

## **Creativity is the New Happiness**

Azam Zanganeh writes a playful, fragmented debut about the enchanter Nabokov.

Lila Azam Zanganeh reads almost obsessively: out of fear she misses something she reads a sentence over. 'I admit, such a close reading is according to most rules when it comes to mental health, a needlessly difficult task.' But is THE way to read Vladimir Nabokov: the creator of the most colourful prose of the last century, in particular *Lolita*, 'with more literary treasures on every page than most other authors write in their collected works,' as [Rudy Kousbroek](#) once stated.

Nabokov once said, in answer to the accusation that his work was incomprehensible: 'Why shouldn't the reader sometimes read a sentence more than once? No harm can come from that.' He added that a good reader always has a dictionary within arm's reach; and once he has finished reading scrupulously, the real work must begin. According to Nabokov rereading is the true reading; after reading the book four times or so, the reader will view the book as a whole, just like we do when we view a painting. Enjoying literature is hard work.

Azam Zanganeh (1976) is an ardent admirer of Nabokov. She offers that this partly is due to the fact that they both share a sense of loss. Nabokov (1899-1977) was driven out of his homeland by the Russian revolution, the parents of Azam Zanganeh, who herself was 2 years old at the time, both fled the revolution in Iran. For both English isn't their mother's tongue, but the acquired language in which they write.

## **Hawk**

*The Enchanter: Nabokov and Happiness* is the first book by Azam Zanganeh, and you can debut much worse. It is playfully, fragmentally arranged, contains shards of biographical and autobiographical information, summaries of *Lolita* and *Ada*, a fictitious interview with the famous author (not an entirely new idea) and a report of meetings with Dimitri Nabokov, whose permission was necessary because of the use of quotes in this book, and he watches like a hawk over the literary testament of his father. In the unorthodox approach and the virtue of subjectivity, *The Enchanter* does remind of Nabokov's book about Gogol.

As the subtitle suggests, happiness is an important theme. That, perhaps, isn't very obvious for an author as Azam Zanganeh admits, 'is a writer who so often is associated with moral sexual malaise'. Nabokov didn't write happy stories with happy characters. The happiness that the writer Azam Zanganeh experiences in Nabokov's work is 'a special way of looking'. Whoever reads his books, looks more intently at the world and becomes more curious. He also looks through a 'Nabokovian lens' and starts to see the uniqueness in every day life. He becomes aware of things and of himself. Nabokov always used all his senses, and for that he paid a high price for the rest of his life: sleeplessness. The uppermost form of Nabokovian happiness is in creativity: when you find words for the things you perceive. That is the reason why Nabokov is so beloved by his fellow authors, next to his style.

Azam Zanganeh presents a couple of Nabokovian keywords in a deliberately loose style. As the enchanter, a favorite image of the writer, the author lifts a couple of images from everyday life and performs a trick with them, with as a result a new reality. Literature isn't a mirror of reality; if the literary creation reflects something, it is the originality and giftedness of the enchanter.

## **Synaesthesia**

Another key element is colour. When you read Nabokov, you see every colour of the rainbow: 'A green rainy day'. The author always spoke about his synaesthesia during interviews. In his mind letters were coupled with colours. Butterflies. Nabokov studied entomology in Cambridge, conducted scientific research and named at least 4 species and 7 subspecies. Memory. 'Remember that,' his mother told the young Nabokov, pointing at a paw print of a bird in the snow. And Vladimir would glean happiness from those kind of details. One of his best books is the autobiographical *Speak, Memory*.

Loosely Azam Zanganeh conjures an image of the writer and his work and – without stepping into the foreground – of herself. In the blurb Vladimir Nabokov states that she writes 'highly accessible style, without any attempt to mimic that of her beloved subject.' That is courteous of Dimitri and untrue, because she does. But that is justifiable because of her unconditional admiration of the author. It didn't bother me.

*The Enchanter* is a sympathetic, catchy book, a stimulant to (re)read the great master himself. The only thing that maybe should be more in focus, is his humour. As any genius, Nabokov was only a genius half of the time, and with his absolutely brilliant finds you also had to read through the less exciting passages. It is his wit, that usually takes the form of a ironically formulated sentence, that makes you want to read on. And Nabokov's humour certainly isn't in the way of the happiness of the reader.

-- Marco Kamphuis, June 17, 2011