

“THE COLLECTOR’S A HEDGEHOG,  
THE DEALER’S A FOX”

An Interview with Michael Juliar  
by Yuri Leving

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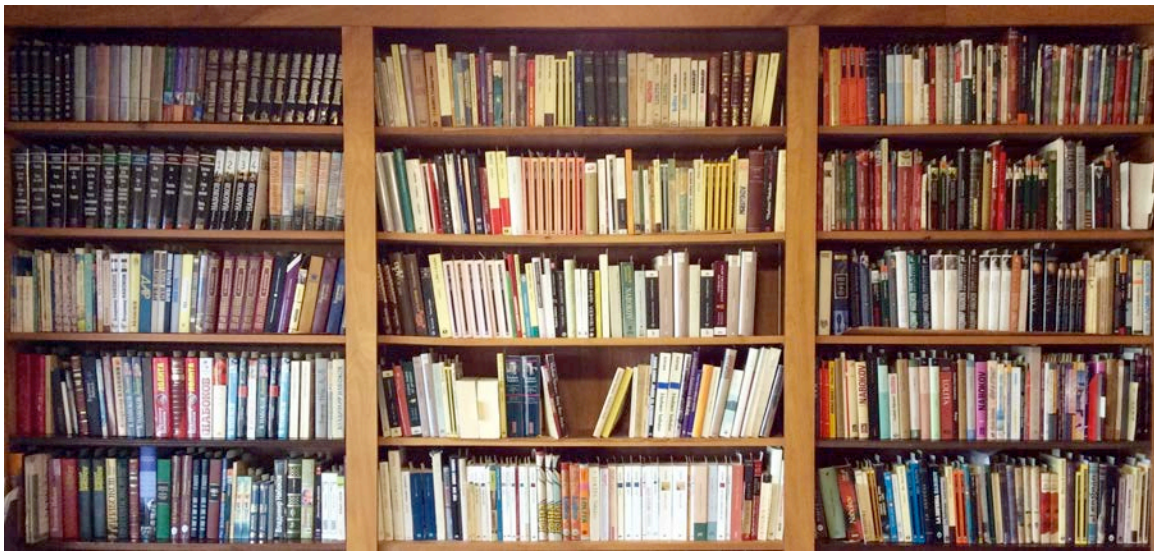


Fig. 1. A wall in M. Juliar’s office of Russian editions (almost all post-Soviet) on the left and D items (translations) in the middle and right. The translations run from Portuguese to Vietnamese.<sup>1</sup>

**Y**ou have defined yourself, in chronological order, as “a reader, a collector, and a bibliographer of VN’s books”. How do the two latter notions inform the former? Could you cite any literary discoveries made possible by looking at the writer’s rare editions? What have you learned as a reader, who has gathered a trove of information about various Nabokov editions in so many languages?

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That reader/collector/bibliographer construction is a chronology: I read Nabokov, I fell in love with his writings, and I read whatever I could get my hands on. That meant I accumulated whatever was available and hunted down whatever was not so readily available. Eventually I found I needed a list to know what I was looking for and I got a hold of Field's 1973 bibliography. But it had its limitations, omissions, errors, and very odd organization. So I began annotating the bibliography, then augmenting it, and finally rewriting it in a standard descriptive bibliographic form on my very first computer, a 75-pound IMSAI VDP-80 with an Intel 8085 microprocessor, 64KB (that's kilobytes) of RAM, a 12-inch monochromatic screen, and twin 8-inch floppy disk drives. (I lay out the specs of that computer, not just because it was—he said nostalgically—my first, but because I love lists.) It was tedious, passionate fun.

Now I sit in front of my iMac with 12GB of RAM, a 27-inch HD color screen, an immeasurably large hard disk, and, best of all, a high-speed connection to the internet through which I can access all of the world's major libraries, book dealers, and book marketplaces from my desk. It is so much easier to track down the information and buy the books. Yes, I have to buy them. You see, I'm like a physician: I can't do my job properly without doing a physical examination of my subject.

I really don't know how collecting and bibliography affect reading. I see them as three separate, though correlated, entities. I get my aesthetic shivers from reading VN. I get my hunting thrills from collecting him. And I get my creative bliss from bibliographizing him.

I think that the only discovery I've made, a minor one, was finding a translation of an 1823 eight-line Pushkin poem, "Ptichka [Little bird]" in a footnote in, of all places, *The Freud/Jung Letters* published by Princeton University Press in 1974. An editor at the press, William McGuire, who had worked with Nabokov on his *Eugene Onegin* translation had asked him as a favor to translate the poem into English. A reference to the poem had popped up in one of Jung's letters.

