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Book review

'The Enchanter:' why Nabokov matters

"The Enchanter: Nabokov and Happiness" by Lila Azam Zanganeh is an off-the-leash tribute to the many pleasures of reading the Russian writer.

By by David Takami

Special to The Seattle Times

'The Enchanter: Nabokov and Happiness'

by Lila Azam Zanganeh

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W.W. Norton, 255 pp., \$23.95

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In "The Enchanter: Nabokov and Happiness" Lila Azam Zanganeh has managed to fend off infatuation and other pitfalls of paying tribute to one's favorite author, and offers a quirky celebration of the Russian-born writer, loosely knitting together his life and fiction with startling originality.

Nabokov is remembered by many for the wrong reasons: as a writer of banned books, notably "Lolita," "often associated with moral and sexual malaise." But Nabokov is one of our most inventive and revelatory writers, with an uncanny knack for describing the simplest feeling or objects in ways that give them fresh meaning.

This is all the more remarkable when we consider that English wasn't his first language (though he was raised speaking Russian, French and English).

Zanganeh was an infant in 1977 when Nabokov died, but this doesn't stop her from encountering him in different phases of his life. She combines biographical sketches of Nabokov — his childhood, his relationship with wife Vera, and his lifelong passion for collecting and studying butterflies — with her own musings on his sublime prose.

She describes, for instance, how memory can be transformed into literature in the hands of a master: "That unique burst of consciousness which continued to reverberate throughout his life. Like filaments of memories coalescing in unforeseen clusters, where happiness — or at least part of it — is a variation on remembrance."

Zanganeh calls Nabokov "the great writer of happiness" despite the fact that many of his characters don't seem happy. Happiness lies instead in the creative process, in his "singular way of seeing, marveling and grasping." Mostly focusing on his great works, "Lolita," "Ada," and "Speak, Memory," Zanganeh supplies sparkling commentary pointing out Nabokov's view of great literature as "a feat of language, not ideas."

There's a certain off-leash quality to this literary gambol, occasionally descending into self-indulgence, but mostly appealing in its energy and freedom. She lets herself go as a writer, following his stylistic lead, sometimes with an idiosyncratic focus on minutiae. In one chapter, she lists and extols her favorite Nabokov words, among them concolorous, fritillary, and purl. (No spoiler here: Look them up.)

Because of its episodic structure, this is a book you can pick up and set down at your leisure, the better to enjoy and appreciate this writer's unique articulation of genius. Writes Zanganeh, "At core, the gift of the Nabokovian novel is this, just this: a call to whom-it-may-concern to capture photon after photon of fleeting life."