

## SELLING NABOKOV

### **An interview with Nikki Smith**

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**N**ikki Smith and her husband, attorney Peter Skolnik, founders, in 1988, of Smith / Skolnik Literary Management, represented the estate of Vladimir Nabokov for over two decades, Ms. Smith as worldwide literary agent, Mr. Skolnik as attorney of record.

***Yuri Leving:* First, allow me to touch upon some general issues related to your professional field. What qualities, in your opinion, should a literary agent possess?**

*Nikki Smith:* With reference to representing the estates of literary lions? Curiosity; and a conviction that the common reader wants to hear the roar. But shouldn't we begin with the juicy bits? Yes, I represented the Nabokov estate for some twenty years. And yes, in the summer of 2008, in the midst of submitting *The Original of Laura* and a handful of other unpublished works to – what was it? – a couple of dozen Nabokov publishers worldwide, I did, in essence, take a phone call from a reporter and learn that Dmitri Nabokov had replaced me with the Andrew Wylie agency. It was all – what shall we say? Quite dramatic.

**And yet, there seems to be a consensus that among all the obituaries published in the wake of Dmitri's death last year, the one you wrote is, perhaps, the most personal in tone.**

More on the lines of a eulogy but, yes, it was sympathetic and, as you say, "personal."

**Some might be surprised by this since the piece was written by a literary agent and not a family friend per se. Can we assume that the relationship you and Peter Skolnik had with Dmitri Nabokov was exceptional?**

Or perhaps typical. Dmitri Nabokov was a very public and, if you will, very personal person: an opera performer by training who served not only as executor of his father's estate but as a performer on the editorial and translation stages, subjecting himself, necessarily, to second guessing at every move. I can't imagine that anyone who knew Dmitri thought it was easy.

Now, on to the former agent's adventures with the Nabokov estate? And let's, if we may, stick to the business of books.

**Excellent. I expect you remember how Smith/Skolnik Literary Management came to represent the estate?**

I do. A telex arrived in the mid-80s, the turn of the year; Nabokov had been dead for a decade. Peter and I were a couple, though not yet a corporate entity, both associates of New York's Sanford Greenburger agency. Peter, a newly minted lawyer, handled, for one, the agency's oldest client, the Kafka estate; I was charged with buying, and occasionally selling, rights on behalf of publishers abroad for whom the agency operated as American offices. Among them, and source of the telex, Nabokov's principal German publisher, Heinrich Maria Ledig-Rowohlt, known universally as "Ledig." He and his wife, Jane, had just returned to their home in Switzerland from holiday drinks with Véra Nabokov – returned, though the telex didn't say so, unnerved by the news that, contrary

to Ledig's advice, Véra was arranging to publish the novella wherein Nabokov takes his initial run at *Lolita*.

That, Ledig was certain, was a mistake. Clearly *The Enchanter* was a false start, not the kind of thing one should reveal. As Ledig mourned, "it takes the dust off the wings of the butterfly." I would remember that, and read into Madame Nabokov's decision to proceed a rewrite of the question she'd posed to Ledig – note "read into." Her question wasn't should she publish *The Enchanter*, but how.

In any event, what Ledig's telex did say was that Véra Nabokov had turned to him for an agent; he'd suggested us; could we come. We said yes.

### **And presented yourselves to Véra Nabokov at the Montreux Palace Hotel?**

And to Dmitri of course. At their invitation, we returned the following day to have a look at the records and files.