I can't say that, having gathered, examined, and described so many editions in dozens of languages, I've learned anything as a reader. One thing that has struck me though is the enormous literary and cultural impact Nabokov has had around the world.



Fig. 2. A closer look at the Albanian, Arabic, Bengali, Bulgarian, and Catalan translations.

***How did you start your collecting Vladimir Nabokov's original print editions and the author-related memorabilia?***

Like all good things in life, I blame my mother. Sometime in 1961 I think it was, she recommended a “very good book, well-written” that she thought her 18-year old son would appreciate. That was of course *Lolita*. I swallowed it whole. And that led me down the path, reading previous Nabokov and buying new Nabokov as they came out. Years later at a book fair in 1979 in New York, I came upon a stack of Nabokov’s Russian editions Peter Howard of Serendipity Books was offering. I bought them without realizing that I could bargain. It wasn’t a good investment monetarily. Taking inflation into account, those books are worth today about what I paid for them back then. But what that purchase did (“But you can’t even read them,” my logical and forgiving wife pointed out) was to open my eyes to my hidden bibliographic passions.

***What is the current scope of your private Nabokov archive and what are its highlights?***

I collect everything Nabokov on paper, with important side channels of works on disk, tape, chip, or what has been released into the ether. This includes every printing of every edition in English and Russian and every edition in translation from Albanian to Vietnamese. That's 49 languages. (Did you know that the first edition of *Lolita* translated into French and published by Gallimard in 1959 appears to have gone through at least 131 printings?)

I also collect Nabokov's first periodical appearances in English and Russian. Those are often difficult to find. I also seek out his entomological offprints, prepublication copies, braille and recorded copies, adaptations (for stage, film, and radio), ephemera, and piracies. I've also been lucky enough to acquire a couple of small caches of correspondence and a few books that were in Nabokov's personal Montreux library.

I think that my collection's highlight is its inclusiveness. My collection's burden is the shelf-length I need to hold the books—the span of a gridiron.

***Tell us about an item in your possession that you cherish most and for what particular reason?***

I'll show you five.

The copy of the Putnam *Lolita* (with my parents' "Ex libris" bookplate) that my mother gave me to read so long ago.

The VN-lepidopterized New Directions *Nikolai Gogol* that Frank M. Carpenter of Harvard sold me. The story there is that my family and I had been on our way to Maine when we stopped off in Cambridge to get back-copies of the entomological journal *Psyche* that Carpenter stored in a Harvard classroom building closet. Since he had known Nabokov when he had worked at the Museum of Comparative Zoology in the 1940s, I asked him if he had any copies of Nabokov's books he wouldn't mind parting with. He said he thought he still had one. He would check and asked me to stop by on our way back from Maine two weeks later. We did. He had the book with two neat little

Nabokovian ink-drawn butterflies and a short inscription to his wife and him. He said he had asked a local dealer what he should charge me for it. It was a modest amount. This must have been in the 1980s. (Did you know that Carpenter was E.O. Wilson's PhD advisor?)

I also have a series of letters from the 1950s between Nabokov and Albert Parry, a Russian compatriot and professor of Russian Civilization and Language at Colgate. Parry was one of only three scholars whom Nabokov would allow to make a reader's report on his *Eugene Onegin* manuscript when Cornell University Press was considering publishing it. I flew down to St. Petersburg, FL, to meet Parry and to examine and buy his VN material.

