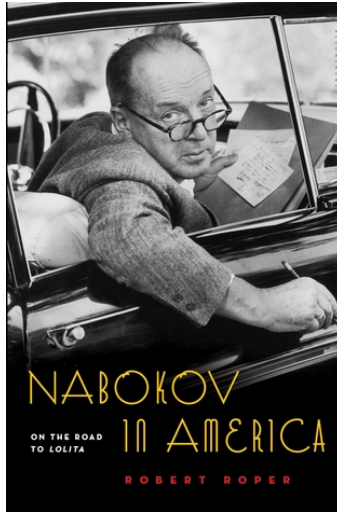


Nabokov in America: On the Road to Lolita, by Robert Roper. New York: Bloomsbury, 2015; ISBN 9780802743633. Index. Bibliography. Photo credits. Notes. 354 pp.



This book explores the ups and downs of the literary giant’s twenty-odd years in America. One of some thirty thousand French refugees arriving in 1940, Nabokov’s rise to fame is a tale of success and hope, though not without its own obstacles. In researching his subject, Roper went where Nabokov went and saw what Nabokov saw, though he admits that it was more profitable to reread the author’s works – the clues and secrets found within them were equally, if not more, telling than following in his footsteps (p. 7) – providing an intimate look at the inner workings of Nabokov’s America. The resulting product is a biography and review of his works rolled into one, a hybrid of sorts, tracing his life and career. Most importantly, for both Roper’s and Nabokov’s readers, it reveals the process of how Nabokov’s masterpieces came to be.

Roper’s work follows Nabokov’s arrival, his growth, and his eventual departure from America. The book unfolds chronologically, evolving with Nabokov. To take on such a feat – reviewing the life and works of one of the world’s most celebrated authors – and to successfully tackle it demands something new, something fresh, especially when the subject has been so masterfully covered already by the likes of Brian Boyd and Jean Blot.

And Roper delivers. The text is sprinkled with excerpts from Nabokov’s most famous works, following his literary progression, and Roper’s thoughtful commentary and critiques extend an invitation to newcomers, welcoming them into Nabokov’s world and guiding them

through his genius. Nabokov's works are, of course, colored by his experiences and frequently witness a real-life modeling of characters. Roper acknowledges this, making connections between Nabokov's acquaintances and his characters (such as the similarities between his "fountainist" friend Henry Lanz and *Lolita's* Humbert Humbert), adding another dimension to the author's biography. Additionally, the book is rich in footnotes, serving as offside commentaries between the author and his audience – which, at the same time, is Nabokov's audience. Roper declares that his book is "an attempt to borrow Nabokov back from the scholars" (p. 7) – and he succeeds. Unlike some of those who have previously borrowed him, Roper's survey of Nabokov and his works feels deeply intimate.

The book features cameos by Nabokov's famous acquaintances, including Henry Lanz and Edmund Wilson. It paints a portrait of Nabokov's colorful friendship with Wilson, one that was both exciting and inspiring, and traces the back and forth of their relationship through letters. Roper makes special note of the trust present in their relationship: for Nabokov, the value of Wilson's opinion; for Wilson, the space to provide honest feedback. Between the two friends, this feedback was not always positive but, for Wilson, he respected his friend enough to hold him accountable. Still, Nabokov accepted his comments humbly, as Roper notes that he "too needed a friend, too simpatico to lose" (p. 202). Roper captures a surprising element here, given Nabokov's notorious reputation for egotism and arrogance. Wilson is reported as being bothered by Nabokov's cruelty toward other writers, and Roper hardly shies away from this, relinquishing his adoration of Nabokov and siding with Nabokov's critic. Unlike Boyd, who disparaged Wilson, Roper praises him, stating that, "without Wilson's stewardship, the road would have been very different" and, in fact, "there might not have been a road" (p. 71). Here, Roper steps out from his peers' shadows and differentiates his work, offering an honest perspective and critical approach to Nabokov.

While Roper's book finds strength in its honesty, often chastising its subject, it does not come without weaknesses. Occasionally, the author falters and makes unsubstantiated claims. In one example, exploring Nabokov's fascination with Lepidoptera, Roper paints connections between the Norwegian author Knut Hamsun's character, Lieutenant Glahn, a hunter who spends much of his time surrounded by nature, and Nabokov the lepidopterist: Hamsun's Glahn experiences forest as being highly sexualized, full of fiery, passionate women, while Nabokov's forest embodies "sexual overtones if not quite yet sexual feeling" (p. 7). Roper attempts to

support the claim with a passage from Nabokov’s letters (p. 38) but, ultimately, falls short. Certainly, the passage suggests an intimate relationship with nature – of course, it would, given the time Nabokov spent outdoors and studying butterflies – but it does not hint at sex. Roper overreaches and makes claims that lack evidence – they may very well be true, but they are unsupported and, ultimately, do not add to the greater product of his work.

Still, Roper’s book produces a refreshing in-depth look at Nabokov’s years in America. In mixing the personal and the professional, Roper reveals the struggle en route to success, exposing how Nabokov immersed himself in American culture, his mindful noticing of American life teaching him about his would-be audience. Roper masterfully spins the tale of how Nabokov invented his America and sold it to his readers, all the while imparting the secret handshakes from the author himself, uncovering them for new readers.

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