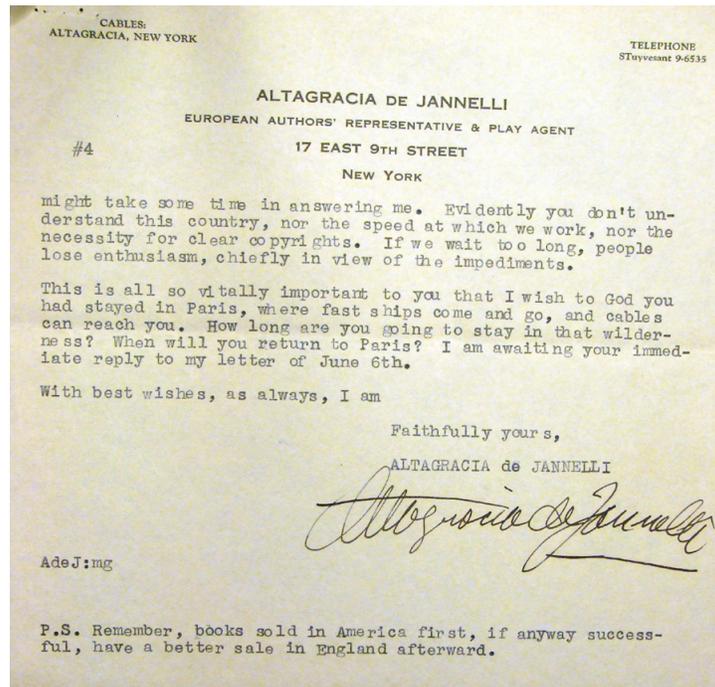
**Can you comment on the work of your predecessors, the American agent Altagracia de Janelli perhaps? Of course, multiple rejections from leading publishers throughout the 30s put her in a much more disadvantageous position, but she could be a harsh critic at times. She was even audacious enough to advise her client upon reading a copy of *The Event*: "...Besides this, the story is nothing. You are going to tell me that you wrote this for a joke. That is all very well, but in America they don't want a joke for a play."<sup>1</sup> Have you ever mused on those early representatives of Nabokov's artistic talent?**

Correction? Véra was our only predecessor. You may know the Stacy Schiff biography. Schiff offers a striking image of Véra as a figure from a Vermeer, a figure alone in a still, silent room, intent on a piece of paper: a contract perhaps, a rejection letter. That figure is there early on. Worth recalling that Nabokov began his career in the enviable position of son of an eminent White Russian who reinvented himself as an émigré publisher in

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<sup>1</sup> Altagracia de Janelli to VN, 14 March 1939, Berg collection; qtd. in Siggy Frank, *Nabokov's Theatrical Imagination* (Cambridge UP, 2012, p. 40).

Berlin. When the émigré market – starved, one gathers, for theatre; happy to read short stories, novels, poetry – finally dissolves, Véra emerges; she functions for decades as what is referred to in the trade as agent-of-origin, parceling out bits and pieces to publishers and to parties known as sub-agents, the uppity Ms. Janelli an early example.



*A Fragment of Altagracia de Janelli's letter to V. Nabokov, dated 26 June, 1937.*

*Courtesy of the Berg Collection, New York Public Library.*

### **Is it usual for wives and widows to take on the role of literary agent?**

Schiff sees similarities in Tolstoy's wife; but in Véra's era, she was, to my knowledge, alone. You asked about the qualities an agent should possess? More useful to wonder if anyone other than Véra Nabokov could have dealt with Nabokov. But she knew her limits, and I tend to think she felt she'd reached them with *The Enchanter*.

It wasn't only a matter of her age, though that was a factor. US rights in *The Enchanter* were going to Putnam's; by the time we came to Montreux, Joan Daly, the Nabokov family lawyer in New York until her death in the 90s, was reviewing final contracts. It was a logical choice – Putnam's, of course, was the US publisher of *Lolita* – but not without its discomfiting ironies, for both parties. Putnam's had never been a

happy fit; Véra had, famously, taken *Ada* to McGraw-Hill; now she was back at Putnam's.

