Questions and Proposals about Vladimir Nabokov's *Speak, Memory* (1951, 1966)

The edition of *Speak, Memory* we read in the All Souls Book Group was the Everyman's Library edition, 1999, with the added "appendix" of the Sixteenth Chapter, and with an introduction by Brian Boyd. If your group decides to read this version of *Speak, Memory*, readers should be urged to read Boyd's introduction, so they know the complex history of the book's publication. And if you would like to use these study questions but would prefer to work with the version of *Speak, Memory* Nabokov intended--meaning, the one without Chapter Sixteen--these questions will serve. Only one question here treats Chapter Sixteeen. (Chapter Sixteen is mentioned as well in the introduction to this document, but only briefly.)

These questions were written by Emilie White, who directs the Kay Falk Literary Project in Asheville, NC. © Emilie T. White

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A note on what you will find in this study document:

The following study guide is arranged into two parts. Part I offers suggestions as to how to approach this book if you're reading it with readers who are unfamiliar with it and with Nabokov generally. These suggestions I could have arrived at no other way except to teach this book myself and to make, in the process, several crucial mistakes. This Part I amounts to an essay of sorts.

Part II includes shorter questions meant in particular for book group members. So if you want to get to the shorter questions, skip Part I, and go to Part II (which begins p. 7 of this document.)

Part I: Suggestions on how to approach Vladimir Nabokov's *Speak, Memory,* especially when you, or readers you might be leading in a discussion of the book, are new to it and/ or to the sensibilities of Vladimir Nabokov

A. Making sure to take the time to distinguish between the author and the narrator

I have only taught *Speak, Memory* once, in the All Souls Book Group in the summer of 2009. The study questions below were composed for that course, and, representing as they do my first pedagogical engagement with the book, they may not be very good. The first time I teach almost any book, especially one as complex as *Speak, Memory*, I invariably make mistakes.

Probably the most consequential mistake I made with the All Souls Book Group was to fail to invite readers, right away, into Nabokov's special sense of humor, especially about the enterprise of writing about one's self. Readers nowadays expect from the autobiographer pretty much an endless capacity for "authenticity" and self-seriousness. They also seem to expect the author of an autobiography and the *narrator* of that autobiography to be one and the same. This would mean that the narrator who states, in Chapter One of *Speak, Memory*, "Initially, I was unaware that time, so boundless at first blush, was a prison," holds the same attitude toward experience as the man who is *not* writing his experience (who is, say, fill in the blank: reading the newspaper at a café); is the same man who misses his mother and perhaps never records that particular moment of longing in print; is the same man who observes the fingers of his newborn son and may find himself, genius autobiographer though he may be, beyond the facility for speech (and for the "spoken," written account of that moment, if indeed it ever occurred, see Chapter 15 of *Speak, Memory*); is the same writer who writes his novels, including the once-scandalous *Lolita*; is the same man who in writing all the chapters of *Speak, Memory* is constantly

shuttling between different selves, some “authentic” sounding and some very obviously fictionalized, and for all kinds of reasons, among them to establish perhaps a *distance* between himself and the enterprise of writing down his dearest memories, a distance which, in a wonderful turn, will make possible *the reader’s’* engagement--your engagement—your formal engagement--with your own memories.

It is understandable that contemporary readers might expect autobiographers to seem “sincere,” as the sincere, selfsame autobiography, the autobiography undertaken expressly to cohere the self, has been our culture of self-understanding, really the mythology of our self-understanding, for the last thirty-some years (at least within major-house publishing.) It should also be emphasized that there are plenty of amazing books that have come out of that culture—--out of its preoccupations, commitments, and expectations.

But Nabokov is not interested in those expectations—and this is what the first-time reader of *Speak, Memory* should be encouraged to understand. Not only is he not interested in them, but at various points in *Speak, Memory*, especially in Boyd’s later-appended Chapter Sixteen, N. will make fun of them. And not derisively will he make fun, rather out of the interest, ecstatically, sterilely, fancifully—the words are Nabokov’s--to *make fun*, to play. (Nabokov’s interest in play is everywhere in *Speak, Memory*, but most explicitly in Chapter Fourteen, which is about, among other things, N.’s fascination for chess. Those modifiers I just used—ecstatic, sterile, fanciful—are from Chapter 14.) Readers therefore who are new to the book should be given the opportunity to stand at a threshold, in a sense, “beyond which,” a leader of a book group might say, “they will enter a conception of self, of memory, of time, the likes of which they may only experience by reading *this* book.” (It is *almost* mortifying, to imagine Nabokov’s expression upon reading that last sentence, but only almost.) Which is to say that although I may sound Willy Wonka-ish as I hype the book’s uniqueness, there really is no subjectivity like this narrator’s--just as there is no subjectivity like yours. And it is the singularity of this narrator’s subjectivity, and

