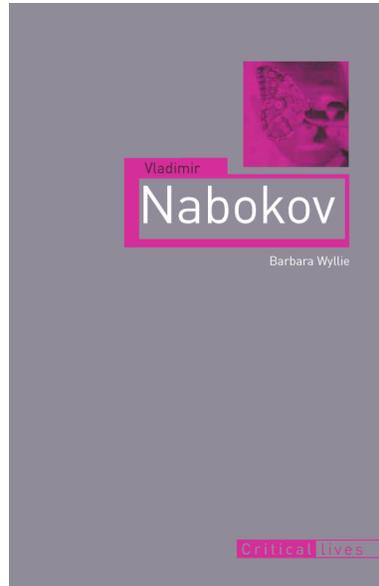


Vladimir Nabokov, by Barbara Wyllie. London: Reaktion Books, 2010; ISBN 978-1-86189-660-5, 220pp. Bibliography.



Barbara Wyllie's contribution to Reaktion Books' Critical Lives series provides an approachable and engaging basic introduction to Nabokov's life and work. This series comprises critical biographies of cultural figures, contextualizing discussion of their artistic output within an exploration of their personal life; Nabokov's career-long exploration of themes such as memory and recollection, authorship/creation of the self and human duality/multiplicity make him a particularly intriguing subject for this series.

The text follows a historically linear structure and is divided into chapters punctuated by the major time periods in Nabokov's life: his privileged childhood and youth in Russia, abruptly ended by the Revolution; his years spent living in Germany and France, as his literary career established and his family life settled; his journey to America, where *Lolita* catapulted him into fame; and his final years spent in Switzerland.

The first chapter describes Nabokov's childhood and early youth, identifying his early literary attempts in poems and stories, and ends in the mid-1920s, with the newly-married author resident in Berlin, devoting himself seriously to writing and 'exploring the consequences for key themes of memory, [and] mortality' (p. 43), themes that would

recur throughout his career and that are explored throughout Wyllie's text in their many forms and appearances.

From Chapter 2 onwards, the evolution of his literary work is overlaid onto the personal trajectory of his life, with Wyllie's chapter titles indicating both the close alliance between his personal development and his artistic output, and segmenting his life in pieces of writing as much as personal benchmarks; for instance, Chapter 3, 'Sirin, Part Two: *Glory to The Gift*', or Chapter 5, 'Becoming Vladimir Nabokov: *Bend Sinister to Lolita*'. This chapter heading is particularly interesting as it suggests the author's becoming through the literature, that his artistic development and output were responsible for the maturing and growth – the very creation – of the individual, problematizing separation between artist and art. The epigraph to Chapter 2 embraces this intertwining of artist and art, and sets the tone for much of the book; it is Nabokov's claim that 'the best part of a writer's biography is not the record of his adventures but the story of his style' (p. 44).

The book considers Nabokov's works in historical order, exploring themes that reappear in similar or altered ways, and considering the thematic and stylistic interrelationships between texts and how this interplay develops over the course of his career. For instance, following chess as a 'structural and thematic device' (p. 55) from the short story 'Christmas' into *The Defense*, and the 'first little throb of Lolita' (p. 105) represented by the novella *The Enchanter*.

Because so short and wide-ranging, the book occasionally does not allow for extended analysis or pursuance of themes, and because of the complexities of Nabokov's writing, this introductory approach does not always offer much nuance. For example, fleshing out an idea such as 'throughout Nabokov's writing, windows offer the prospect of access to "other" worlds, whilst the vertiginous pull of gravity is a powerful force to which many of his protagonists are drawn' (p. 62) might lend it more specificity.

Nabokov's well-known desire to control the mode of delivery and release of his writing is acknowledged in this work, as is his insistence that his writing represented a domain in which he was the sole authority. Wyllie refers back to Nabokov's own articles, interviews and memoirs, supporting her discussion of his fiction through his published accounts of

his life. Examples include the claim that *Pnin*'s seven chapters mimic "the colored spiral in a small ball of glass" – which Nabokov used to describe his life' (p. 125) in *Speak, Memory*; the notion that Cincinnatus, at the end of *Invitation to a Beheading*, might 'suddenly vanish' into 'some new depth of ether' being compared to Nabokov's own description of 'leakings and drafts' in his own consciousness (p. 83); and Nabokov's personal relationships being paralleled to relationships and characters within *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (p. 102): throughout the text Wyllie shows how elements of Nabokov's own life and experiences can be 'mapped throughout his fiction like 'a certain intricate watermark whose unique design becomes visible when the lamp of art is made to shine through life's foolscap'" – again reinforcing the idea with direct textual support from *Speak, Memory* (p. 96).

This approach simultaneously allows Nabokov to be the authority on the text – thus, in a sense, on himself – and yet resists his complete control over his texts and characters by decontextualizing quotations and applying them elsewhere. In *Strong Opinions* Nabokov claimed that his characters were his galley slaves, and was scornful of the idea that a book should have any source of control or power other than its author; Wyllie's text draws links between his life and work, suggesting inspiration and thematic explorations he may not have acknowledged, while reinforcing his own previously quoted notion that the biography of the art becomes a record of the artist.

Because the book draws so heavily on Nabokov's own words, primarily from *Speak, Memory* and *Strong Opinions*, the biography seems to use its subject as its authority; for an author as enamored with linguistic games and trickery as Nabokov, and with so few qualms about playing with his reader, this is an interesting choice. Wyllie draws on many other sources, but the two titles above are very heavily referenced, particularly in discussing Nabokov's childhood using his memoir.

This simultaneous adherence and challenge to Nabokov's control over his work is present in the discussion of *The Original of Laura*, his unfinished last novel. Wyllie discusses Vera and Dmitri Nabokov's decision to release what existed of the text despite Nabokov's express instructions to destroy it following his death. At the time of his death, the 'book' existed only as a collection of index cards outlining some brief scenes and a general narrative structure – exactly the kind of rough draft he was so disdainful of other

writers sharing with the world, comparing the practice to ‘passing around samples of one’s sputum’ (p. 184).

As an introduction to Nabokov and his writing, this text is very useful. His books are given more or less equal discussion space, and the textual analysis of each piece provides a launching pad for more extensive exploration. The book itself is highly enjoyable to read; the layout and format are clear and neat, and Wyllie’s style is direct and engaging. The inclusion of pictures is a welcome addition, providing not only photographs of the author and his family (I particularly enjoyed the image of Vera and Nabokov reclining by the pool in Montreux, Vera sporting a pair of plastic heart-shaped sunglasses almost identical to the ones Sue Lyon wears in the promotional poster for Kubrick’s film version of *Lolita*) but also a still from Kubrick’s film, book covers and city scenes from Germany and Russia, enhancing descriptions in the text.

The book fits very neatly into the series it belongs to, and would serve well as a touchstone for more extensive Nabokov research – referencing is clear and allows readers to follow Wyllie’s sources and pursue at greater length the ideas she briefly introduces here. The addition of an index might have made the book a more convenient research tool.

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