There was another issue. The pattern in the States, an author split among many publishers, some of those assigned world rights, spilled into virtually every territory. The exception was Germany. Obviously Rowohlt would publish *The Enchanter*. No publisher would reject a "lost" Nabokov, precursor to *Lolita* – indeed, we ultimately went to contract with some fifteen houses worldwide. But only Rowohlt had published all the man's fiction. Only they had managed to fetch in contracts from this or that house in the States; and only they would be able, as Ledig said, to "refresh" sales of all the fiction with posthumous fiction from the archives. Véra knew her royalty records; she saw that.

My sharpest memory of that first visit to Montreux? Standing, Peter and I, with Véra Nabokov at a glass book case on the top floor of the hotel as she reached in and pulled her shelf copy of the first Swedish edition of *Lolita*; listening as she spoke, with relish, of not seeing paragraphs that should have been there, of forcing the publisher to burn his entire edition, then going on to another house in Stockholm. When we left Montreux for New York, I think we knew that if a way could be found to re-engineer this author's approach to the world markets, we could count on Véra Nabokov, on her nerve and her resolve.

### **And you did find such a way?**

Eventually, yes. I said we had only one predecessor? There was another, as important in some ways as Véra, though neither Peter nor I had known him. That was Sanford Greenburger, Peter's predecessor as worldwide agent for Kafka. Later, we would leave the agency, Peter going on to a corporate law firm in New York, I to the task of establishing a separate agency to represent a number of clients, the Nabokov estate among them. But Peter knew the Kafka contracts, cold: book, film, opera, cantata. In my last years at the Greenburger agency, I read the Nabokov papers that came in from Montreux and what remained of Sanford Greenburger's correspondence files more or less side by side, companion volumes if you will.

The goal with Nabokov was to terminate and revert to the estate contractual ownership of both *Lolita* and as much other property as conceivably possible, in as many languages and territories as possible. If re-capture could be accomplished – here, Peter’s mastery of international copyright and contract law would prove crucial; so, too, scrutiny of royalty statements – fine; but to what end? What floated up from the Kafka files was Sanford Greenburger’s vision of the publisher who agrees, albeit under force of contract, to perform as steward of the author; to build an author’s market, feeding readers new works as they surface from the archives; responding to anniversaries, paying substantial royalties decade after decade even as the work slips, as by law it inevitably will, into the public domain.

That kind of publishing isn’t easy. It’s not easy for Kafka; arguably harder for Nabokov, author of one world famous novel and dozens of other works, published and unpublished, across virtually every category. But which category of letters, we might ask, is *Poems and Problems* One of a kind, I expect, like the author. And indeed, Rowohlt had hired, very early on, a German critic, Dieter Zimmer, to deal with Nabokov.

**Editor, even today, of the Nabokov *Gesammelte Werke*.**

Exactly. As soon as re-capture began, Rowohlt was in a position to announce the complete works, in German, “curated,” as the French say, by Dieter Zimmer.

That level of expertise couldn’t be duplicated, certainly at the time, but there were houses in territories other than Germany we could try. In New York, Vintage, the paperback arm of Knopf; in Italy, a house founded, as it happened, by an old friend of Ledig’s; once the Berlin Wall fell and China opened up, another dozen or so, all under contract to publish individual volumes of some twenty Nabokovs, typically *Speak, Memory* and all the fiction.

**Perhaps you can comment on how other matters changed, or didn’t, over the course of the years you represented the estate?**

Brian Boyd certainly happened. The relief among Nabokovians was almost palpable: Andrew Field, biographer as Judas, done in at last. One might say that Erica Jong happened. When *Lolita* “turned 30,” the *New York Times* asked Jong, then as now, a feminist icon, for a piece commemorating the release of the US edition. Jong’s celebration of the novel, and the author, may mark the beginning of the end of a feminist objection to *Lolita* that drove American academics – I think here of Alfred Appel – to apoplectic despair. Nevertheless, a decade later, mid-90s, not long after Véra’s death, Nabokov’s critical reputation assured, *Lolita* became, once again, a dirty book. We’d located a re-capture lever that gave Dmitri the rights to license a remake of Kubrick’s *Lolita*; said remake was duly produced, but the picture, a function of threats from the “family values” crowd, failed to find a distributor in the US of A. It aired here on cable television, then died.