its coming into existence as he composes it—and, ever the chessman, op-poses it--that newcomers to *Speak, Memory* should be invited to watch for, and enjoy.

B. Making sure to give readers enough time (enough meetings) to talk about the book

In the All Souls Book Group in Asheville, NC, we held four meetings about this book, so, at two hours per meeting, that was eight hours. That's about twenty-four hours too few. One could easily dedicate one two-hour meeting to each of the sixteen chapters and not run out of things to say.

After all, this is a book group. It's up to you how often you meet. This is a book to savor. "Nature," the narrator warns us on the first page of his autobiography, "expects the full grown man to accept the two black voids, fore and aft, as stolidly as he accepts the extraordinary visions in between. Imagination, the supreme delight of the immortal and immature, should be limited. In order to enjoy life, we should not enjoy it too much."

And then he writes: "I rebel against this state of affairs."

So we know what Nabokov would say about how often you should meet. He'd say enjoy your life. He'd say to live in your visions. He'd say to meet as often as necessary to enjoy your imagination, "the supreme delight of the immortal and immature."

If you *do* decide to dedicate whole meetings to single chapters, my advice would be to focus each discussion around that particular structuring image—and there is at least one in each chapter--as to the way, to put it terribly crudely, time and memory might work anew (in this narrator's elaborate and glittering conception.) Each chapter is organized around at least one such image, or "vision" (Boyd calls it the chapter's "riddling quality", p. xvi.) How, in each chapter, has the narrator "rebelled" against a state of affairs in which life should not be enjoyed "too much"? What "colossal effort" is he making in that chapter to

"distinguish the faintest of personal glimmers in the impersonal darkness on both sides of [his] life"? (9, Everyman Edition.)

C. Making sure to stay close to individual passages/ making sure the questions you ask aren't too general.

Most of the questions I wrote for the All Souls Book Group were too general. (These questions are below, in Part II of this document.) They asked readers to think about the book as a whole, which I suspect may have kept them from getting inside the intricacies of single moments and images, and therefore from seeing within-chapter and cross-chapter patterns. If I had it to do over again, I would have spent more time attending to single moments, figures, images. Readers will have favorite passages. Invite them to bring them to discussion, then read those passages aloud. Even very long passages should be read aloud. Readers love, I have found, to do this.

When we finally did get around to addressing single passages, the ones we found most revealing—and obviously this is list is going to change from group to group—were the following:

1. The whole first section of chapter one. Two meetings easily could be spent on this section. Fiction writer and essayist Peter Turchi, who has lectured brilliantly on Nabokov at the Program for Writers at Warren Wilson College*, says of the first chapter of *Lolita* that it draws up a "contract" with its reader, showing you, in "condensed form," "the laws of the world about to unfold." Same goes, I think Turchi would say, with the first section of *Speak, Memory*. Several of the book's unifying preoccupations and even habits are present in this first section. The careful reader—meaning, the reader who reads this section several times—will be well equipped to journey into the book entire.

*(For readers wanting to hear Peter Turchi's lecture on Nabokov, please visit the following website: www.warren-wilson.edu/~mfa/newwebsite/homepage.php. On the left of this site page is a link, "Audio Recordings," which will give you information as to how to obtain a recording of that lecture, along with recordings of all the lectures, classes and readings given in the Warren Wilson MFA Program since 1983. Also, Turchi's lecture may be published somewhere, and if/when if find out where it is, I'll come back into this document and let you know. For the time being I will recommend his quite beautiful book about literature, *Maps of the Imagination: The Writer as Cartographer*, Trinity University Press, 2004.)

