

# Lila Azam Zanganeh: 'I've always wanted to push myself to do things I don't know how to do'

Lila Azam Zanganeh loved Nabokov from an early age and has now turned her passion into a book. But be warned – it's like nothing you've read before

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guardian.co.uk, Thursday 26 May 2011 15.46 BST

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Lila Azam Zanganeh: 'When people fall in love in movies they say, "I feel I've arrived." It was like that with Lolita.'  
Photograph: Martin Godwin

Lila Azam Zanganeh likes the words "boring" and "delicious". She uses both several times during our conversation, and it becomes clear that, for her, they mean opposing, and very particular, things. "Boring" is her shorthand for anything that reeks of orthodoxy, earnestness, an overemphasis on propriety. An academic conference she attended a couple of years ago in New York was "so boring". So, too, were many aspects of her elite Parisian education, with its stress on rote learning and framing every question according to a prescribed set of theoretical constructs.

"Delicious" is her word for the opposite – the abandonment of rigidity. It represents spontaneity, free thought, *not* doing things by the book. Above all, it's a word she applies to the experience of reading her hero, Vladimir Nabokov, to whose work her own literary career has, so far, been a complicated act of homage.

Zanganeh, who is 34, has just published her first book, a deeply unconventional, even eccentric, study (although "study" is hardly the right word) of the Russian *émigré* writer. *The Enchanter: Nabokov and Happiness* is a book that's almost impossible to describe, being so unlike anything else I've ever come across. Although it contains elements of memoir, biography and criticism, it might more accurately be described as a playful, semi-fictionalised sequence of elaborations – or variations – on the experience of being a passionate Nabokov reader. There's no linear narrative, no sustained argument. Its approach is episodic, fragmentary.

Each chapter addresses the central theme – Nabokov's concept of happiness – from a fresh angle. So one chapter, inspired by a Q&A passage in James Joyce's *Ulysses*, consists of the complete transcript of an imaginary interview between Zanganeh and Nabokov that took place, she tells us, on the shores of Lake Como "about 10 months after he completed *Ada*" (that is, nearly a decade before she was born). Another is a compendium of dazzling Nabokovian words, replete with definitions: "cochlea", "hymenopteroid", "lambency", "uvula".

Other chapters are slightly more conventional: biographical snapshots, summaries of Nabokov's great works. There are commentaries on celebrated passages and accounts of encounters with Nabokov's son, Dmitri, whom Zanganeh befriended while writing the book. There are drawings, photographs, typographical oddities.

And it's all written in a style that, as Zanganeh admits, owes a considerable debt to the master himself. Sample sentence: "After the letters somehow coalesced into words and began making a semblance of sense, the second hurdle was the abhorrent topography of the paragraph."

Such a project is highly risky – it could have been painfully arch or come across as an embarrassing attempt at emulation. The anxiety of influence goes up several notches when you set yourself the task of inhabiting the linguistic universe of one of the greatest-ever prose stylists. But *The Enchanter* is, in its subtle, light-spirited way, a triumph, a work that manages to say interesting things about Nabokov while remaining faithful to its own artistic spirit.

As Zanganeh is keen to point out, it's a book with no specific audience in mind: it offers something to devotees and novices alike. She proudly tells me that one friend, a model, insisted on reading a draft. "And she said, 'It took me about five or six chapters to realise this guy was actually real.' But you know what, she really got the book. And then she even read *Ada* last summer." Another friend came up with her own acronym for it: "ULO – Unidentified Literary Object".

Zanganeh's fascination with Nabokov dates back to her childhood, when her mother would read her translated passages of his autobiography, *Speak, Memory*. Her parents are Iranian exiles – the family fled to Paris following the revolution of 1979, when Zanganeh was two – and for her mother, reading Nabokov's account of his far-off Russian boyhood was a way of reconnecting with her own childhood in "another world".

A sense of Nabokov's importance therefore pervaded Zanganeh's upbringing, but it wasn't until she was in her early 20s, and studying at Harvard, by now fluent in English and an exile twice over, that she began reading his novels for herself. She read them slowly, poring over each sentence – *Ada* alone took four months – but the effect was

transformative. "When people fall in love in American movies they say, 'I feel I've arrived.' And it was exactly that with *Lolita*. Oh my God, this is home, this is me, and nothing beats this."

Zanganeh's love of Nabokov led her to want to write about him. Not surprisingly, given her academic background (before going to Harvard she studied at the Sorbonne and the *École normale supérieure*), her first thought was to write "something serious". "But then I thought, wait a second, Nabokov hated didactic works. How could you say, 'Listen people, Nabokov is a writer of happiness, so let me show you in a serious and well-constructed disquisition'? It would have been boring to death!" She was also put off by reading Nabokov critics, who are obsessed, she says, with questions surrounding the morality of his work. "But the whole point is that his work lies outside the realm of morals, beyond good and evil. He said in the afterword to *Lolita* that there is no moral in tow, that it is a magnificent game of chess with the reader."

So her conception of the book became less straitlaced. "It was obvious that I wanted each chapter to be a different formula. That's where I think the French education kicked in as a force of reaction. Everything I'd ever done had been really structured. Now, for the first time in my life, I had a blank page and I wanted every chapter to be as playful as possible."

One noticeable thing about *The Enchanter* is how little prominence Zanganeh gives to her family background. She briefly alludes to her family's expulsion from "an age locked in a receding ball of glass", but Iran isn't mentioned by name. This is deliberate. Publishers in America (where she still lives) pressed her to write a more obviously commercial book, drawing on her Iranian heritage and stressing the parallels between her life and Nabokov's (both exiles; both writing in an acquired tongue). But such a book, Zanganeh says derisively, would have been "kitsch". She found an agent who sympathised with her desire not to write a "phony memoir" and eventually landed a publishing deal.

In person, Zanganeh displays the same mix of seriousness and playfulness that informs her writing. She quotes easily from great writers and thinkers: Hugo, Musil, Nietzsche. She refers regularly to the many languages she speaks (I counted five, but perhaps there are more). Yet she isn't reverential or precious; she also has a more mischievous side. Despite being obviously glamorous, she exudes a slight air of gawkiness, a legacy, perhaps, of the experience of having been – as she says of her days at her strict Parisian school – a "nerd in Nerd Town". Like her writing, her conversational style is digressive, free-flowing – she wends her way gradually to her answers and doesn't always get there at all – but listening to her is always entertaining.

Her Nabokov book out of the way, Zanganeh tells me that she is now working on a novel. It spans 14 centuries, starting in eighth-century France and ending in 21st-century New York, and tells the story of a knight who is both a man and a woman. "It's called *The Orlando Inventions* and it's an exploration on the nature of love. Virginia Woolf's Orlando is of course one in a long line; there were many Orlandos before her, and the original was a knight in medieval times, who appears as Roland in the French epic *Chansons de geste*." I tell her that it sounds incredibly ambitious and rather wonderful – "and probably totally uncommercial," she adds, laughing. "But I've always wanted to push myself to do things I don't know how to do."