The Feud: Vladimir Nabokov, Edmund Wilson, and the End of a Beautiful Friendship

Alex Beam
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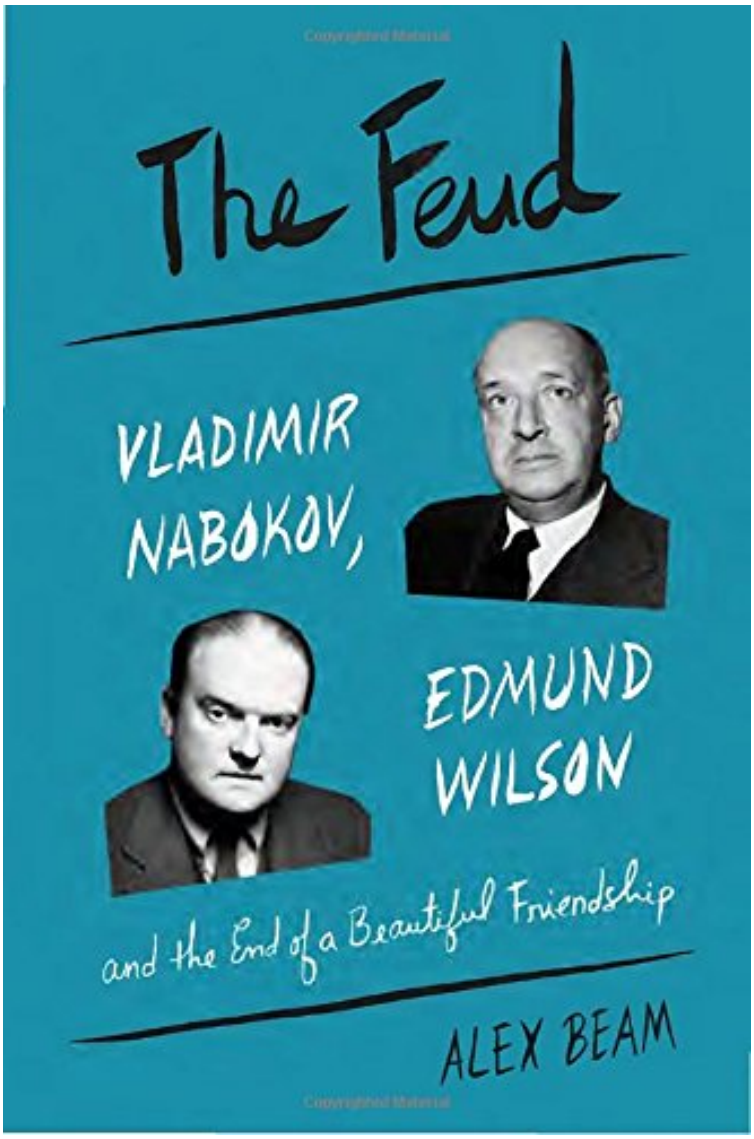

#824583 in Books Alex Beam 2016-12-06 2016-12-06Original language:EnglishPDF # 1 8.50 x 1.00 x 5.75l, .90 #File Name: 1101870222224 pagesThe Feud Vladimir Nabokov Edmund Wilson and the End of a Beautiful Friendship | File size: 54.Mb

Alex Beam : The Feud: Vladimir Nabokov, Edmund Wilson, and the End of a Beautiful Friendship before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Feud: Vladimir Nabokov, Edmund Wilson, and the End of a Beautiful Friendship:

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W W3I was a great fan of the books of both Vladimir Nabokov and Edmund Wilson before I discovered their feud , and then later learned that they had previously been great friends. This book tells the entire story wonderfully , and bring both Nabokov and Wilson to life . It also reminds us of a time when literature played a greater role in American life than it does today . Wilson was the arbiter of traditional literary values , while Nabokov was the fearless (at times reckless) innovator and iconoclast. It is fascinating to watch the reputation of one rise from obscurity to global fame, while the other moves in the other direction.If you have any interest in either of these authors, you will love this book as I did.0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. The Mouths That RoaredBy Victoria G MemmingerIt helps if you remember when it was going on, but the writer is so talented even those too young to have read Nabokov and/or Wilson can appreciate the giant egos at play. Egos are often compared to King Kong--these two make Kong look like J.Fred Muggs (anybody remember J. Fred?)0 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Great disappointmentBy Philip S. AndersonThis book was a great disappointment. I is more about the author than Nabokov and Wilson.

