

A fine enchantment

Lila Azam Zanganeh's new novel is a celebration of her love of reading and, in particular, the words of Vladimir Nabokov. By David Robinson

WRITING about myself," says Lila Azam Zanganeh, "is just boring". That's what her publishers wanted her to do more of in her book *The Enchanter*, and even though she refused, you can see why they tried.

She is, after all, young, beautiful, blindingly intelligent, the kind of writer who can write in English for the *New York Times*, in French for *Le Monde*, in Italian for *La Repubblica* or who can – and did – give seminars at Harvard in literature, cinema, Spanish and French. The kind of interviewer for whom Salman Rushdie and Orhan Pamuk happily make themselves available, and then provide glowing quotes for her book. Her vaguely exotic background – a moneyed Iranian family in exile in Paris – doesn't do any harm either.

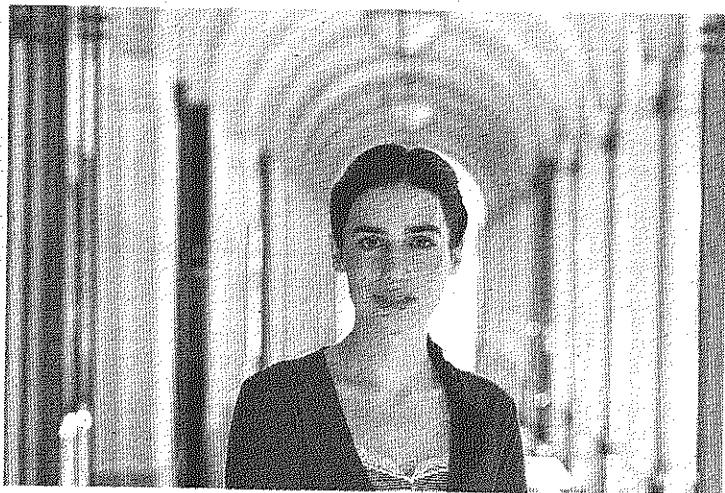
But no. What Lila wanted to write about wasn't herself but the joys of reading, and not just reading in general but reading her titular enchanter, a writer who had died just ten months after she was born in 1977: Vladimir Nabokov.

Her mother first introduced her to Nabokov's work by reading aloud passages from his autobiography *Speak, Memory* when she was 11. Perhaps, Zanganeh concedes, it was because his account of an idyllic childhood on a country estate in Russia echoed her mother's stories of a privileged adolescence in northern Iran. Or perhaps it was that he was an exile too, that he also had to work his way inside another language with a dictionary at his right elbow just as she had to, always stopping to master its detail and complexities so that when he finally did use it, he could work unfettered magic in his readers' minds. Either way, Nabokov's writing went deep into her mind, and lingered long.

There's a scene in *My Fair Lady* in which a Hungarian phonetician tries to find out about Eliza Dolittle from her accent. "Her English is too good," he says, meaning that it is so precise that it must have been taught. Listening to Zanganeh – and reading her too – is a similar experience. Instead of the lazily reductive patterns of slang, there's a rare exactitude about her diction – and, come to that, in her choice of reading.

"I'm primarily interested in the beauty of language," she explains. "That doesn't mean beautified language; it can also mean interesting, singular writing – like Céline, for example, which is the complete opposite of Nabokov's. But I feel as though I have no time to read things that are not appealing or challenging enough. So I never read for story..."

So that's no to Elmore Leonard, it turns out (never read him), and yes to Keats and Homer, the books beside her bedside table right now (only the first time she's re-read the *Iliad* since she was 12). It's not



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that she hates lowbrow culture – she'll quite happily watch a piece of cinematic schlock like *The Da Vinci Code* – just that she doesn't want to waste her time on reading anything that doesn't repay concentration. "If I'm going to spend time on a book, I want to try to find the golden morsels of culture, the very best literature that humanity has ever produced. And when one is reading difficult texts, one must reread constantly, getting in tune with the language and all the nuances of language. When you dive into Nabokov, often you have to reread four or five times to get to the bottom of a sentence. That is arduous, it requires a lot of willpower to avoid being distracted. It took me four whole months to read his novel *Ada*, for example, and that's just a 600-page book."

Yet the rewards, she insists, are there if you persevere. "Nabokov talks about good literature giving you a tingle in the spine," she says, "and that sense of awe at some of his best sentences is something that is

are you going to go in condoning this, in reading this, in being beguiled by Humbert Humbert and how much are you going to believe in his redemption?"

She wrote about *Lolita* for her Masters – her thesis: "that the novel isn't so much a sexual adventure as a textual adventure" – but for *The Enchanter* all traces of literary criticism are washed clean away. This is a homage, mimicking Nabokov's lyricism and his linguistic playfulness; what Zanganeh is trying to explain is what it first felt like to read his novels, often using his own words as part of her own description, sometimes inserting herself into the story, imagining that she was interviewing him or going out butterfly-hunting in his honour (Nabokov was also a distinguished entomologist).

I'll give you example, from the very first sentence. "I've always dreaded reading," she begins. Really? Not at all. But that's a nod to the opening sentence of anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss's memoir *A*

World on the Wane, which declared his hatred of voyages of expeditions. And that's only there in the first place because Nabokov always made some reference to other books at the start of his own novels – like

the first page of *Ada*, when he turns Tolstoy's opening to *Anna Karenina* (keep up: you know, the one about all unhappy families being different and all happy ones being the same).

Only the first five words, then, and the book has – if you read as deeply and intently as Zanganeh – opened up three others. But even if you don't pick up on that, you will have certainly realised from the start that you are dealing with a very unreliable narrator. Because almost every word that follows is about love of reading, of "re-enchanting the world" and setting out on voyages of discovery through timeless literature. For the first weekend of the world's biggest book festival, what more could you ask?

● Lila Azam Zanganeh is at the Edinburgh International Book Festival tomorrow at 4pm.

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difficult to come by. Of course it's in Shakespeare too, and again, it's my mother who introduced me to his work. She was trying to teach me English irregular verbs when I was 12 – we were learning English from scratch, my fourth language – and then just to show me its beauty of the English language, she put on a video of Laurence Olivier's *Hamlet*. She'd pause it and translate, but she is such a passionate woman that her love of that her love of that work came through. It's stayed with me ever since. I adore *Hamlet* more than any other work of literature."

When she was 19, she discovered Nabokov's *Lolita*. While 15-year-old boys (me, anyway) were busy searching out the smutty passages, Zanganeh's deeper reading showed her that what Nabokov was really doing was "playing a game of chess with the reader. He's asking 'How far