woman whose predicaments he ...more

575 miss.mesmerized rated it really liked it · review of another edition
Cass has fled her Australian home and arrives in Berlin at the beginning of January not expecting it to such freezing cold. In front of a memory plate for Vladimir Nabokov she encounters Marco who invites her to a strange group. Apart from the Italian, there is an American, Victor, another Italian, Gino and a Japanese couple,
580 Yuki and Mitsuko, who all gather in vacant apartments to tell stories of their lives. They are linked by the love for Nabokov's work and when seeing each other outside thei ...more

585 A Guide to Berlin by Gail Jones immersed me in Berlin and the intricacies and beauty of snow. Jones writing is powerful. Her phrases leap out, to be reread and tasted over, to ascertain their meaning. Unusual analogies and associations, gentle phrases, questioning paragraphs, an insight into others' thoughts. The idea of a group of foreigners forming a bond, befriending each other and becoming close knit in a city far away is full of intrigue. Nabokov, a famous
590 author, is the common denominator, ...more
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595 I have followed this Australian writer since reading Sixty Lights a few years ago. While that novel is still my favourite of Jones' work, I was very taken with this one. It is intellectual and highly literary - until a dramatic and violent event three quarters of the way through the novel turns all its (and our) assumptions upside down.

600 Vladimir Nabokov wrote a short story called A Guide to Berlin and in this novel Jones has six characters (all foreigners living in Berlin) who become unlikely

When I was 26, the same age as Cass in this book, I was obsessed with Nabokov. It was also the year I visited Berlin. So, what I'm saying is that, I'm not sure I can be anywhere near objective in my review. I spent a weird two days, half in sunny Perth, half in grey, cold to the bone, Berlin, surrounded by umbrellas, trains and tortoises, and punctuated occasionally by brightly painted bears. I lived it rather than read it and I think I loved it, but it definitely needs to be read again.

I'm abandoning this at 40%. It is the most pretentious thing I've read in a long time, and so ridiculously over-written. The faux profundities are stuffed into every paragraph, and every single thing has to be imbued with deep, deep, deep significance. I tried, I really tried - but if no plot has appeared by the 40% mark, I have to assume there isn't one. A collection of character studies linked by lots of tedious allusions to Nabokov's stories does not a novel make.

Jones' eyrie depiction of Berlin casts a hauntingly beautiful obscurity over her novel, full of mesmerizing characters and a natural flowing narrative. However, the incident towards the end really didn't sit well with me, and felt completely out of place and unnecessary.

Another take on The Secret History, which seems to be a popular source of inspiration. Too short to really say anything too meaningful (I don't like short novels anyway) but had some lovely moments and made me itch to travel, to explore and to explore myself. A beautiful atmosphere and a good ending. Way overwritten, florid and teeming with adverbs. None of the characters had much depth or a voice of their own, and the dialogue is less believable than that in The Secret History!

This is one book that is easy to judge by its cover. If, like me, you find the image beautiful, evocative and promising, then press on. However, if you find it bleak and depressing, then don't bother.

This is an eloquent, elegant and thought-provoking story of a group of six strangers who find themselves in Berlin and meeting in a literary group through their love of writing and, in particular, Vladimir Nabokov. Characters are slowly and beautifully drawn, but, we are still left with some secrets ...more

Beautifully descriptive novel of six travellers who meet to discuss Nabokov in the bleak winter of Berlin. I well and truly got the sense of the cold more so than the characters whom I failed to warm to. I liked the idea of the speak memories but the dialogue was unrealistic; it felt as if the characters were reading out lines in a play. The involvement of the seventh character, Karl, I found to be implausible.

The book started gently as you get to know a little about each character, but then meandered too long before the key plot event 3/4 through. Her writing is beautiful in parts, particularly depicting the snow and the bitter cold, and Berlin is a character all on its own. Having not read any of Nabokov's work, a lot of the literary references were lost on me. The drama at the end was unsettling and seemed implausible, and out of step with the earlier tone of the novel, but you could see it was he ...more

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Stunning writing. Didn't feel like the protagonist was 26, she seemed much older. The 'speak-memory' speeches were gorgeously written but didn't ring true as dialogue at all. The twist felt unnecessary and overwrought. Surely a quieter ending would have better suited the first 2/3 of the book.

655

Despite being well written I found the story itself to be flat and uninspiring. Six people meet regularly in an apartment in Berlin, drawn together (rather flimsily) by their love for Vladimir Nabokov. Much of the book is contained within the characters' "speak-memories", expository lumps (as Ursula Le Guin called them) detailing their past. Instead of facts and information being revealed as the story unfolds I felt more like I was attending a lecture that was feeding me pertinent information. I ...more

660

I was looking forward to this book. I heard someone talking about the set-up on Radio National last year. It's a setup I like - 6 strangers come together in a locale and we come to know them better as they come to know each other better.

665

In this instance, it's Berlin, a city I visited for the first time last year. I was there in spring, which according to Jones, would make a huge difference to my impressions. Her book is set in the dead of winter and this backdrop is the driver for some of the be ...more

670

A thought provoking exploration of people's responses to grief and tragedy (both individual and in a group) set in a city haunted by its tragic past.

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Six strangers and foreigners to Berlin are brought together over an appreciation of the author Vladimir Nabokov. Their connection is hot-housed by each revealing intimate/sensitive details of their lives in a Nabokvian speak memory style weekly group encounter. The initial chapters read like a series of separate short stories as the group members e ...more

680

Bloody hell, what a book. I absolutely loved it from beginning to end. Gail Jones is such a beautiful writer. The narrative so strongly evokes the feeling of a freezing Berlin winter that despite it being about 30 degrees C I felt a biting cold right in my bones as I was reading. The unlikely group of characters are all so charming and tangibly real. I think this book has a lot to say about how we present ourselves to others, and how the stories we tell & withhold have such a power over the ...more

685

I seem to being drawn lately to books about grief. I've read a few of Ms Jones books and have enjoyed them all. This book follows an ex-pat Aussie writer who has traveled to Berlin to rediscover her muse. As the story unfolds it becomes clear she is also running away from grief. The book opens as she is approached by a young man as she is taking a picture of an apartment block that former housed Vladimir Nabokov. The man, Marco is de-facto leader of a small group of ex-pats who's common thread i ...more

690

Vladimir Nabokov is one of the most well-known Russian authors and his Pale Fire has been on my to-read list for a while. So when I saw A Guide to Berlin, a novel based on one of his short stories I figured there was no better way to prepare

700

myself for starting his book than by starting with Gail Jones. And it was definitely one hell of a rollercoaster ride. Thanks to Netgalley, Harvil Secker and Random House for providing me with a copy of this book in exchange for an honest review.

- 705 A Guide to Berlin weaves the story of six travelers in Berlin, brought together by chance and a love of Vladimir Nabokov. Over a period of weeks, they meet to share their 'speak-memories' monologues of their live secrets previously untold, until tragedy strikes and they are torn apart. In A Guide to Berlin Gail Jones uses her trademark elegant prose to build to a shattering climax. Lyrical and
- 710 hauntingly beautiful, this story vividly paints the picture of Berlin in the depths of winter.