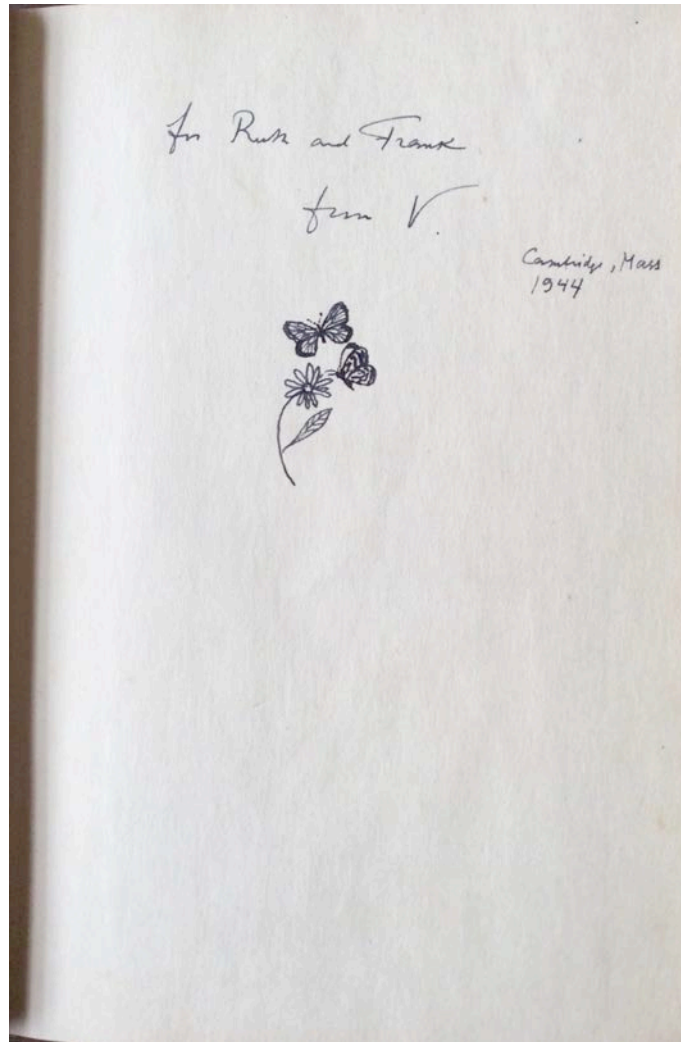


Fig. 3. The Frank Carpenter book, a 1944 *Nikolai Gogol*, inscribed to Carpenter and his wife, with two frisky butterflies.

There are the letters Nabokov wrote to two of the Marinell sisters, close family friends. And Nina Berberova's defective copy of the 1955 Olympia Press *Lolita*. Its first volume has multiple blank pages and so Berberova wrote in pencil in her neat hand the first lines of the missing paragraphs. I got to know her when she was retired from teaching and living in Princeton. She inscribed to me a copy of her memoir, *The Italics Are Mine*, by outlining her hand on one of the endpapers.

***What is generally required from a true collector: being passionate for a subject? Scholarly sensitivity? Hunting instincts? Intellectual refinement? Archivist's ardor? All of the above and more?***

Sure, you have to be passionate if you're going to collect seriously. (What's more passionate than a nine-year old seriously collecting baseball cards?) Scholarly sensitivity? I don't think it is very important. But scholarly awareness certainly helps. Hunting instincts? Ah, yes. Very important. Finding out who knew your collecting target and who is still around and might have worthwhile material. Getting to know the dealers who specialize in your area and letting them know you are in the hunt. Like a deerstalker, being patient. Intellectual refinement? I'm not sure what that means. But an archivist's ardor gives you the push to organize your wants and your haves and to make of your collection more than just a pile of books and papers.

***Does provenance of any particular item add to its intrinsic or extrinsic value, both in monetary and cultural terms?***

Provenance, in the sense of a lineage of ownership, is always important in determining an item's monetary and cultural value. I do have a few like that—a couple mildly corrected by VN, a few inscribed by him, and two lepidopterized.

And then in collecting there is something like provenance, but in the sense of a trail of physical text.

Picture this trail: the author's working notes, drafts, rejects, and, ultimately, fair copy, i.e., the manuscript; the setting manuscript, with the author's and editor's

corrections and emendations, used by the printing shop; the galleys; the advanced review copies (often called ARCs), books which are not in their final bindings and are missing preliminaries and such; review copies, which are often prepublication copies exactly as the publication copies intended for the marketplace; the for-sale commercial item as a first printing of the first edition; and then the association copies (books owned and annotated by the author, books given by the author to friends and family, books inscribed, books lepidopterized). So acquiring items in this paper trail is a vicarious, non-literary, non-intellectual, non-academic way of getting close to the author. The closer you get to the manuscript, the greater the thrill. Also, of course, the fewer the copies and the dearer the price.

***Has there ever been an instance in your long career in which you missed something that led to the loss of an addition to your collection? Do you feel regret?***

You're not really in the hunt if you've never lost a desired item. I've lost many: I mistook the expiration time of an item on eBay and someone outbid me at the last moment; I didn't bid high enough in an auction and later realized I had been too cautious; I found out something was available from a dealer only minutes after he had sold it to someone else; and so on. Regret? Sure. I'm human. But I've learned that almost everything—all but the rarest of items—comes around again. You know: live, collect, die. And the items go back into circulation.

