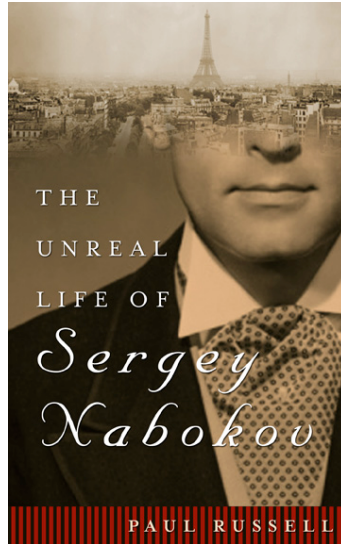


The Unreal Life of Sergey Nabokov: A Novel, by Paul Russell. Berkeley, CA: Cleis Press, 2011. ISBN 978-1573447195. 320 pp. USD16.95



Nabokov scholars, and general readers who admire VN's works and know something about his life, will appreciate and enjoy this novel... mostly. It is carefully researched, well written, and focuses upon a fascinating individual and topic. I would certainly recommend *The Unreal Life of Sergey Nabokov* to Nabokovians, but perhaps more for entertainment than for serious study.

The novel is, as the title suggests, an imagined autobiography of Vladimir's younger brother Sergey. The work begins and ends in Berlin, in 1943, as the narrator is about to be arrested by the Nazis. In the sad, real world, Nabokov's brother died early in 1945 of starvation, overwork and dysentery at the concentration camp of Neuengamme. The fictional narrative moves back and forth between a chronological recounting of Sergey's life beginning in 1900 and his final days in war-ravaged Germany in the early 1940s.

Towards the end of the work, Sergey reads *Mary* by his older brother, and finds therein what he understands to be distorted, "transmuted" references to himself. He comments, speaking surely for Paul Russell as well, "A tricky thing, this parsing of reality and invention" (255). Indeed. That very "tricky thing" is both a technique and a theme of much of VN's fiction. Thus, for example, the work "Mademoiselle O" was originally presented, and later anthologized, as a

fictive short story, but with few alterations was also published as part of Chapter 5 of Nabokov's "real" autobiography *Speak, Memory*. In the case of *The Unreal Life of Sergey Nabokov*, Russell has carefully taken the relatively few known facts of the reality of the life of his hero, and grafted onto that skeleton the flesh of imaginative fiction.

There are a few principal sources for uncovering those facts of the life of Sergey Nabokov. Brian Boyd's authoritative biography of Vladimir mentions Sergey frequently, and the outline of his life emerges reasonably whole, albeit scattered throughout the 600 plus pages of *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years*, usually a sentence or two at a time. Boyd is relatively non-judgmental about the relationship between the brothers, but does point out Vladimir's clear status as the favorite son, the coolness of their early contacts, and their increased closeness in the last decade or so of Sergey's life. He notes the discomfort and difficulty with which VN writes about his brother.

A second important biographical source, and the inspiration of Russell's novel, was the 2000 article in *Salon* (www.salon.com/2005/05.17/nabokov_5/), entitled "The Gay Nabokov", by Lev Grossman. This study is thoroughly researched, and Grossman has cited key and reliable sources and interviewed important individuals to shed new light on Sergey Nabokov's sad life. Grossman's article is more judgmental than Boyd's biography in its discussion of Vladimir's attitude towards his gay brother (as was earlier VN biographer Andrew Field). "Nabokov simply didn't like homosexuals", Grossman asserts. He cites several unflattering depictions of gay characters in VN's fiction, not entirely fairly: "egregiously stereotyped... vain, silly, usually effeminate... shallow, intellectually trivial and ineffectual... two-dimensional." This seems an unwarrantedly harsh judgment of, for example, Charles Kinbote or even Gaston Godin. Quite a contrary view, which Grossman cites, is that of Dmitri Nabokov, who declared on the Nabokov-listserv: "He had a sense of justice, a homosexual brother, and not one but two homosexual uncles [Konstantin Dmitrievich Nabokov and Vasily Ivanovich Rukavishnikov, "Uncle Ruka," see below]. Among the writers he admired were plenty of homosexuals, from Proust to Edmund White. He had a number of homosexual friends. I also know he would have been less than happy had his son inherited those genes." Finally, there is Nabokov's own description of Sergey and of his vexed relationship to him in the third edition of *Speak, Memory* (1966). He confesses

an unusual inarticulateness: “I find it inordinately hard to speak about my other brother.” He describes their early relationship gingerly but honestly. And he concludes, with a kind of uncharacteristic and almost apologetic meekness, “It is one of those lives that hopelessly claim a belated something – compassion, understanding, no matter what – which the mere recognition of such a want can neither replace nor redeem.” Russell’s novel includes virtually all the material from all of these sources, and does so with strict accuracy.

