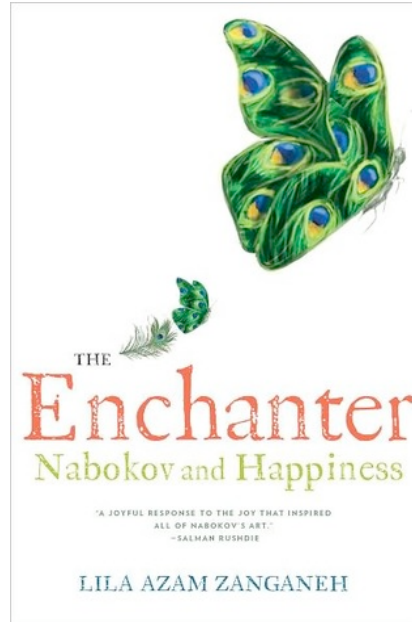


***The Enchanter: Nabokov and Happiness*, by Lila Azam Zanganeh. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2011; ISBN 978-1846143670, 256 pp.**



T*he Enchanter: Nabokov and Happiness* is, without a doubt, a strange book – it is neither literary criticism nor biography, in *The Guardian*'s opinion; *The Boston Globe* remarked simply that the book is “suitably eccentric”; and the *Financial Times* called it a “literary platypus”. The title brings to mind self-help books. Labelling it literary criticism is perhaps simply the least-bad option, although “biography” and “creative non-fiction” seem appropriate to a similar degree.

We are given hardly any biographical information regarding the author – simply her name, Lila Azam Zanganeh, that she moved to the United States twenty years after being born in Paris, and that this is her first book. There are reasons for this obscurity – Zanganeh, like Nabokov, believed that biographical information should have little-to-no bearing on the reading of the work; that “a writer’s true biography should amount to no more than the story of his style” (95).

This emphasis on style, to the exclusion of much else, runs throughout the work; although we do learn more about Zanganeh – that she was born just ten months before Nabokov’s death;

and that she develops a close friendship with Dimitri, Nabokov's son.ⁱ Formally, the book itself is best described as whimsical; illustrated beautifully, with maps, calligrams, and old family photos. As with Nabokov's autobiography, *Speak, Memory*, the first thing that confronts the reader is a map – in this case, of a butterfly-shaped island, 'Happiness,' leading the reader through the chapters. Underneath is an inscription: "MAY FOLLOW THE ITINERARY OR CHOOSE YOUR OWN". Quotes are interspersed with prose; the text changes size mid-paragraph to emphasize particular points. The book revels in its strangeness.

The Enchanter proper begins with a Foreword entitled – helpfully, for the purpose of a review – "why read this or any other books?" Zanganeh argues that we read books – and should read Nabokov's books in particular – to "reenchant" the world. This rather airy notion is grounded in Nabokov's conception of "the creative reader" – a "fellow dreamer, observing the minute detail of the world" ('Foreword'). For Zanganeh, at the core of Nabokov's best novels is "just this: a call to-whom-it-may-concern to capture photon after photon of fleeting life" (176). Happiness, for Zanganeh, is found in Nabokov's "singular way of seeing, marveling, grasping, in other words, of netting the light particles tingling around us;" in his affirmation that "things quiver with lambent beauty," even in "darkness or demise" ('Foreword'). To put it crudely, one finds happiness in the details. To call Nabokov "the great writer of happiness" does not mean that he writes happy stories, far from it – for Zanganeh, his work is not simply "happy"; nor is it a manual to achieve happiness. Reading Nabokov is an *experience in* happiness. As such, *The Enchanter* is perhaps best described as a celebration (and exploration) of Nabokov's meticulous style, taking place within an informal biography. And it appears that Zanganeh is so besotted with this style that she cannot help but ape it. Held up explicitly against Nabokov's own, her writing – beautiful though it may be – runs the risk of doing little but annoying those already acquainted with Nabokov's style, and confusing those who are not.

Zanganeh goes about her project in fifteen, brief and very distinct chapters.ⁱⁱ As suggested by the instructions on the opening page, there is nothing but convention demanding one begin

ⁱ Making her thirty-four at the time of publication.

ⁱⁱ Again mimicking the structure of *Speak, Memory*.

from the first page – each chapter is self-contained; they are discretely linked by motifs running through the work. The first three chapters are largely biographic, recounting Nabokov’s death, childhood and adolescent love, whilst Zanganeh simultaneously explores her own first encounter with Nabokov. The biographic information is not provided as an interpretive tool. Zanganeh says that she does “not believe VN’s novels are the transcripts of his past”, although the past undoubtedly informed them (40). As it progresses, the work gradually becomes less and less biographic. The next series of chapters document certain experiences of happiness “the reader” (Zanganeh) has while reading “the writer” (Nabokov). Chapter 4, ‘A Burst of Happiness: (Where the writer talks about the only real thing in the world and the reader becomes quite talkative)’, is only two pages long; Zanganeh takes quotes from Nabokov regarding consciousness and floridly expands upon them. In Chapter 6, Zanganeh recounts a conversation with Dimitri, who explains to her Nabokov’s “three great losses” (his boyhood, his father and the Russian language; 69-71). The chapter leaves one wanting to hear more from Dimitri – but the book does not cooperate. Chapter 7 takes another step away from biography, and attempts to develop a theory of “Nabokovian Time”, which, “to be scientifically exact”, is (love + memory)/consciousness (87). Chapter 9 is a close reading of two unassuming passages from *Lolita* and *Ada*. Chapter 10, ‘April Happiness in Arizona’, is an imagined interview with Nabokov, where ‘the reader’ asks ‘the writer’ questions such as: “What is your favourite state?” and “What irritates you the most about America?” It is unclear whether “the writer’s” responses to these questions are gleaned by Zanganeh from other works, from Dimitri, or are simply made up. For Zanganeh, the importance of the reality of biographic information is a non-issue; “we do not know, and do not care” what *actually* occurred (97). This gives her a wide berth to mix conjecture, fact and fantasy. Fair enough, but *caveat lector*. The final chapters are the most varied: Chapter 12 is a metafictional account of the reader reading *The Enchanter*; Chapter 13, a glossary of words extracted from Nabokov’s works “that dazzle and delight, scintillate and sparkle like stars on a see-through night,” words that kindle Zanganeh’s curiosity (161). The work ends with “Particles of Light,” which makes beautiful use of different descriptions of light (“the medium of choice for netting the marvel of being-in-the-world”) in recounting a dream of meeting Nabokov (187).

Although there is nothing quite like this book, it is difficult to recommend *The Enchanter*. As an academic monograph, it does not appear to provide much – if any – new information to Nabokov scholars; nor does it offer particularly profound insight into Nabokov’s life and works; for someone seeking “strictly the facts”, Zanganeh’s style seems just as likely to infuriate as it is to enchant. As a piece of popular literary criticism, one cannot help but think *most* readers would be better served by actually cracking open one of Nabokov’s novels or *Speak, Memory*. But this is certainly not to say that this is a bad book. What it is, is literature.

Zanganeh attempts to twist Nabokov’s manner of viewing and describing the world back on himself. Whether or not this is useful, or can even be accomplished, is beside the point. Like Nabokov’s novels, the book’s greatest strength lies in the minute details of the prose – it is an absolute pleasure to read; a difficult thing to communicate in a review. Although *The Enchanter* is not one of the more *useful* works on Nabokov, it may well be one of the most beautiful. This small book may prompt the reader to look at Nabokov’s works – and perhaps literature in general – in a new light; it affirms its axiom: it re-enchants.

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