***In what senses does a collector-bibliographer differ from a book dealer, even the most advanced and experienced one?***

A serious collector has the advantage of specific knowledge generated by his collection over the dealer who, in order to stay in business, has to cover a broader range. To channel Archilochus: The collector's a hedgehog, the dealer's a fox.

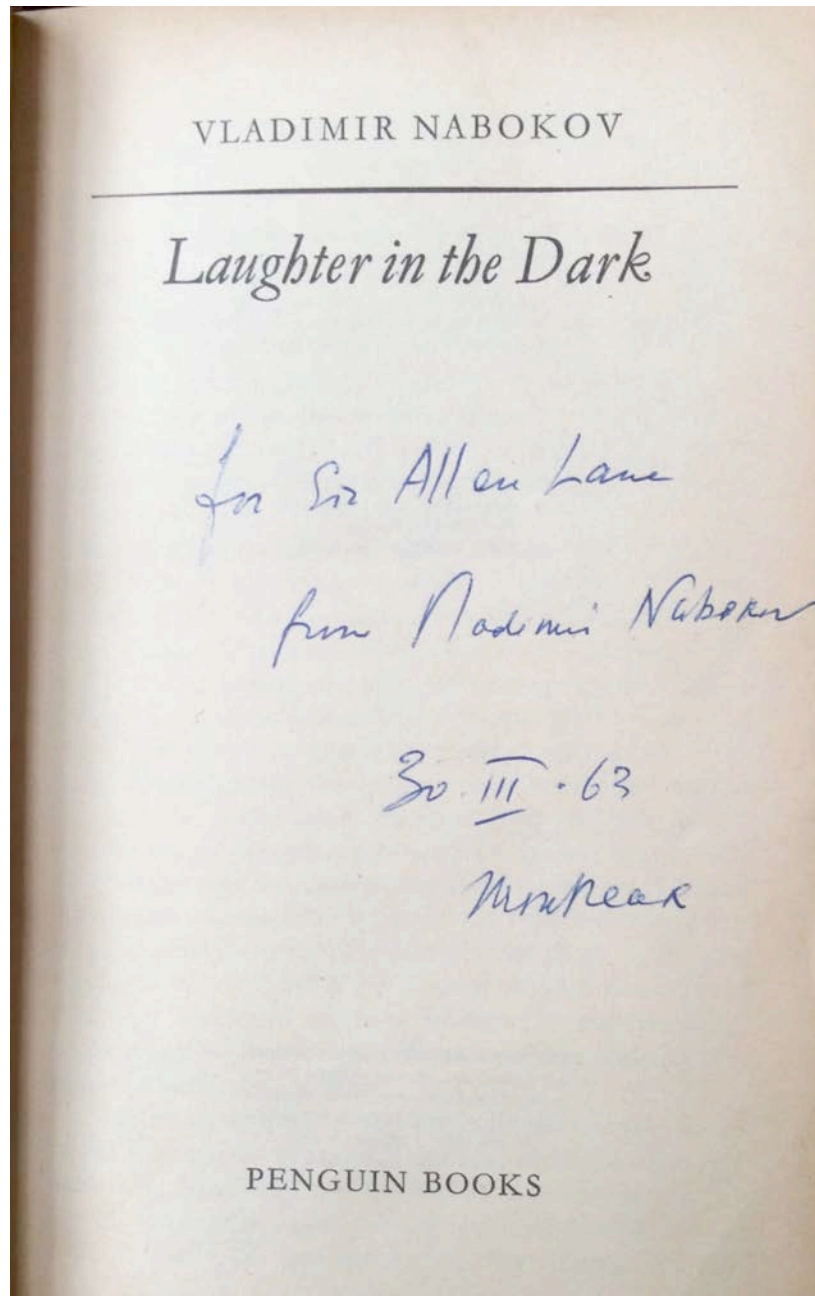


Fig. 4. Nabokov's inscription in a 1963 Penguin paperback edition of *Laughter in the Dark* to the co-founder of Penguin Books, Sir Allen Lane. This copy is mentioned by Nabokov in a letter to George Weidenfeld, 30 March 1963 (See *Selected Letters*, p. 343).

***Do you foresee a steady increase in the cultural and market value of Nabokoviana? If so, what will be the driving factors, in your opinion?***

It's interesting. There appear to be three book (to use that word very broadly) markets. One is the popular market as measured by the New York Times best seller lists.