The Feud is the deliciously ironic (and sad) tale of how two literary giants destroyed their friendship in a fit of mutual pique and egomania.In 1940, Edmund Wilson was the undisputed big dog of American letters. Vladimir Nabokov was a near-penniless Russian exile seeking asylum in the States. Wilson became a mentor to Nabokov, introducing him to every editor of note, assigning him book reviews for The New Republic, engineering a Guggenheim Fellowship. Their intimate friendship blossomed over a shared interest in all things Russian, ruffled a bit by political disagreements. But then came the worldwide best-selling novel Lolita, and the tables were turned. Suddenly Nabokov was the big (and very rich) dog. The feud finally erupted in full when Nabokov published his hugely footnoted and virtually unreadable literal translation of Pushkin’s famously untranslatable verse novel, Eugene Onegin. Wilson attacked his friend’s translation with hammer and tongs in The New York Review of Books. Nabokov counterattacked. Back and forth the increasingly aggressive letters flew, until the narcissism of small differences reduced their friendship to ashes.Alex Beam has fashioned this clash of literary titans into a delightful and irresistible book—a comic contretemps of a very high order and a poignant demonstration of the fragility of even the deepest of friendships.(With black-and-white illustrations throughout)

"Alex Beam, in his new literary biography, The Feud: Vladimir Nabokov, Edmund Wilson and the End of a Beautiful Friendship. . . gives us a brief but detailed sketch of how two erudite men of letters went from intimate confraternity to bitter enmity in the span of a few decades. . . Literary biographies remind us that even the gods are human ?? primates, like the rest of us, just a few chromosomes away from the sapajous."?? Tyler Malone, The Los Angeles Times"The Feud: Vladimir Nabokov, Edmund Wilson and the End of a Beautiful Friendship is a relentlessly absorbing account of a sorry saga which stemmed from a difference of opinion, accelerated into a battle of egos and culminated in bitter loss for both adversaries. . .Was Wilson too scathing? Was Nabokov too thin-skinned? [Alex] Beam leaves those questions for his reader to decide. What he does, though, throughout his compelling book, is strikingly portray two brilliant but flawed men, and remind us that a rock-solid friendship can be eroded or destroyed by the combined forces of ego, envy and wounded pride."?? Malcolm Forbes, The National"Beam wears his learning lightly. He has a keen sense of the absurd and is mischievous but not malicious in exposing the foibles of these frenemies. He also, while he’s at it, has some Nabokovian fun as he laces his narrative with wordplay and faux-scholarly flourishes...his book mostly leaves you asking yourself how prideful and pig headed even the smartest men can be. If there’s a broader application to The Feud, it stems from that question, which doesn’t bode well for any of us."?? Michael Upchurch, The Boston Globe"Throughout, [Beam] is not only an amiable guide, but also proves adept concerning Russian history and literature, and Pushkin’s famous novel. (Beam was the Globe’s Moscow correspondent earlier in his career.) Reading The Feud, we may laugh at these famous writers and their prideful foibles, but it also forces us to think how far we’ve come and how much things have changed. Today, the idea of a public squabble over a 19th century Russian text is sort of quaint. But at any point in history, Beam shows us, how quickly such contretemps can turn silly?? John Winters, WBUR.org"Literary feuds can become the stuff of legend. Often sparked by equal measures of arrogance and insecurity, and fueled by wit and vitriol, the best provide great sideline entertainment for fans and detractors alike...Beam—a former Moscow correspondent and current columnist for The Boston Globe— makes clear in this slender, yet thoroughly researched and sprightly told account of the events, the rivalry was long percolating...What will interest readers, though, are the well-drawn, often unflattering portraits of two prickly, self-assured giants of 20th-century-literature, engaged in childish, if sharp-witted, verbal fisticuffs."?? Robert Weibezahl, BookPageOne of Publishers Weekly's Best Books of 2016"Beam's book evokes the strangely satisfying sensation of witnessing smart people bickering over seemingly small matters. It also provides a fascinating behind-the-scenes glimpse, full of anecdotal ephemera, of how Wilson and Nabokov interacted and why. But the more lasting sensation is the bittersweetness of this portrait of a fallen friendship—at its height, Nabokov wrote to Wilson, 'You are one of the few people in the world whom I keenly miss when I do not see them.' "?? Publishers Weekly, starred review"The almost legendary tale of Vladimir Nabokov and Edmund Wilson's very public literary debate is told with great sympathy and skill by Beam... On one level it is a story of two titans of modern American literature coming to verbal blows over

