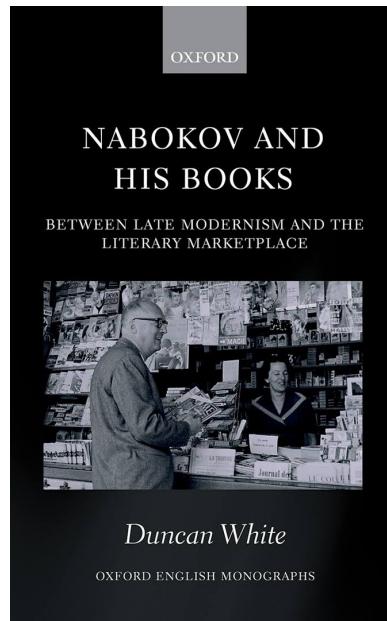


Duncan White. *Nabokov and his Books: Between Late Modernism and the Literary Marketplace*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017; ISBN 9780198737629. 256 pp.



Duncan White proposes at the outset of *Nabokov and his Books* to discuss Vladimir Nabokov's late modernist aesthetics and literary production as it was influenced (and possibly impacted) by the American literary market. Until the publication of *Lolita*, Nabokov had not been writing for a mass readership, but rather for a small Russian émigré community which understood the cultural contexts and literary allusions populating his works. With his arrival to America, White asserts, Nabokov entered a rapidly changing literary market that seemed to be primed for a work like *Lolita*. The immense success of this novel not only catapulted him to literary stardom, but allowed Nabokov to become increasingly mercantile in his dealings with publishers. As a result of this success and his manipulation of the marketplace, Nabokov was able to publish similarly provocative new works and rescue his earlier Russian publications from obscurity.

Instead of a chronological approach, expected after White begins with the success of *Lolita* and follows with a discussion of how this success emboldened Nabokov to actively manage his own cultural capital, White organizes chapters thematically: *Introduction*, *Contexts*,

Inspiration, Reading, Publication, and Legacy. In so doing, White lingers quite a while over the issue of literary classifications (modernism, late modernism, postmodernism) in order to accentuate Nabokov's uncomfortable status as a late modernist. It is clear that much scholarly energy has been directed at this cataloging process and Nabokov highlights certain challenges to this classification system. Yet, White does not take a similarly exhaustive approach with the economics of culture. Although he quickly glosses the work of Pierre Bourdieu and Pascale Casanova (pp. 28; 30-31), White's discussion of market forces anticipates prior theoretical knowledge. For example, Bourdieu's terminology (consecration; p. 37) is introduced without a sufficient explanation of the process, by which cultural merchants testify to the value of the literary work, collude with one another to increase its value and aid in the conversion of symbolic capital into actual money. It is in the last two chapters that the emphasis shifts from Nabokov's late modernist aesthetics to Nabokov's dealings with the literary market. This thematic approach challenges the reader to move fluidly in time to follow White's argument and shifting focus.

In the chapter *Inspiration*, White reasons that upon arrival to America, Nabokov adhered to aesthetic autonomy (a late modernist quality) as reflected in book reviews and lectures of the period. White then provides an extended discourse on the philosophical influences and underpinnings of Nabokov's artistic and personal worldview. Caught between Symbolism's "art-for-art's-sake" and the materialism of the Russian revolution, Nabokov sought a "third way" of understanding aesthetic creativity. In so doing, he came to believe that the writer made perfect something that already exists. For White, this seems to further demonstrate Nabokov's designation as a late modernist. White then makes a less convincing argument that for Nabokov books occupied an "iconic space" ("a locus of aesthetic communion as the author's and reader's relations are elevated [...] beyond materialist determinations of the world", p. 94) that Nabokov utilized as a strategy for the commodification of literature.

At the beginning of the chapter *Reading*, White promises to elucidate how Nabokov asserted his authorial autonomy in the marketplace, but actually concentrates mainly on the author's theory of re-reading. There is some discussion of Nabokov's efforts to publish his works in translation to generate income, as Germany was becoming politically unstable. Towards the end of this chapter, White focuses on *Lolita* and the American literary market, which lasts only

three pages, followed by much longer synopses of *Pale Fire* and *Ada*. The chapter *Publication* touches briefly on several important issues, such as how Nabokov attempted to dictate the terms of his contracts, to control the art direction of his book covers, to provide forewords to his books to ensure their proper reading and to approve (or to disapprove) of the blurbs and other marketing texts used to sell his books. The chapter *Legacy* examines Nabokov's self-fashioning through interviews and the ways in which he attempted to present his work as a unified *oeuvre*. White recounts how Nabokov would validate (or not) literary critics writing about his life and works – even reading and correcting some of these critics' manuscripts. Fittingly, White explores the posthumous publications of *The Original of Laura* as a proof that, for all of Nabokov's best efforts to contain and control his literary reputation, he was ultimately betrayed by his own success – that all of these years later, there would be a market for his unfinished novel on index cards.

Overall, White provides an interesting examination of Nabokov and his literary works within a fresh context. For readers unaccustomed to viewing Nabokov as a late modernist who shaped and was shaped by the success of *Lolita*, so much so that it allowed him significant control over publishers, this is a fine introduction to the topic. For those who are familiar with this topic already, the book might promise more than it actually delivers. In either case, White should be commended for placing Nabokov in a larger socio-cultural context that confronts the external pressures and influences on the author. In fact, the most compelling aspects of White's approach are the discussions of the post-War American literary market, the hierarchy of the various paperback editions and the evolution of literary criticism in relation to these changes towards a mass readership. After all, no matter how much Nabokov attempted to manage the market, some forces were simply beyond even his control.

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