



## Q&A with Lila Azam Zanganeh, Enchanted by New York and Nabokov

Perry Santanachote for NYC-ARTS | April 30, 2012 4:04 AM

Parisian [Lila Azam Zanganeh](#) claims she would never have become a writer if she hadn't moved to New York City. Little more than 10 years after she arrived here, New York City's [Center for Fiction](#) awarded her book "[The Enchanter: Nabokov and Happiness](#)" (2011) the Roger Shattuck Prize for Criticism. This Wednesday, writer Lila Azam Zanganeh meets with Proust scholar Eugène Nicole for a [lunchtime literary discussion](#) at New York University, a free event of the [PEN World Voices Festival](#), which marks the PEN American Center's 90th anniversary.

Born to Iranian parents, the first-generation Parisian moved to New York City in 2000 to attend Columbia University, where she fell in love with literature and writing. "[The Enchanter: Nabokov and Happiness](#)," is a combination of fiction and essay that shares her delight in discovering the writer Nabokov. The small book traces Azam Zanganeh's own growth as a writer and the inspiration of the Russian novelist: "Every page, every sentence, read and reread by a little maniac in the making, wide eyes glowing slightly brighter by the day."



Lila Azam Zanganeh. Photo by Hank Gans.

*Americans believe in writing as craft. In France, you are born a writer, you do not become one.*

### **Q: Did you have a typical "immigrant" upbringing in France?**

A: Yes and no. At home, I lived almost entirely among Iranians, with many exceptional artists and intellectuals in exile, men and women who came and went, and sat at our dinner table. All of them had fled,

like us, the Islamic Revolution of 1979. They opened a world of intricate stories, of color-studded landscapes, of unknown familiars. At school, however, there were no foreigners. So I was always 'the foreigner' – even though I was born in Paris and speak Persian with a slight French lilt!

### **Q: Was your sense of always being a foreigner magnified when you moved to the U.S.?**

A: When I arrived in the U.S., and in New York especially, for the first time in my life, I was a New Yorker, period. It was as obvious as drinking water—a Persian idiom, in fact!

### **Q: In the literary sense, what does New York offer that Paris doesn't?**

A: Openness. New Yorkers, and Americans in general, to this day are incredibly open to new ideas and creative input. They have faith in unknown men and women arriving from the world over. That sense of possibility, of trust, of wonder – I am not aware of it existing anywhere else in the world.

**Q: Has living here changed your perspective or writing style at all?**

A: My perspective, yes entirely. Put it this way: I would have never become a writer had I not come to New York. It was New York, its effervescence, its unique practice of cultural diversity, its creative energy, that taught me that art in general, and writing in particular – contrary to what many Europeans seem to believe—is not necessarily the product of genius. Americans believe in writing as craft. In France, you are born a writer, you do not become one.



**Q: So you never thought you could “learn” to become a writer?**

A: I was meant to study political science and international affairs. It was a writing class at Columbia University—taught by the extraordinary Judith Crist, who is now almost 90 years old and still teaching—that changed the course of my life as I knew it.

**Q: So how do you approach writing in Paris now?**

A: I go back to many different places in Europe [she speaks six-languages] and always try to explain this notion of art as craftsmanship. They are still rather puzzled. Editors in French publishing houses, for instance, often barely touch a text. The notion of creative exchange with an editor is not as deeply ingrained as it is in the U.S. Same goes with teaching writing, which is barely practiced at all in French schools.

**Q: Will your mixed heritage once again be reflected in your new novel, “The Orlando Inventions”?**

A: Yes, of course, though indirectly. I am writing it in English, and it will be set partly in France, partly in Constantinople, and partly in New York, but in different centuries.

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