Another is the academic/intellectual market as seen in what's written about in literary journals and what is taught in classrooms (I guess that's the literary canon). And then there is the collecting market as measured by the odd and quirky values put on a medley of works—high literary, popular, genre. VN had his fine day in the popular market sun; he is part of the foundation of twentieth-century world literature; and he commands high, but not the highest, prices from collectors. (A fine first edition of *The Big Sleep* is worth twice as much as an Olympia Press *Lolita*.)

I'm counting on a steady upward slope of VN prices for my retirement. Wait, I'm already retired and I'm still buying. I can't help myself.

*There exists if not an industry, but at least a small niche of Nabokov's fakes (false dedications, butterfly drawings, etc.) – have you seen a lot of those surfacing on ebay.com and similar platforms? What do they usually look like? Any amusing stories about (un)successful forgeries?*

There was a flurry of them some five or ten years ago. A large number seemed to emanate from Australia. Most were posted to eBay where the largest and most gullible audience resides. For a fuller description of what happened in 2009 to one dealer who was taken in, go to my blog, vnbiblio.com and search for "fakes". In fact this month that same item was being offered by a California dealer for \$13,500. He told me that he wasn't aware of its history.

*Both editions of your titanic work, Vladimir Nabokov: A Descriptive Bibliography (1986, 1991) have been long out of print and your updated version is in progress. Is the new, revised edition in the offing? Apart from this practical question, how exactly should any "complete" and "definitive" Nabokov bibliography look like under ideal circumstances, provided an unlimited publication budget?*

One could fear that the publication in traditional form (i.e., codex-bound paper) of a new, revised edition may never happen. But I have hope. I finished the A items two-and-a-half years ago. I must still finish the B items (contributions to books), C items

(periodical appearances), and D items (translations). In fact, for D items, I've done all but a dozen languages. In the meantime, the finished work in draft form is always available on my blog at [vnbiblio.com](http://vnbiblio.com).

Ah, the ideal form of publication. I can imagine many: a traditional book with a DVD of the data, searchable, bound in; a relatively small, handy field guide such as birders carry for the collector haunting the dusty shelves of that promising dealer just off the interstate (not too many of them left); a sturdily-bound reference book that lies flat when open; an ungodly expensive coffee-table book printed on heavy coated paper with delicious full-sized, full-color portraits of each A item; and while we're at it, why not a leather-bound volume printed on vellum. They are all possible, most unattainable. Which one will it be. At this time I have no idea.

*Creating a bibliography with annotations and images allows one to build a multilayered database on a given topic, but the process itself, at least as I understand it, is not without similarities to a creative endeavor akin to Borges's "The Library of Babel" or scientific plight experienced, let's say, by a taxonomist. From what do you draw your pleasures while making your way through a narrow corridor between scholarly exactitude and artistic satisfaction?*

Yes, this bibliographic thing is like taxonomy: You collect, you examine, you study, you record, you compare, you write up your conclusions. Very like Nabokov at the Museum of Comparative Zoology, I like to think. But it is not like Borges's fable. In the universe of the Library of Babel, the library has always existed. And I can't imagine anyone other than a mad bib trying to deal with it.

I remember a children's picture book written by an old friend of my wife. In it, the protagonist (a rather heavy term to be used here) one day takes his toys and lines them up very carefully, very exactly, very particularly, through the house. Why? I don't know. To get praise from his mother? To admire his own handiwork? To discern the connections between things? Just to make something? Whatever the reason, he is, by the last page, very satisfied with himself.

One satisfaction I get is in using my collection and the knowledge I've gathered to answer queries and respond to requests for photos from scholars, editors, dealers, and collectors from around the world.

*You are actively editing your own blog (<http://vnbiblio.com/>) calling it a crossroads “where the trivia (in both its original and modern senses) of bibliography, collecting, and commerce” meet. What kind of fresh possibilities does this online non-print resource offer? Do you enjoy the digital aspects of a trade mostly associated with the print matter before? And, looking back at the experience of running this website for several years now, what part of the named triad would you prefer to expand: bibliography, collecting, or commerce?*

Online presentation is powerful, flexible, responsive. Update at any time. Correct mistakes immediately. Present your work to the whole world essentially for free. Fear no space limitations. Get direct feedback from your readers. Allow multiple forms of search. Present your material in previously unimaginable ways. (Because so many editions of *Lolita* in English are just repackagings of previous typesettings, I can imagine using a type of data-driven graphic called network analysis to show the relationships of the different typesettings.) There's nothing not to like about this technology.

Last of all, I'm going to ask myself one question: Why Nabokov? And I answer it by echoing a Nabokovian formula, I love him as a storyteller and as an enchanter. But I most value him as a teacher.

