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**Reading ‘Lolita.’ Forgetting Tehran.**By *STEPHEN HEYMAN*

Hank Gans

In the commodities exchange of American letters, [Lila Azam Zanganeh](#) is an easy buy: She’s got that appealing balance of Near Eastern extraction, European education and Yankee ambition. Born in Paris to Iranian exiles, she studied at the prestigious École Normale Supérieure before teaching literary seminars at Harvard. Now she lives in New York and is something of a fixture at book parties and publishing events. (She was just on [the cover of Thursday Styles](#), giving Jon-Jon Goulian, another of the season’s publishing darlings, a protracted peck.) She speaks six languages, sings opera and is quite beautiful, although even her sultry glamour is tempered a bit by a childlike innocence.

“Would you split a cookie with me?” she asks. We had just left the Guggenheim museum, which Zanganeh suggested as a meeting point this month because it was where her poet mother took her on her first visit to New York. She explains how her mom barely escaped from Iran in 1979 on the last Air France flight out of Tehran, fleeing to Paris on the same plane that had just delivered Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini to a victorious homecoming. This is interesting personal history, but it’s mostly left out of Zanganeh’s new book, [“The Enchanter: Nabokov and Happiness”](#) (W. W. Norton, \$24), a very idiosyncratic marriage of fact and fiction dedicated to her lifelong literary obsession, whom she refers to just as “VN.”

“I will spare you the details of my infancy, but this much I should say: I grew up in a family expelled from an age locked in a receding ball of glass,” she writes about herself, nodding obviously to “Speak, Memory.” “Once upon a time, and such a very different time it was!’ became the leitmotiv that rocked my cradle.”

Suffice it to say, there may be something of a biographical kinship between Nabokov and Zanganeh. Both writers came from privileged families that were forced to abandon their respective homelands after seismic revolutions. Both had close relatives who were victims of political assassinations (Nabokov’s father, Zanganeh’s uncle). And both were not native in English but staked their literary careers in that language.

The decision to avoid making these similarities more explicit in the text was a conscious one, and Zanganeh freely admits that it made it much harder to find a publisher. “The manuscripts would come back and everybody was saying, ‘Where’s Iran? Where’s her story? It has to be something narrative about herself,’” Zanganeh says. “I was very

grateful to Norton that they bought a book that wasn't just another 'sweeping narrative about a young Iranian girl.'”

Instead, with “The Enchanter,” Zanganeh recalls her rapture at discovering Nabokov — “Every page, every sentence, read and reread by a little maniac in the making, wide eyes glowing slightly brighter by the day” — and channels it into a kind of evocation of the writer. She even imagines interviewing Nabokov one summer on the shores of Lake Como, as he sits in a wicker chair, holding, for some reason, a brand new copy of Dante’s “Inferno.” “There he was, by the raincloud glimmer of that lake, softly rolling his head-*r* in words like “Russia.”

Before her own literary debut, Zanganeh covered American literature for *Le Monde* and conducted author interviews for *The Paris Review*. This work gave her access to a number of big writers. She once spent nine hours interviewing Umberto Eco.

Jonathan Safran Foer praised her journalistic tenacity. “You actually read the book,” she recalls him telling her during an interview in 2005. “You’d be surprised to see how few journalists read the book these days.”

No doubt because of her connections from the books beat, her first effort has been very well blurbed: Orhan Pamuk, Salman Rushdie and Dmitri Nabokov all chime in. Rushdie also spoke at her book launch earlier this month at Idlewild Books. And Philip Gourevitch and Larissa MacFarquhar had a party for her on Friday at their Brooklyn home.

Zanganeh still seems excited about how fluid the identity of a writer can be here, especially compared with what it’s like in her native France. She makes much of her ability to have morphed from an academic to a journalist to a memoirist (of sorts) and, now, she’s at work on her first novel, “an exploration on the nature of love that spans 14 centuries.”

“I think it’s something very American and lovely that there’s no complex as to what being a writer is,” she says. “In France, there’s all these different names for what you are. Being a writer in the literary sense is called *écrivain*, and *écrivain* is only if you have 20 books behind you or if you’re a genius by the age of 25, and it’s absolutely evident. Then, perhaps, you can be an *écrivain*.”

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*This post has been revised to reflect the following correction:*

***Correction: May 24, 2011***

*A previous version of this post misidentified the Iranian leader who returned to Tehran in 1979. It was Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, not Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.*