Most of the imagined material which fills in the often gaping blanks in the biography of Sergey Nabokov does not do injustice to what we actually know of the real person. Occasionally, however, Russell seems to stretch credulity somewhat, to produce more vivid fiction. Thus, for example, we know that Sergey was brave and self-sacrificial in the face of Nazi brutality: he was openly and dangerously critical of National Socialism. Still, it seems far-fetched to imagine him proclaiming, loud enough for all around him to hear clearly, at his post in the Nazi Propaganda Ministry where he worked, in the midst of the British air attacks on Berlin, that “England is the most civilized country in the world,” as Russell has him doing.

There are several moments in Russell’s novel where he takes his clue from the known facts of the Nabokov family, but fills out a sketchy historical picture with believable invention. Thus, for example, we know that Sergey’s homosexuality became a matter of open knowledge when Vladimir discovered some indiscrete writings of his brother and showed them to their current tutor, who in turn presented them to their father, V. D. Nabokov (Boyd, 106). In the novel, Russell makes a guess as to the nature of those revealing writings:

“I am fiercely in love with Oleg’s soul,” Father read aloud in a scornful voice. *“How I love its harmonious proportions, the joy it has in living. My blood throbs, I melt like a schoolgirl, and he knows this and I have become repulsive to him and he does not conceal his disgust. Oh, this is just as fruitless as falling in love with the moon!”*

Father put down the diary. “Remarkably silly stuff, wouldn’t you agree?” He said.

It was my brother who had discovered my furtive pages—quite by accident. Having read my inflamed words, he showed the diary to our tutor, who immediately conveyed it to Father (44).

On the other hand, there are some other aspects of the novel which seem to lessen the creative credibility of the work, to introduce weaknesses into the self-contained fictional universe which characterize the best novels. (This is not just a matter of mixing fact and fiction; Vladimir Nabokov's "Mademoiselle O", noted above, moves seamlessly from descriptions of the "real" Cecile Miauton to the beautifully imagined but wholly fictive scene of her midwinter arrival at the Nabokov country estate.) Russell's depiction of Parisian artistic culture and Sergey's place in that culture between the wars seems rather less successful. True, this was an era of experiment in the arts and tolerance in the *monde* of some of the most venturesome of the artists. But *The Unreal Life of Sergey Nabokov* seems to suggest that: a) many of the most innovative and interesting artists spent an inordinate amount of their time together, and b) Sergey Nabokov knew well (in some cases, VERY well) an astonishing assortment of Parisian artists and patrons of the '20s and '30s. Thus, at one party given by (the wealthy expatriate painter) Gerald Murphy and his wife Sara, Sergey is depicted as interacting with: Jean Cocteau; Serge Diaghilev; Boris Kochno (dancer, poet, Diaghilev's lover); prima ballerina Vera Nemchinova; conductor Ernest Ansermet; Serge Lifar (a leading Russian dancer); Winnaretta Singer, heir to the Singer Sewing Machine fortune; Polish painter Misia Sert; Bronislava Nijinska (sister of the dancer); Pablo Picasso and his first wife dancer Olga Khokhlova; Igor Stravinsky (whose dance cantata Les Noces the party celebrated); Russian artist Natalia Goncharova; costumer and famed host Etienne de Beaumont; and Mr and Mrs Cole Porter. It is not impossible that such a gathering took place, but it is difficult to imagine a conversation such as:

"I believe you are down there," Stravinsky told him, gesturing in my direction.

"Surely there's a mistake," Cocteau appealed to Mrs Murphy, who was explaining to Picasso ...

Later, predictably, Sergey also becomes a regular in the salon of Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas. Altogether, to me this seems like novelistic name dropping.

Like many of us who read VN's prose, and try to write about it, Russell is not immune from the temptation to imitate the master. Thus, for example, the "Acknowledgments" which follow the novel echo Nabokov's "Afterword" to *Lolita*: "The first throb of this novel was provoked by..." (379). Similarly, there are a few scenes in Russell's work which seem to suggest fictional scenes from Nabokov's novels rather than any particular reconstruction of the life of Sergey. In a vision which seems lifted straight out of *Pale Fire*, for instance, we meet a boy "wearing nothing but a loincloth, and the remains of a laurel wreath perched on his head" (232). Most Nabokovians will find such references familiar and entertaining.

Any work which touches upon issues of homosexuality and the Nabokov family will need to include discussion of Vasily Ivanovich Rukavishnikov, Vladimir's Uncle Ruka. Brian Boyd ascribes to the strained relationship between the boy and his uncle some of the adult VN's attitudes towards gay men, as well as several literary descriptions of inappropriate sexual behaviors in the novels. In *Speak, Memory*, Vladimir describes himself as "embarrassed by my uncle" when the family and servants observe him perching VN on his knee and fondling and crooning "fancy endearments" to him. In *The Unreal Life of Sergey Nabokov*, that embarrassment is presented as considerably more hostile: Volodya imitates Ruka's mincing gait cruelly (18), and responds to his affectionate gestures by freezing rigidly (22), struggling to escape, and fleeing the house. Conversely, Russell portrays Sergey as adoring his uncle Ruka, "a delightful exotic," "tremendously elegant;" "for two happy months our uncle would be in our midst, shedding wonder and light" (18). Alas, just as Vladimir spurns his uncle's clumsy advances and is rewarded by inheriting his estate, Sergey who worships Ruka, receives only indifferent coolness from him: "For an adoring nephew's stutter, however, he had no patience. My very presence seemed to annoy him, which only reinforced my desire to make him like me..." (20).