**Were you surprised? Was Dmitri?**

Oddly enough, yes and no. I think we were all stunned, and, given the rise of a new brand of conservatism, realized that we shouldn’t have been.

**A necessary prerequisite for an agent in order to represent an author is obviously to have read the works. What about *to love them*?**

Alternatively, given the sheer volume of the unpublished work, was it necessary to read Russian? It wasn’t, not initially, partially because Véra, relieved of her role as agent, was fully available. Nabokov’s best Reader, the Reader who, when we addressed the utility of a one-volume collection of stories, remembered the unpublished Russian juvenilia in the archives.

Which is also to say that I have no Russian and later, when it came to dealing with Russia, yes, that was a disadvantage, 1999 marking something of a Before/After point.

**Nabokov’s centenary year.**

As every good Nabokovian was fully aware. There were several New York events in honor of the centenary, all very nice. Glenn Horowitz and Sarah Funke, rare book dealers who'd handled the sale of the Montreux archives to the New York Public Library, worked with the library to open an exhibition of the papers. Vintage joined with *The New Yorker* to host an evening of centenary speakers – Michael Scammell, Boyd, Schiff – at a public hall in Manhattan. That evening, one could walk up Fifth Avenue, past the library draped with flags proclaiming “Nabokov under Glass,” then around the corner to the public hall, filling with people. Scattered among them – I don't remember who pointed them out – aging members of New York's White Russian community, the very elderly with canes and walking sticks.

Not long after, Dmitri phoned to say there were new problems in Russia. In some sense, New York's White Russians would come to stand, not only for a language I couldn't pronounce, but for everything lost to most of us raised and educated during the Cold War, including, as I had to be instructed, the pre-Soviet brand of Russian that Nabokov used to attack the page.

**And Dmitri? The piracy of Nabokov's works in the late Soviet and early post-Soviet markets was wild. What was Dmitri's attitude at the time?**

Schizophrenic? That's probably accurate enough, though both that and “piracy” do need quotation marks.

When the Soviet ban against Nabokov as an émigré writer was lifted in the late 80s, there was an element of relief at Montreux, and certainly despair. Under Soviet copyright law, virtually all foreign works were deemed to be in the public domain, and a bowdlerized, nonetheless legal, Nabokov began to flood the Soviet market. Dmitri's “schizophrenia,” justifiable in my view, would persist: both an eagerness to see Nabokov in print in Russia and a suspicion of Soviet-reared Nabokovians, scholars and publishers alike, any of whom might be, potentially, a “pirate.” That extended, of course, to parties seeking access to Russian materials archived in the States. Most scholars, I expect, recall that Dmitri's permission to examine, and Xerox, was required.

**Eventually, VN did make a ritual comeback to his homeland. What did you do to effect that change?**

I? Nothing. Olga Voronina, an early director of the Nabokov museum in St. Petersburg and occasional sub-agent for Nabokov in Russia, alerted us to the so-called Putin declaration – Summer, 2004, if I remember correctly. Retroactive copyright protection was to be granted all foreign work; overnight as it were, Dmitri Nabokov became the sole owner of all Nabokov in Russia. Voronina, in the States for graduate school by then, remained crucial: she knew, probably as well as anyone, which of the Soviet-produced Nabokov texts were worthy of attention.

A year later, Russian publishers were subjected to an auction conducted by new sub-agents, headquartered in London and Moscow. They handed around a list of a complete Nabokov that reflected the wishes of what Andrew Field had referred to as the Nabokov “mafia”: Dmitri Nabokov; his lawyer, Peter Skolnik in this case; and Nabokov scholars, both those who predated Field and those who’d appeared in his wake.

