

## The Enchanter

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Published: June 3 2011 22:16 | Last updated: June 3 2011 22:16

**The Enchanter: Nabokov and Happiness**, by Lila Azam Zanganeh, *Allen Lane*, RRP£20, 228 pages

Part critical essay, part biography, part memoir and part fiction, Lila Azam Zanganeh's book of reflections on the life and work of Vladimir Nabokov is something of a literary platypus. However, the main contention of this whimsical, intriguing and at times bewildering work is that the author of *Lolita* "is the great writer of happiness".

"Of course," explains Zanganeh, "it might appear unsettling at first to celebrate happiness according to Vladimir Nabokov, a writer so often associated with moral and sexual malaise." Yet the happiness she perceives in his writing "is connected to an experience of the edge ... which in turn becomes one of extreme poetry. And this poetry is bliss."

Zanganeh's first encounter with Nabokov – reading his novel *Ada* – was "akin to falling in love". It had to do, she realises, with "the wiles of a new language". His writing had the luminous precision of a "whisper following you everywhere, summarising existence".

Are other forces at work in her fascination with the Russian émigré who made himself at home in the US and spent his last years in a hotel on the shores of Lake Geneva? Zanganeh – born in Paris to Iranian parents and now resident in the US – describes a kinship with her literary hero that goes beyond words. "Was it the textured voice of a novelist exiled from both country and native tongue which invited me to dwell in his universe?"

On this point, however, her book is unsatisfying. She omits explicit references to her own back-story, perhaps out of a reasonable desire to avoid comparisons with that other Nabokov-themed memoir by an Iranian expatriate, [Reading Lolita in Tehran](#). Yet her reluctance to explore the connections makes her appear coy, even cagey.

Martin Amis once wrote that writers' daydreams about meeting Nabokov invariably include a session of butterfly hunting – Nabokov was a passionate collector. True to the cliché, Zanganeh presents herself as an avid lepidopterist: "Then at last, I netted my first winged beauty, expertly twitching my wrist to imprison it all at once ... " But the whim is not sustained for long: "I am lying a little," she confesses a few paragraphs later.

So at one does Zanganeh feel with Nabokov that the book's final chapter simply stitches quotes from the old master's works into her own dream-like text. It's an amusing conceit, well executed, but perhaps sheds more light on her opinion of her own writing than on her subject.

Zanganeh is working on her first novel. To judge by some of the prose in *The Enchanter*, it will be a thing of wonder. In the meantime, this book is likely to make confused readers reach for Nabokov's books, which might not be a bad thing.

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