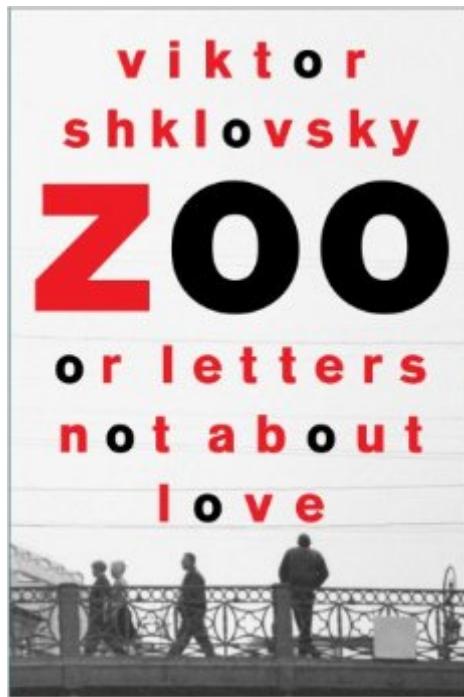


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Zoo, Or Letters Not About Love



Synopsis

While living in exile in Berlin, the formidable literary critic Viktor Shklovsky fell in love with Elsa Triolet. He fell into the habit of sending Elsa several letters a day, a situation she accepted under one condition: he was forbidden to write about love. *Zoo, or Letters Not about Love* is an epistolary novel born of this constraint, and although the brilliant and playful letters contained here cover everything from observations about contemporary German and Russian life to theories of art and literature, nonetheless every one of them is indirectly dedicated to the one topic they are all required to avoid: their author's own unrequited love.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Viktor Shklovsky's epistolary novel "Zoo," written and published in Berlin 1922-1923, is one of the most remarkable and ingenuous epistolary novels ever written, for the very reason that it manages a cross-over between theory and literature as well as between fiction and life. It is rare in its combination of deep emotion and sharp reflection: a moving evocation of the pain of exile and unrequited love and, at the same time, witty metaliterary play. "Zoo" reshapes the traditional epistolary novel in metafictional style and revitalizes it by blurring the borders between documentary and poetic epistolarity. This can be taken quite literal in view of the textual genesis: the novel is said to mix fictional letters with real ones, letters that were or might have been exchanged (in a rather one-sided correspondence) between the young critic and the lady he courted, between the novelistic 'I' and his beloved Alya, alias Viktor Shklovsky and Elsa Triolet (a Russian emigrant like himself and a future French writer). Shklovsky composed the little book in Berlin after fleeing from

the Soviet Union, and it is a document of his own intermediary existence in the limbo of exile as well as a kind of ethnography of 'Russian Berlin'. But to take the work simply from the autobiographical side would mean to under-estimate its theoretical drive. Not only does it thematize Formalist ideas (as could be expected in a text whose protagonist is a theorist), but it is constructed on such principles, or more precisely: it is performing them. Shklovsky's "Zoo" harks back to Sterne's "Tristram Shandy" and German Romanticism and it anticipates postmodern ideas of a playful merging of criticism and fiction. Within the generic development of the epistolary novel, "Zoo" is the hallmark of modernity.

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