2. The final image of chapter one, of the narrator's father "sprawling in midair," observed by the narrator through the window of his dining room. In this image are condensed three visions of Nabokov's father: a) the father who was, b) a figure on the "vaulted ceiling in a church," and c) a figure in an open coffin. All in one sentence. Much could be understood about the book entire through studying this one image.
3. The last three paragraphs of chapter 2, about Nabokov's mother.
4. The many images of bears woven through Chapter 3. The bears may seem a silly thing to focus on, but doing so will acquaint readers with Nabokov's peculiar way of making of his books almost visual things or artifacts, even material things or artifacts.
5. Uncle Ruka in Chapter 3.
6. Chapter 5 was a favorite. It's the chapter treating Mademoiselle. One's aim here should be to account for the last extraordinary image in the chapter, that of the aged swan trying to hoist himself into a moored boat, observed by Nabokov toward the end of Mademoiselle's life, when Nabokov is an adult. Readers in the All Souls Book Group also spent quite a bit of time talking about the incredible moment in this chapter in which Nabokov bends down to scoop up a handful of snow. (p. 73)

The simple objective here is to get inside the details of the book and to re-remember the sense that there is a seeming infinite wealth of them—that the "truth" is vastly richer than the crafted recollection. The more complicated objective here is to look at the release of information within chapters, which means, for everyone participating, extensive note taking and rigorous attention. One thing I did was to sketch out synopses of the chapters, before meetings, on 4 by 6 index cards, so that during discussion I could see within a single frame all of the chapter's contents. This helped.

Okay. Here then, in the remainder of this document, "Part II," are those big, maybe too general questions.

Part II: Questions about *Speak, Memory*

Question 1. *Speak, Memory* as perhaps effecting a change in your relationship to reading (and, perhaps as consequence to one's changed relationship to reading, a change in one's experience of time)

Have you found, in reading *Speak, Memory*, that you are more aware of the reading experience than you usually are, even more protective or cultivating of the reading experience than you usually are? I have found such a heightened awareness as I read the book, and wonder if this awareness isn't itself one of the effects Nabokov intended as he wrote it. Ordinarily I remove dust jackets from books, but with *Speak, Memory* I've not only left it on but find myself savoring the business of making sure not to mar it in any way—-standing the book on my desk so as to slide the jacket whichever way is needed, up or down, so that its borders tally with those of the book; checking upon leaving the book that the jacket's inside flaps aren't folded; and just enjoying the feel of the book, its alluring heft and solidity. I wonder if you have developed similar sorts of rituals/ habits around

your reading of *Speak, Memory*. Perhaps you've reserved a specific time of day to read it, or have found yourself harvesting more of your day than you usually do for reading generally. Perhaps, like me, you're transcribing passages you especially love, either by hand or into your computer, *in effect protracting the amount of time it takes to read the book*. To sum up: perhaps, like me, you have found the book creating its own special "time" within the larger, habitual time of your daily life, and that, in response to this offering, you are experiencing *time itself** differently than you did before.

I'm not sure about this yet, and, as this is my first reading of the book, I could be wrong, but it seems to me that Nabokov is up to something in describing *reading* as much as he does. Go back over the pages you've already clocked and look at how much reading goes on in *Speak, Memory*. And not just reading, but—-and here I'm expanding the question--looking, or studying, or gazing. The book is intent on sustained aesthetic wonder of several kinds (and under this heading I would include N's pursuits as a lepidopterist). We might even say that "sustained aesthetic wonder" functions in *Speak, Memory* as a kind of threshold between modes of perception, maybe even as an altar between worlds. Do you identify with this description of the book? And, to go back to the first paragraph of this question, have you too, with *Speak, Memory,* found yourself dedicating more of yourself to the reading process than you usually do?

*The term "time itself" is, I believe, Marcel Proust's. Michael Wood refers to the term in an essay on *Speak, Memory* in his monograph on Nabokov, *The Magician's Doubts*. Wood's excellent monograph plays an important role in Question 3 in this document, which is about "time." In that question you will again encounter the term, "time itself." (Question 3 begins the top of p. 10)