Who among the Russian publishers would step forward to serve as Nabokov’s sacrificial lamb? Russian bookstalls still carried a bowdlerized Nabokov, estimated in the hundreds of thousands of copies. The court system was inadequate to deal with that, or with the possibility of the wilful pirate operating in a market still groping its way to self-regulation. In the States, Ellendea Proffer of Ardis had attempted an authorized Nabokov in Russian and supplied, happily, production copies of her editions; other such volumes had yet to be compiled. There was no acceptable Russian version of, for one, *Ada*. That said, a number of publishers, all former “pirates,” did step forward, immediately.

One might have waited; pulled the texts together, given the market time to adjust. But for Dmitri, time felt like it was running out. To his credit, he didn’t comment on the typos.

**Can you comment on Dmitri’s protracted inner debate regarding the fate of *The Original of Laura*? I am specifically refraining from any ethical considerations (which are beyond the point). From the purely business perspective, what is your**

**assessment of this move? In your view, have the initial commercial goals been achieved?**

A couple of caveats? The *Laura* move, as you say, was made in 2008; by mid-summer, I was no longer involved. Nor did I take a look at editions other than Knopf's US edition.

That said, the only protracted debate I was aware of involved the contents of the box that the staff in Montreux photographed, digitally, for Dmitri, then in Florida, and a circle of scholars. What percentage of *Laura* – fifty percent? seventy percent? – was actually on the cards; what explanatory notes might be required, by a guess at Nabokov's handwriting or the newspaper clipping that was tucked into the *Laura* box. Most compelling, probably unanswerable: what order should the cards take.

But one wants to back up a bit.

Several years before, Dmitri had agreed to Boyd and Voronina translating all that survived of his parents' correspondence, Nabokov's letters to Véra, publication of which was "suppressed" during her lifetime. Not long after, Dmitri drafted a transcription of the *Laura* cards and asked me to distribute those pages, together with a photocopy of the cards, to a number of Nabokov scholars, all of whom were aware of what was later mischaracterized in the press as the "Kafka question." The *Laura* question was very different. Could this estate, pointedly deferential to an author given to magisterial proclamations, trump what had been advertised as the man's instructions and publish this material? Though there was some division, and hesitation, that question was tabled in light of what I offered as the other question. If one does publish, how?

Dmitri phoned early in 2008. They're cards; just publish the cards. He mentioned the Internet.

My view? A facsimile edition of working manuscripts for Eliot's *The Waste Land* had been published, perhaps not with the publicity due "new news" but with all the respect owed the occasion. The volume carried the imprimatur of the Eliot estate, signalled by the inclusion of his widow's comments; and a longer view, authored by the poet and critic who'd marched Eliot through an early re-write of the work, Ezra Pound. I thought, almost immediately, of Boyd. *Laura* wasn't a manuscript for a work that went on to publication in final, celebrated form; this was an unfinished manuscript for a last

work, a lens through which we would look back, one way or another, to who the author was.

So, one could envision, at least in major markets like the States, an exact facsimile of the cards – loose, perhaps, like playing cards – packaged with what could appear in any market, however small: a “final” annotated text of *Laura*, wrapped with an introduction by Dmitri and an afterword by Boyd.

### **That’s not descriptive of the Knopf edition.**

No, it’s not, suggesting that Dmitri was persuaded to a different view of what we might call the contract between a literary estate and the author’s readers. No notes, no afterword, no reference to the news article in the box.

As to Dmitri’s decision – indeed, very radical decision – to proceed at all? In his introduction to the facsimile edition of *The Waste Land*, Pound offers a one-liner that goes to how we might best judge the matter of picking through archives. The more we know about Eliot, the better. Given his decision to proceed, Dmitri Nabokov was declaring, in my view, that he was reversing his father on the grounds that, contrary to what the author thought, or feared, the more we know about Nabokov, – his approach to structuring a novel, the extraordinary reach of his imagination – the better.

