

Book review: The Enchanter: Nabokov And Happiness

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Lila Azam Zanganeh

Allen Lane, £20

LITERARY criticism in universities has become a venture both timid and mandarin, which might account for the slight trend in publishing for books that convey the complex joy of reading to a wide audience.

Titles such as James Wood's *How Fiction Works*, Zadie Smith's *Changing My Mind* and Geoff Dyer's *Working The Room* all sought to make the reader appreciate the exact textures and timbres, the subtleties and astonishments of favourite authors; often intercut with personal reminiscence and witty asides.

Lila Azam Zanganeh's *The Enchanter* is in a similar vein, and, if the intention is to send the reader back to the works of Vladimir Nabokov with newly polished eyes and an eager appetite, it succeeds without question. But it is more than a literary springboard from which to launch oneself back to the classics: it is a thing of beauty in its own right.

Zanganeh's very personal pas-de-deux with Nabokov did not begin auspiciously. "Nabokov died on July 2nd 1977," she writes. "I was ten months old. Roughly four hundred miles separated us. In sum, we had got off to an unfortunate start."

But there are important connections between the two. Zanganeh, born in Paris to Iranian parents, was cut off from her homeland by the Ayatollah's Revolution; just as Nabokov fled Russia, and then Europe, from the Communists, then the Fascists. Both had to learn and live in new languages; both became academics in America.

It creates a rhyme of empathy between them: not essential for good criticism, but revealing here. Unlike, for example, Nicholson Baker's contentious and egocentric engagement with John Updike, *U & I*, Zanganeh's biographically inflected criticism is neither intrusive nor a form of special pleading.

Zanganeh traces an unusual thread through Nabokov's oeuvre: his depictions of happiness.

It's not the first mental state that leaps to mind in connection with the author of *Lolita*, *Pale Fire* and *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*: madness, delusion and self-delusion, and the queasy fear of being profoundly misunderstood seem more prominent themes. It is, however, a fruitful line of enquiry.

A good critic - and Nabokov would agree - should be a good noticer, and Zanganeh certainly fulfils that requirement by choosing such an overlooked aspect of Nabokov.

Through happiness, Zanganeh examines Nabokov's ideas of time, and parallels his literary work with his own relationships, his butterfly collecting and his notions of loss.

The book is stylistically experimental in a fitting tribute to Nabokov. There are glossaries of the more idiosyncratic vocabulary with equally idiosyncratic definitions, and a real virtuoso piece where Zanganeh braids the surprisingly frequent different descriptions of light by Nabokov into her own narrative.

Her own prose is just as limpid and bevelled as the work of the Enchanter himself.

The Enchanter is bold in dealing with one of the most problematic areas of reading in our micro-blogging, attention-deficit days: that it is actually hard. Zanganeh writes openly about the effort involved: "Why confront oneself with the generalized terror of countless unread pages, the squadrons of words that will eventually defeat us, if only because we read against the clock?"

The answer is profound: Zanganeh reads not to see how Nabokov describes happiness, but because reading him is in itself a form a happiness. There could be no better definition of the "creative reader".

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