Question 2: Tone

Nabokov, thank heavens, is not one of those writers who's going to tell you how

much he cried about some particular sad event from his life. Indeed he will do everything possible not to cheapen experience or to privilege emotion over the (sometime) hard-feeling, final-feeling obduracy of reality. In this way he—-well, he teaches us courage—a reserve, also a levity, that is also a kind of courage--but what else does he do? You may have noticed, for instance, that at exactly those moments when other writers might have gone in for pious sentimentality or cheap nostalgia, N. becomes droll; or he just concludes the chapter or section, he just gets out of there; or he expands the frame to include material unanticipated at the beginning of that chapter/section. You might have noticed also how fast the narrative sometimes moves—-all of a sudden, a character we were just getting to know is dead.* You may have also noticed N.'s habit of self-irony, of making a character out of himself at exactly that moment when another writer might have tried to seem "sincere." The attitude a writer holds towards his or her material is called "tone," and many reader-writers, such as myself, believe that tone is all: that with the proper tone we are able essentially to honor experience, thereby giving it to the reader; and that with an improper or vulgar tone we dishonor it, drawing the light back to ourselves.

How do you experience Nabokov's tone in *Speak, Memory*? Do you find yourself surprised by it, at times? Relieved? Energized? Unnerved? Please refer to the text in your answer.

*An added observation: This acceleration in narrative I mention above, in which, say, an element of the world N. has just created for you is suddenly being "wrenched" away—the word is Boyd's--such as a character suddenly dying, is an example of the many ways in which the book is experiential. It *does* what it's talking about; or, it does what it dreads. The "colossal effort" N. is making to rebel against time will be overwhelmed. Regularly the book will admit this, and moreover will make you *feel* it; and one way you feel it is to have something or someone you've grown to care about suddenly "wrenched away."

Question 3: Time

In the first pages of the book, Nabokov sets himself up as a rebel against time; yet only a paragraph later he describes time as a "radiant and mobile medium" (p. 11). Also within that first chapter he suggests that the beginning of sentient life coincides with the beginning of our awareness of time (and here I refer to the moment on pages 10-11 when N. first learns his age in relation to those of his parents.) Now that you've read the book, what do you think time really is for Nabokov? Or maybe the question is less what time *is* for Nabokov than what Nabokov *does* with time. What he is able to do with his "medium" (it's sort of like asking what a painter is able to do with paint and canvas, a weaver with his warp, woof, threads, etc.) And what is time now for *you*, now that you are beginning to integrate N.'s sense of time with your own?

By the way: Very helpful to me in my studies of Nabokov's writing has been Michael Wood's excellent monograph on Nabokov, *The Magician's Doubts: Nabokov and the Risks of Fiction.* Here is Wood on Nabokov's (or the narrator's) posture toward time in *Speak, Memory.*

> "The dominant posture in *Speak, Memory* is not disbelief in time and not simple submission to it. Nor is it, although Nabokov himself makes a number of rhetorical waves in this direction, a rebellion against time, an assault on the 'walls of time' of the 'prison of time.' It is an intricate engagement with what Nabokov, echoing Proust, calls 'time itself', and anticipating his own fiction character Van Veen, calls the 'texture of time'. [. . .] The would-be rebel against time, time's disbeliever, speaks even in his opening pages of time as 'a radiant and mobile medium.' Time is not only brutal passage and decay, it is also a form of awareness, and what Nabokov calls 'the birth of sentient life' is the birth of a consciousness that knows itself to be temporal. He associates the development of the mind

> itself with the very constraints it longs to deny: 'the beginning of reflexive consciousness in the brain of our remotest ancestor must surely have coincided with the dawning sense of time.' A little myth of origins. The remotest ancestor is figurative and hyperbolic, but the argument is immediate: we start to think when we think about time."

(See Michael Wood, "The World Without Us: Speak, Memory," in *The Magician's Doubts: Nabokov and the Risks of Fiction*, Princeton University Press, 1994, p. 84)

Question 4: For Personal Reflection: Curiosity

Do you wish you had been as curious about the things and people of your childhood as Nabokov was about his own? I don't have my childhood to do over again, and I am, in middle age, pretty much stuck with the mind I have-—but perhaps I can make a few timorously hopeful changes. Does *Speak, Memory* inspire such hope in you? Please refer to the text in your answer.

Question 5: About "Sirin": Self-Objectification/ Separation Self-from-Self

The narrator discusses Sirin on p. 225, in the middle of Chapter Fourteen (this is in the Everyman's Library cloth edition from 1999.) "Sirin," as some of you will know, is the name with which Nabokov signed his Russian novels. This is to say that when Nabokov starts talking about "Sirin," he is in fact talking about himself—or, more precisely, about the writer he *was*, when he was still writing in Russian.

