

An immortal Alice in the real world

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I met Lila Azam Zanganeh a year ago at a literary festival in Xalapa, Mexico. I liked her immediately. Even before I found out that she sang opera and walked around loaded with more languages than the chambers in a revolver. There was something happy about her—fresh and radiant, and on the last night of the festival, I insisted on dragging her out for a party, which turned into a fun-filled five-hour dance marathon. Most people with whom you bond over such things say, Let's keep in touch. Lila said, Let's read each other.

It took a while, but a few days ago, flying home from Venice, squashed far back in the foam of my window seat, I started and finished Lila's extraordinary first book, *The Enchanter: Nabokov and Happiness*. It's a difficult book to categorise—a delicious intersection of lives and ideas, containing within its pages multitudes of dreams, butterflies, signs and coincidences. It's a homage to Lila's literary hero, Vladimir Nabokov, whom she refers to as VN, "the great writer of happiness". But it is, more importantly, an exploration of the idea of happiness. Not platitudinous happy, but singular happy: Nabokovian bliss. The kind of happy a reader must feel when she encounters a writer that truly enchants; that takes her through an "intricate atlas of sentences" and brings her to wonderlands.

Lila describes herself as a French-Iranian writer who lives in New York and writes in English about things mostly unrelated to either France or Iran. Throughout this book, Lila appears as reader and writer, shadowing through her hero's pages with a butterfly net, bringing into glorious relief the genius of Nabokov, while revealing quiet nuggets of her own life. The book is divided into fifteen luminously titled chapters, such as "A Summary of Six Mad Hatter's Happiness", which Lila describes as "fifteen Alice-like variations, rambles". Alice in Wonderland, we find out, was VN's most beloved English book. Other hitherto unknown particularities about VN: He tried to work in a bank but lasted only three hours. He acted as a nameless extra in a German film. He gave tennis and boxing lessons.

Nabokov died in a hospital in Lausanne on July 2, 1977, 10 months after Lila was born in Paris. 400 miles and a lifetime separated them. "He would remain forever unaware of my puny existence," she writes, but in this marvellous book, Lila shows how pure time can "blow clocks apart" and make lives intersect. She shows just how important the "shuddering magic" of chance is.

Like VN, Lila doesn't believe that literature can be reduced to any kind of role, "Otherwise you start requiring of it to be moral or useful or good, and then it can be seen as evil, useless or dead". Like VN, Lila believes that the novelist is an immortal Alice in the real world, that great literature is a feat of language, not ideas. Like VN, Lila believes that literature begins with a vision in that "glimmering netherworld" of imagination.

Lila is currently working on a novel that takes place in 14 countries in 14 centuries. It's called *The Orlando Inventions*. A new muse, perhaps? I think I hear a Woolf calling.

The writer is a dancer, poet and novelist.

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