Having more or less announced publication, Dmitri, with Boyd, turned to the project that went on simultaneously with the preparation of the *Laura* transcript: a review of all the unpublished work in the archives. At my request, Voronina supplied a copy of the few letters she and Boyd had translated. Those pages were cobbled together as a so-called proposal, picked up a working title, “Letters to Véra,” and we went on submission on behalf of an aging proprietor of an estate who, approaching his own death, wished, in some sense, to clarify who his father was. He was now making available Nabokov’s last, unfinished novel, his letters to his wife, and a fuller body of the poetry and plays, the lectures, letters and butterfly papers.

### **May I ask what the response was?**

With respect to the initial projects? Re “Letters to Véra,” automatic nods. Re *Laura*, mixed, both among and within houses. I’d phoned Rowohlt early on. Ledig was long dead by then, but no one could imagine that Dieter Zimmer, some twenty volumes into his Nabokov *Gesammelte Werke*, was going to be entirely thrilled. But younger editors, and sub-agents and editors in territories where the Internet and E-book were creating a buzz – they all sat up.

**You’ve mentioned the Internet several times.**

I’m something of a Luddite, but even I was struck by the fact that popping the cards and the transcript on computer screens not only created an instant circle of scholars – initially, Stas Shvabrin, then in California; Gennady Barabtarlo at Missouri; Boyd, dipping in and out from his base in Auckland; and later, in Washington, D.C., Alice Birney, director of the American manuscript division at the Library of Congress. The Internet also allowed them to post for each other, and Dmitri in Florida, questions, observations, exegeses on references in the text. It was a colleague of mine, long acquainted with Dmitri, who pointed out that the Internet is interactive. One could switch cards around on the screen. Could you more or less duplicate what was becoming, in effect, an international colloquium on *Laura*, and on Nabokov? Of course.

Dmitri was bemused. Which is not to say that some publishers weren’t shocked by the notion of an international website for *Laura*, complete with the comments and questions of scholars and open to the common reader – come; play cards; find *Laura*; discuss Nabokov.

On the other hand, *Laura* may be as shocking as the idea of publishing *Laura*. So, too, for that matter, *Lolita*. In my view, notwithstanding any “family values” crowd, we don’t want to look forward to the day when Véra Nabokov’s husband’s most famous novel is not shocking.

***Yuri Leving*: Let me ask what you think drove Dmitri Nabokov to leave your firm for the Wylie Agency. Are there any principal differences between how authors’**

**interests and rights are handled in smaller, more personalized firms like yours and the larger agencies, like the Wylie Agency, with offices in London and New York?**

As to why, perhaps as complicated as Dmitri? That said, I didn't ask. What I can say is that the label the media attaches to Andrew Wylie, "the Jackal," is, in some respects, descriptive: his client list is lined with boldface names long associated with other agencies, of all sizes, both here and abroad. What "jackal" doesn't describe is what I take to be the conviction that Wylie voices as he approaches his target: the conviction that the target is, sadly enough, under-valued. But that's only a guess. Dmitri and I didn't speak until the turn of the year. There'd been email exchanges, but he phoned for an address he'd misplaced; we exchanged pleasantries of the season and never spoke again.

**A final question. What has been the role of Nabokov in your own biography as a reader, not as a broker of his works or advisor to the estate, but as a reader?**

Such a good question. Wherever you find him, quoted in biographies, critical stuff, epigrams, I think you know you have to stop and listen. And he does tend to ruin you as a reader of contemporary fiction. Further to which, I've pounced, gratefully, on recommendations of Nabokovians. Julian Barnes' *Flaubert's Parrot* comes to mind, and Colm Toibin's take on Henry James, *The Master*. Notice the theme: there's an affection for novels about novelists constructing novels. I'm instructed that such affection does not – can not! – extend to Coetzee. Too dark? Too anti-fiction? Possibly even anti-Nabokov? In which case, I think that's a mis-reading. I take Coetzee to be an excellent Nabokovian, reluctant perhaps, but still, a Nabokovian.