Please go back and reread the passage beginning on p. 225 of the Everyman cloth edition treating "Sirin" (the passage ends on the top of p. 226). "Sirin"

raises a number of interesting and important questions, which, if answered, might help you think about the book as a whole. Here are some of those questions:

1. Why is Nabokov posturing as someone other than the writer he was when he wrote in Russian; or, to put this question differently: Why has Nabokov objectified the writer he was when he wrote in Russian; or to put the questions differently still: Why is Nabokov invoking his former writer-self from outside of that self?
2. What are the reasons behind the severance, the separation, self from self?
3. There is mischief here, isn't there? (And here I'm remembering the All Souls Book Group Renni Browne's description of the narrator as being up to "mischief," which she offered during our first *Speak, Memory* meeting, on 8/10.) Do you think, with that mischief, Nabokov just wants to make you feel tricked? What if we said that by separating himself from himself, he makes something *possible*--emotionally possible, imaginatively possible-—both between you and him, and between you and *yourself*?

Question 6: About "Chapter Sixteen": A proposal: Through ending his book two different ways, Nabokov has sent his book into two different kinds of "time," two different kinds of contingency

In this proposal I'm going to advise that readers take a long look at the last two chapters of the book, Chapter 15, which was the ending N. intended for the book, and Chapter 16, which N. wrote in 1950,, and which he never published, and which was included, by Brian Boyd, as an "appendix" to the edition we are reading, in the All Souls Book Group. What I advise you do here is to treat these two different "endings" as two different kinds of "time." What kind of time does Nabokov send his autobiography into when he concludes it with Chapter 15?

What kind of time (a very different one) does he send it into when he concludes it with Chapter 16? Two different posterior lives he creates for his book; two contingencies. In giving his book (his life?) two endings, he sort of up-ends the myth of endings. (Forgive me.) That is how the two-endings ending registers for me, as an effort at control that admits paradoxically to the *lack* of control. For once you have two endings, you could just keep writing them, you could have…seventeen endings, you could have an infinite number. *It's also obviously extremely telling that N. didn't end his book with Chapter Sixteen*. He ends it with Fifteen. That's how he wanted the book to close. The final impression he wants for you, and here I'm referring to the very last paragraph of Chapter Fifteen, is that of his family, together, in "one last little garden," "laid out on the last limit of the past and on the verge of the present," encountering the "real prototype" of one of the toy vessels from his son's bath. Another pattern to be discerned. Another "stratagem." A ship will take them to New York, away from Europe, and Russia. (Go back and look at that final page, p. 243.) What are we to think—that N. writes the clever, deconstructive ending (Chapter Sixteen) but doesn't value it? Doesn't want it, anyway. What are your thoughts, here?

Question 7: For Personal Reflection: What *Speak, Memory* may have to teach us about parenting: Nabokov as theorist of child development (oh no!)

One of the ways I thought about *Speak, Memory* was as a parent. You may remember Nabokov turning to the reader relatively early in the book and addressing him/her expressly as a parent. This moment comes after a long, especially moan-overable passage about Nabokov's childhood nighttime-bathing ritual (he calls it his "bedtime dawdling" (61)). Nabokov has been climbing the stairs to bed ahead of his mother, with his eyes closed; and when he gets to the toilet, he dawdles some more by engaging in a sensory sort of experiment involving pressing his forehead against the "smooth comfortable edge" of the

door and then “roll[ing] it a little.” “A dreamy rhythm,” he writes, “would permeate my being.” The whole passage, meaning, the description of this “bedtime dawdling,” takes nearly four full pages. The passage summarized above concludes: “I appeal to parents: never, never say, ‘Hurry up,’ to a child” (62).

I wonder if others of you began to see the book as, among other things, a portrayal of, maybe even as an argument for, a certain kind of parenting that could make possible within a child the peace and energy essentially to have one’s childhood—-to enter into the penumbral realm, as Nabokov does here, and explore its particular character. There does seem in *Speak, Memory* a kind of theory of individual development that says that the full and “dawdling” exploration of one’s self, of the natural world, of language, books, images, one’s own rhythms—-that this research, if allowed to follow its own “time,” could, later in life, result in the courage and delicacy of attention necessary to love one’s life, even to make a work of art out of that life (or out of that love, if you will), despite the dread of loss.