Although *The Unreal Life of Sergey Nabokov* is far from pornographic, at times its more erotic scenes seem akin to the tone of popular romance novels:

Then Hansel the swing boy's lips are pressed to mine, his hands roaming restlessly, grabbing, caressing, tugging, all of which I meet in full... How my heart goes out to him,

this Abyssinian in all but name whose very doubtful future I take gratefully in my traitorous mouth. As I receive his gift I am as certain as I can be that I shall never on this earth taste love again (216-17).

Or, in an earlier scene, a sexual encounter with Cocteau:

Nearby shrubberies abetted us.

“Moderately endowed,” Cocteau appraised. “Generally I prefer the larger, but an artist works with whatever he has at his disposal. At least it’s eager enough. Yes, it’s marvelously responsive, almost too much so. Oh dear! Are we done already? (196-197)

What does Russell make of the character of his protagonist’s older brother, our Vladimir Nabokov? It is worth noting that, at least from the safe distance of America a couple of decades after Sergey’s death, Vladimir was fairly hard on himself when describing this relationship. Boyd reports that VN “racked himself with thoughts of insufficient fraternal affection, a long story of unconcern, casual taunts, habitual dismissal: ‘there was not even any friendship between us and... it is with a strange feeling that I realize I could describe my whole youth in detail without recalling him once’” (70). Russell seems to take VN at his word regarding his treatment of Sergey, and in his fictional treatment of that fraternal relationship, Vladimir is depicted as insensitive, selfishly preoccupied, aloof, and needlessly cruel. For example, upon receiving news of the Tsar’s bravery, “Volodya remained indifferent. ‘What do these ridiculous puppets matter? Here’s the real news of the day,’ he said, proceeding to recite to us a poem he had composed...” (85). When Sergey pleads for a chance to speak with Volodya in Paris in 1932, “He studied me coolly. ‘My schedule’s very crowded,’ he told me. ‘I leave tomorrow afternoon for Berlin.’ He coughed, scratched his forehead distractedly, took a deep reluctant breath and said, ‘Still, I will meet you for lunch. On one condition. You must pay’” (322). In their last years together as the war is sweeping over Europe, Russell suggests a reconciliation between the brothers. (Boyd too relates that after a public reading by Sirin, “Vladimir and Sergey talked together earnestly, calmly, even warmly. That warmth – never present between them until now, even in childhood –

would endure when they met in the future (397)). There can be little doubt that the actual relationship between Vladimir and Sergey Nabokov was an uneasy, sometimes confused, and often unpleasant one. Russell's fictional version of that relationship seems to play up the imperious and insensitive side of VN's youthful personality, to emphasize Sergey's innocence and vulnerability. This is not a picture which is particularly attractive to Nabokovians, but it is clearly not without some basis in biographical fact.

Two rather vexing issues emerge in reading *The Unreal Life of Sergey Nabokov*, especially for readers who come to this novel as devotees of the writing of Vladimir Nabokov. First, Russell's work raises some uncomfortable questions of topical relativism. Is it fair or appropriate to judge the attitudes of Vladimir Vladimirovich Nabokov and his father Vladimir Dmitrievich and their contemporaries towards Sergey and his homosexuality (and that of the two uncles) from the perspective of the twenty-first century? Measured against a progressive, contemporary template, most of the Nabokovs behaved without much understanding and with much harshness to Vladimir's gay brother. And it is from that perspective, and by that template, that Russell presents his material. Paul Russell is a twenty-first century novelist, writing for a twenty-first century audience about issues which are still profoundly relevant today. He is creating a fictional world of his imagining, and so certainly can choose to present that imagined cosmos with whatever themes and perspectives he wishes. But at the same time, it seems somewhat askew to draw so heavily upon biographical facts of the first half of the twentieth century, as viewed through (and judged by) the lens of the values of today's world. On the one hand, human insensitivity to fellow humans is a timeless weakness, and we may have the right, indeed an imperative, to condemn it whenever or wherever it occurs. But on the other, are we not being insensitive ourselves to fail to recognize and comprehend the context of eras different than our own? By today's standards, Vladimir Nabokov was clearly and sharply homophobic; it is not so clear that by the standards of the 1940s, '50s or '60s his attitude towards his gay brother would have seemed intolerant to most of his contemporaries.

A second interesting conundrum raised by this novel concerns the perspective of at least this reader, and I presume many others. I read *The Unreal Life of Sergey Nabokov* mostly because I am interested in Vladimir Nabokov. More bluntly, I am interested in Sergey Nabokov

because he is the brother of Vladimir Nabokov. But am I not casting myself in a rather bizarre role as a kind of judgmental divinity when I declare that the life, real or unreal, of one of the greatest English prose stylist of twentieth century letters is more important or interesting than that of an awkward, stuttering, misunderstood dandy who died an honorable and even heroic death at the hands of that century's most brutal murderers?

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