

BOOK REVIEW

A satisfying look at Nabokov, the literary 'Enchanter'

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THE ENCHANTER

Nabokov and Happiness

By Lila Azam Zanganeh

Norton, 228 pp., \$23.95

To seek a greater understanding of happiness by way of Vladimir Nabokov is no typical self-help path, to say the least. Yet that's what author Lila Azam Zanganeh attempts in "The Enchanter," a witty, illuminating examination of desire, fulfillment, and passion in Nabokov's work and life. For her, the novels "Lolita" and "Ada, or Ardor," and his amazing memoir "Speak, Memory" are not merely manuals to finding happiness; they are experiences of bliss. "VN" (as she affectionately calls him), "in his linguistic genius and trilingual grace, awakened it more vividly than anyone else I had ever read."

In that assertion, Azam Zanganeh is in good literary company: Edmund White has called Nabokov "the high priest of sensuality and desire." Martin Amis has written that his books offer "stimulation that is at once intellectual, imaginative, and aesthetic."

In lesser works, Nabokov seems to favor qualities of flash, whimsy, mischief, and linguistic prestidigitation over a deep rendering of human experience. But in his masterpieces, and that is what Azam Zanganeh devotes herself to in this book, the great Russian is capable of hitting all those notes and more to dazzling effect. The good thing is, one needn't have read Nabokov to enjoy "The Enchanter." The better news is you may desperately want to after reading this. (Start with "Lolita" and you can't go wrong.)

Azam Zanganeh — who was just 10 months old when Nabokov died in 1977 in Montreux, Switzerland — is suitably eccentric in her approach to him. She flits around ideas and musings like one of Nabokov's beloved butterflies. (He was an accomplished and much-admired lepidopterist.) Using whimsically titled chapters such as "Happiness, Counterclockwise" and accompanying subtitle phrases ("Where the writer dreams up paradise and the reader leaps straight into it"), she revisits stories from his books, shares charming anecdotes from his life, and chronicles the famed love story of him and his wife, Vera, to whom he was married (though not always faithfully) for 52 years.

Anyone expecting a breezy self-help manual in "The Enchanter" will be disappointed. The author is too sophisticated for that. Happiness is not dealt with in a trite way; it is found in Nabokov's "singular way of seeing, marveling and grasping." It is what she describes as the staggering "curiosity and ecstasy" in his work that enchants her. (She notes that "invent" was one of his favorite verbs.) Through the act of writing, she argues, Nabokov achieved the highest state of being — something she achieves in the act of reading him.

Although Azam Zanganeh delivers a marvelous, erudite analysis of the pleasures to be found in Nabokov's work (and offers a fascinating account of the man himself), she is rather withholding about her own background. This is a memoir of sorts, but her omission of even basic autobiographical details seems coy and slightly off-putting.

One of the book's greatest virtues is that the author cultivated a connection with Nabokov's son (and only child), Dmitri, who is now 77. He is a fascinating character: an opera singer, a translator, a former race car driver, and the zealous guardian of his father's legacy and literary estate. He generously provides some of the beautiful family photographs seen in this book, and shares intimate memories of what it was like to be the son of a literary giant. Clearly, he was impressed enough by Azam Zanganeh's devotion and intellect to offer such access.

She fills in plenty of facts herself, too: for instance, one section is an imagined interview between herself and VN, supposedly having taken place just after he had completed "Ada."

In a sense, "The Enchanter" is a book with no beginning, middle, and end. The reader is dropped into the author's literary sleuthing adventure and tossed along all the way. However much this book lacks linearity or cohesiveness, the ride is a pleasure. Think of "The Enchanter" as a delightful tumble into a Nabokovian rabbit hole, and Azam Zanganeh's manic passion will be hard to resist.

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