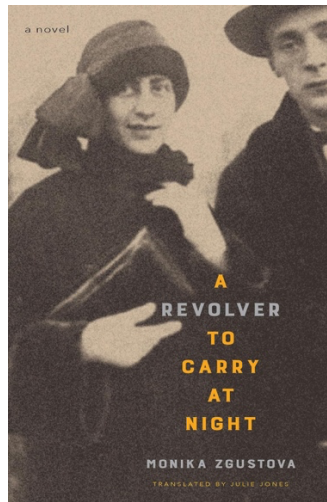


Zgustová Monika. *A Revolver to Carry at Night: A Novel.* Translated by Julie Jones. New York: Other Press, 2024.



Monika Zgustová's *A Revolver to Carry at Night* (*Un revólver para salir de noche*) is an attempt to reconstruct the interior world of Véra Nabokov, the wife and literary guardian of Vladimir Nabokov. The novel, blending fiction and biography, seeks to unravel the dynamics of a complex marriage, casting new light on the woman behind one of the twentieth century's most celebrated writers. Zgustová, an experienced literary biographer, presents the story in four interconnected parts, shifting perspectives and timeframes to offer a fragmented but deeply evocative meditation on love, loyalty, betrayal, and literary legacy.

At the heart of the novel is the long-speculated affair between Nabokov and Irina Guadanini, a romance that Véra carefully managed and ultimately extinguished. Zgustová juxtaposes Irina's genuine tenderness with Véra's calculated pragmatism, emphasizing the stark contrast between Nabokov's two great loves. The tension in the novel arises not from the affair itself but from the power dynamics between Véra and Vladimir, which are explored with unflinching honesty. Zgustová's portrayal of Véra is neither sentimental nor forgiving; instead, she is depicted as fiercely intelligent, emotionally distant, and obsessively committed to protecting her husband's literary career at all costs.

The novel's first section, *The Yellow Butterfly*, is set in Montreux in 1977, in the final months of Nabokov's life. Here, the writer is depicted as frail and bedridden, haunted by his past.

His mind wanders between key moments of his life: meeting Véra for the first time, the discovery of his literary vocation, his tumultuous exile, and, most controversially, a revelation about his childhood abuse at the hands of his uncle. Zgustová takes the provocative stance that *Lolita* was in part an attempt to process Nabokov's trauma, a claim that remains speculative but adds psychological depth to his character. The novel also revisits Nabokov's request for Véra to burn *The Original of Laura*, a wish she famously ignored. The fragmented, nonlinear structure of this section effectively mirrors Nabokov's failing consciousness, though at times the transitions between memories are abrupt, momentarily disorienting the reader.

The second section, *Irina on the Beach*, transports the reader to Cannes in 1937, recounting Nabokov's last meeting with Irina before severing ties permanently. Told from her perspective, this section presents Irina as a deeply sensitive and vulnerable figure, forever marked by the loss of her great love. Zgustová's writing is at its most lyrical here, capturing the quiet devastation of an unresolved romance. The chapter underscores Nabokov's cold decisiveness in ending the affair, as well as Irina's quiet resignation to a fate that was never truly hers to control.

The third section, *Nocturne*, shifts to New York and Boston in 1964 and focuses on Véra's emotional and intellectual inner life. This is perhaps the most compelling part of the novel, offering an unsparing portrait of a woman who was both indispensable to Nabokov's success and a controlling force in his life. Zgustová portrays Véra as not only the guardian of his manuscripts but the architect of his public image, filtering his correspondence, managing his finances, and eliminating perceived threats to his reputation. The novel suggests that Véra was instrumental in steering Nabokov's transition from Russian to English, pushing him to embrace the novel form, and even helping shape his editorial choices. In doing so, *A Revolver to Carry at Night* challenges the romanticized notion of Véra as a devoted wife, instead portraying her as a gatekeeper who shaped Nabokov's literary trajectory as much as he did. This section also explores her attitude toward her husband's many flirtations, revealing a woman who maintained absolute control over the boundaries of their marriage while tolerating the indiscretions she deemed unimportant.

The final section, *The Revolver*, is set in Montreux in 1990, where an aging Véra reflects on her life's work: preserving Nabokov's legacy. The novel implies that she actively curated history, destroying letters, cutting ties with old acquaintances, and ensuring that the world saw Nabokov only through the image she meticulously constructed. It is in this chapter that the book's

title takes on its full weight. The revolver, carried by Véra for decades, is both a symbol of protection and control—of her husband, his works, and, by extension, her own place in history.

Zgustová's novel succeeds in offering an alternative view of the Nabokovs' marriage, one that is devoid of sentimentality but rich in psychological nuance. She does not vilify Véra, nor does she seek to exonerate her; rather, she presents her as a woman who understood power—how to wield it, how to sustain it, and, ultimately, how to outlive it. The novel raises provocative questions: Did Nabokov remain with Véra out of love or necessity? Would his career have flourished without her intervention? And was his legacy his own, or the product of a careful partnership in which Véra's influence was as significant as his own genius?

However, the novel is not without its shortcomings. Its blending of fact and fiction occasionally blurs the line between documented history and speculation, making it difficult to discern where biography ends and invention begins. While this approach lends the book a dreamlike quality, it also raises ethical questions about the liberties taken with real historical figures. Additionally, while Zgustová's portrayal of Véra is compelling, it is at times one-dimensional; she is presented as a woman of formidable intellect but little warmth, a characterization that, while dramatic, may not fully encapsulate the complexities of her character.

The translation by Julie Jones is fluid and natural, successfully capturing Zgustová's introspective tone. While some liberties are taken with phrasing, the overall effect is one of readability and elegance.

A Revolver to Carry at Night is a compelling, if occasionally speculative, meditation on the nature of power, devotion, and artistic legacy. By shifting the focus from Vladimir to Véra, Zgustová challenges the traditional narrative of literary genius, arguing that great art is often the product of complex relationships rather than solitary brilliance. Though some readers may take issue with its fictionalized elements, the novel remains a fascinating exploration of a marriage that was as much a creative partnership as it was a personal one.

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