Thoughts here? Thoughts here as a child? As a parent? As an educator? As a psychologist (we have a few in our book group.) As an aunt or uncle? As a grandparent?

Question 8: Shift in Writer to Reader Address: The Moment when Nabokov starts addressing his wife, Véra

What do you make of the shift in address, which happens about mid-way through the book, from a generalized reader-address to a more specified “you,” meaning, to Nabokov’s wife, Véra? Every now and then Nabokov will turn to his wife and recall an experience only the two of them could know. The feeling I am left with as I read these shifts in address-- well, the feelings are complex, and one of them is of suddenly realizing I have been eavesdropping. Then, by Chapter Fifteen,

the chapter originally intended by Nabokov as the last in his autobiography, the entirety of the address is to Véra. What is the effect of this shift for you, the reader? Does your relationship to the book change as Nabokov emerges more and more as a husband and father? What is it like, for you, to be included in that relationship--through reading N. address his wife--and to be *ex*-cluded by that relationship, in that you are now no longer the primary addressee?

Question 9. A way Nabokov might have conceptualized his relationship to you, the reader

In one of our meetings about *Speak, Memory*, a couple of discussants said that they found Nabokov "conceited," then going on to say that they found his conceitedness a kind of barrier they had to overcome before accepting the book. I'd like to shake things up a bit and propose the following in reply. I think it's worth doing even for the non-All Souls book group member, or leader.

What if Nabokov knew that he had an extraordinary gift—-the kind given only to a few writers a century. And what if his response to knowing that he had such a gift was to create a relationship with *you* in which the fullness of his gift, and the fullness of yours, could be fully engaged? What if the creation of this relationship—-with you, the reader—-was his way of accepting his gift with the utmost responsibility?

What if, in other words, Nabokov is not a writer who plays at being anything less than what he knows himself to be? And what if, in the United States especially, we expect such posturing; and what if it's this expectation that makes it difficult for us to embrace the challenge (a playful challenge) set to our intelligence by a writer as potent--and as liberating--as Nabokov? Please note that by modifying the challenge as "playful" one does not necessarily mean "light" or "un-serious."

The point, for Nabokov, is not to value the game one way or the other—-light, serious, what have you. The point is only to play.

A corollary to the last question, Question 9: Considering Nabokov's term, "artist-reader": the possibility that Nabokov took his reader very seriously

Indeed, what if it is the potency of our own intelligence, our own imagination, we are most unwilling to accept? What if our reluctance to accept that potency is the ultimate barrier? And what if our reluctance to accept that potency is bound up with the reluctance to accept the change-ability of the self, its vulnerability to change and contingency (and death.)

Related to this last question: What if, for Nabokov, the ideal relationship with you, as reader, is as opponents in a game of chess? If this proposal interests you, please reread the section about chess in Chapter Fourteen. (The passage begins p. 226 and ends p. 230.)

Question 10. "This capacity to wonder at trifles…[is] the highest form of consciousness."

The following is a remark of Nabokov's from one of his lectures about other writers' literature. The title of this lecture is "The Art of Literature and Commonsense."

> "This capacity to wonder at trifles--no matter the imminent peril--these asides of the spirit, these footnotes in the volume of life are the highest forms of consciousness, and it is in this childishly speculative state of mind, so different from commonsense and its logic, that we know the world to be good." (Vladimir Nabokov,

Lectures on Literature, ed. Fredson Bowers, New York: Harcourt Brave Jovanovich, 1980, p. 374.)

This capacity to wonder at trifles…is the highest form of consciousness. What are your thoughts, reading this? One thought I have is how subjective in emphasis this remark is, how perhaps dangerously private and idiosyncratic. *But what about the common good?* one wants to say. *Isn't the highest form of my consciousness taking shape when I'm thinking or working on behalf of the other, on behalf of other people and what we share in common?* And then another thought I have is how *hopeful* the remark is, how, to have arrived at it at all, one would need to have developed a certain faith in human consciousness, a *strength* of faith, that had already withstood the vicissitudes invariably encountered in an illogical, speculative state of existence. What are your thoughts, here? Do you agree with Nabokov? Disagree? How does the experience of reading *Speak, Memory* inform your thinking on this question?