

## Lila Azam Zanganeh remembers Dmitri Nabokov

For three days and three nights, I became his reader, reading to him from my own work and from the works of his father

---

Lila Azam Zanganeh  
guardian.co.uk, Friday 2 March 2012 17:55 EST

---



Dmitri Nabokov with a photo of his father, Vladimir. Photograph: Donald Stampfli/AP

Fifty five minutes before he died, on 23 February 2012, I spoke to [Dmitri Nabokov](#) – opera singer, translator and [Vladimir Nabokov](#)'s son – for the last time. Moments before, I had received a text message from one of his attendants in Switzerland. The message read: "DVN not well."

Dmitri had been hospitalised and diagnosed with pneumonia. After a first recovery, he had suffered a second infection and his body was now no longer reacting to treatment. I was still hoping he might live, even though his doctors had assured me he would not. He had, after all, defied expectations for seven days. Yet, on reading the text message that night, I knew that he was dying.

Ten years back, Dmitri and I had got off to a rather curious beginning. The first time I'd met him, for a profile in a literary review, we had had a cordial if rambling conversation at his home in Montreux, and I had been struck mostly by the physical resemblance between father and son. His clear-blue gaze, his aquiline nose, the downward-looking double-line of his mouth looked so similar to the features I had observed in countless photographs of his father. And I had noticed the way both Nabokovs pronounced, almost identically, their soft, white-Russian "ts", as I had caught them in the rare recordings of Vladimir's voice.

The second time I'd interviewed Dmitri, after hours of travelling, I had nearly fallen asleep from exhaustion as he'd insisted on providing me with a detailed summary of his health. Soon, I'd realised that father and son shared a measure of misogyny (father had a marked dislike for "lady-writers" and had said point blank, if not entirely truthfully,

that he was "frankly homosexual on the subject of translators"). Still, I was somewhat surprised when, in 2003, I received an email from "Nabokov" titled "housekeeping". In it, Dmitri inquired whether I'd be interested in solving his domestic troubles and taking on a new job as chief of staff in Montreux. I politely declined.

About two years later, I began researching a book on the life and work of his father. This book, *The Enchanter*, is a combination of fiction and essay, of invention and interpretation. It argues that Nabokov is the great writer of happiness. And to my surprise, it was Dmitri himself who gave me the original impetus to get started. When I asked him, early on, whether he agreed that this was a theme that had been overlooked by Nabokovians, he said "yes". Dmitri and I also saw eye-to-eye on the true nature of *Ada* as a chronicle of extraordinary (if ineffably complex) happiness, and rather amazingly, we agreed, too, on which of his fictional characters his father actually loved (as opposed to those he professed to love in interviews: Lolita and Lucette).

In 2006, I subsequently interviewed John Updike, an avowedly ardent Nabokovian, and asked him what he thought of Nabokov's relationship to happiness. Updike had been the author of a 1971 New Yorker article on *Gloria* titled "The Crunch of Happiness", and in 1965 had come up with this unforgettable sentence: "Nabokov writes prose the only way it should be written, that is, ecstatically."

Though he never could bring himself to like *Ada*, Updike told me he thought the themes of happiness, and ecstasy, essential to any lucid understanding of Nabokov. In effect, together with Dmitri, Updike had in the span of an hour or two provided me with the intellectual sustenance I needed to get started on a perilous literary adventure. On completing *The Enchanter*, I was notified that I needed to obtain the rights to quote from Nabokov's works before I could approach any American or British publishers. I knew that Dmitri had a forbidding reputation in the literary world for attacking the works of many a would-be Nabokovian. I felt quite terrified at the prospect of his passing judgment on my book before agreeing, or not, to let me quote from his father's works. The life or death of my first book now rested entirely in his hands.

On my next visit, this time to Palm Beach, Florida, where he had his second home, Dmitri told me he had skimmed through the book, and liked two chapters out of 15. He had been feeling ill (he had been in a wheelchair for several years) and requested that I read the remaining chapters to him out loud – all 13 of them. Thus, for three days and nights, I became Dmitri Nabokov's reader, reading to him not only from my own work, but also from the works of his father.

He kept a critical ear throughout, and disapproved of some sections of the book – for instance, the passage in which I imagine his parents' room at the Montreux Palace, late at night. Yet he was enthusiastic about the whole – warm and effusive, in fact, in a way he had never seemed before, in the eight or so years we had known each other. From then on, something shifted. He began to trust me, and I him.

As the only son of one of the greatest writers in literary history, a child so adored by his parents that, though poor and struggling as Russian émigrés in Europe, they considered him their "only luxury", Dmitri developed an often misunderstood personality. Though demanding and at times difficult, he was also, like both his father and his mother, Véra Slonim, incredibly bright, and full of genuine tenderness. His hard-won friendship was a gift. I shall miss the kindness in his eyes, and the way he ended phone conversations by saying, with an almost childlike intonation: "Me too."