vocabulary and syntax, but more importantly, and more universally, it is the story of a generous friendship collapsing under the weight of reputation and the desperate need to have the final say. Beam is a natural storyteller and lucid scholar... The account of these two apparent geniuses devolving into bickering schoolchildren is endlessly readable and bittersweetly comic."?? Library Journal, starred review“A shrewd, affectionate, and wildly engrossing account of one of the greatest and most ridiculous smackdowns in literary history. There came a time, in the feud between Nabokov and Wilson, when the former effected the removal from his books of blurbs written by the latter. Among the many delights of Beam's telling of the tale is his unerring acuity, in knowing the nonsense for nonsense, and the heartbreak for misery.”?? Jill Lepore“Think Mailer versus Vidal meets Wittgenstein’s Poker—two balmy over-clever protagonists brought to splenetic life again by some top-grade research and writing.”—Richard Cohen, author of How to Write Like Tolstoy About the AuthorALEX BEAM has been a columnist for The Boston Globe since 1987. He previously served as the Moscow bureau chief for Business Week. He is the author of three works of nonfiction: American Crucifixion, Gracefully Insane, and A Great Idea at the Time; the latter two were New York Times Notable Books. Beam has also written for The Atlantic, Slate, and Forbes/FYI. He lives in Newton, Massachusetts.Excerpt. © Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved.Introduction I first learned of the friendship and subsequent feud between Edmund Wilson and Vladimir Nabokov only a few years ago. A friend of mine had been tracking down Alexander Pushkin’s descendants—there are a few—and mentioned in passing that Wilson and Nabokov had ended a quarter-century-long friendship because of a disagreement over how to translate Pushkin’s novel in verse Eugene Onegin. I burst out laughing. It was the silliest thing I had ever heard. I hadn’t known about this famous contretemps because I was eleven years old in 1965, when Wilson trained his guns against his longtime comrade in letters—”a personal friend of Mr. Nabokov . . . an admirer of much of his work,” as he introduced himself in a salvo of ill-will splattered across the pages of The New York of Books. I wasn’t reading the , then in its third year of publication, and it certainly wasn’t lying around my parents’ house. I was reading Boys’ Life, what the Russians would call the “organ” of the Boy Scouts of America. I think Vladimir Nabokov, he of the wondrous outdoorsy boyhood, would have approved. I know a thing or two about Russian language and literature—my harshest readers will confirm that modest count—but I had never read Onegin, and was familiar with only the highest peaks of Nabokov’s astonishing range: Lolita and Speak, Memory. There was a time when college students with literary pretensions read Edmund Wilson, but it wasn’t my time. When I graduated in 1975, Wilson had been dead for three years, with his literary renown and influence already in deep eclipse. Several years into this project, I laugh less now. Of course the pedantic exchanges between two eminent men of letters still ring silly—is pochuya, which could mean “sensing,” or “sniffing,” a present or past gerund? (Good question!) Did Pushkin know English well enough to read Byron? (Maybe.) But the end of a friendship is always a loss. Especially a friendship so deeply and mutually celebratory as this one. “Edmund was always in a state of joy when Vladimir appeared,” Wilson’s third wife, Mary McCarthy, recalled. “They had an absolute ball together. He loved him.”1 Their correspondence was legendary, full of rambunctious exchanges about literature, gossip, sex in taxicabs, sore gums, and very genuine emotions. “You are one of the few people in the world whom I keenly miss when I do not see them,” Nabokov wrote to Wilson eight years into their friendship.2 And then, nothing. Like so many intimate relationships, this one bore the seeds of its own destruction. In one of his very first letters to his new acquaintance, Wilson scores Nabokov for his punning, which Wilson finds tiresome. But of course it is irrepressible, and will continue throughout his life. Nabokov’s last major novel, Ada—the title itself a pun, alluding to “ardor,” and to the Russian ah, da (oh, yes)—mentions Mr. Eliot’s famous poem, “The Waistline”; and so on, ada infinitum. In many ways the two men proved to be two entirely different and contradictory people, Wilson the erudite literalist and Nabokov the ludist, the fantasist, the trickster king. The opposites attracted, and then they didn’t. When their friendship ended, much was made of the fact that Wilson never reviewed any of Nabokov’s novels. Indeed Nabokov himself complained in a gift inscription to Wilson, “Why do you never review my works?” But it is very hard to imagine Wilson enjoying, say, The Gift, Nabokov’s favorite of his own Russian novels. The Gift would have infuriated Wilson. It is simultaneously a work of literary criticism, a memoir of the Russian emigration in Germany, and a complicated gloss on Pushkin’s Onegin. The Gift incorporates a novella-length, jocoserious “biography” of Nikolai Chernyshevsky, a sacred figure of nineteenth-century socialism whom Nabokov mercilessly lampoons. It is supremely Nabokovian; a novel, and not a novel. And it ends with a perfectly crafted Onegin stanza, Nabokov’s knowing nod to his favorite Russian writer. That stanza appears on—but I anticipate. It is equally hard to imagine Nabokov reading, savoring, or even understanding Patriotic Gore, Wilson’s unsentimental, revisionist overview of the literature and the mythopoeia that animated the combatants in America’s Civil War. Wilson spent more than ten years researching the book. It is difficult to envision Nabokov spending even ten minutes perusing its index. When Gore appeared in 1962, Nabokov had already ensconced himself in Switzerland, settled atop a pile of money from the fabulous sales of his novel Lolita. America, and Edmund Wilson, were only faintly visible in his rearview mirror. Let me make two quick points: Told from such a distance in time, this becomes a story of unequal combat. Nabokov is very much alive in his work, perhaps less on the night table than on the college syllabus, but nonetheless he remains known to millions. Not so Wilson. In the years leading up to his death in 1972, “he was not much read,” his friend Jason Epstein wrote in a heartfelt obituary. Once hailed as the “dean of American letters,” possessed of what the

biographer Leon Edel called “a certain Johnsonian celebrity,” Wilson is largely unknown today. When I mentioned Wilson’s name to a participant at a donors’ event at the Boston Public Library, his reply was: “It’s weird how he makes everything about ants.” No, that is Edward O. Wilson, the Harvard professor and author of The Ants, The Anthill, and Journey to the Ants. Edmund Wilson was someone else entirely. Second: There seems to be an infectious tendency to “go Nabokovian” when writing about the late, great novelist. Andrew Field, Nabokov’s first biographer, decided not to include an index with his biography, a complicated and annoying homage to his subject, who sometimes bent indexes to his own playful needs. When Wilson’s biographer Jeffrey Meyers wrote about the Nabokov-Wilson feud, he couldn’t resist the easily available pun “when Pushkin came to shovekin.”3 Douglas Hofstadter, the Pulitzer Prize–winning author of Gödel, Escher, Bach, who spent two years translating Onegin with great élan, fell into pun-ditry himself, asserting his right to “poetic lie-sense,” and so on. I myself succumbed. It is futile to resist the lure of such pseudo-verbs as “pedanitifies,” or to ignore the temptation to tack footnote after footnote onto my explanation of Onegin’s scintillating “Pedal Digression.” When I needed to cite an Onegin translation, I quoted from the late Walter Arndt’s version, just because I knew that would irk the Nabokovian shade. Nabokov hated Arndt’s Onegin. I call Vera Nabokov “Vera Nabokova” in part because that is how she signed her name, but also to fingernail-scratch the Elysian blackboard where the Master may currently be lecturing. He inveighed against the feminization of Russian family names, and insisted on teaching Anna Karenin, never Anna Karenina. These are pure Nabokovian impulses. Literary confrontations were to be pursued in this life and the next. When revising his Onegin translation after Wilson’s death, Nabokov urged his publisher to shake a leg: “I would like to see my edition printed before confronting an irate Pushkin and a grinning E. Wilson beyond the cypress curtain.” A feud unto death, and beyond. As we shall see, Wilson attacked Nabokov from beyond the grave, affording himself a satisfaction we cannot yet fully appreciate. In the five years that he outlived Wilson, Nabokov, too, tap-danced on his old rival’s tombstone, in a manner unbecoming the international celebrity and self-proclaimed genius that he was. And then Nabokov’s son, Dmitri—but again, I anticipate. In a famous essay, Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote that “friendship, like the immortality of the soul, is too good to be believed.” In the case of Nabokov and Wilson, it was.