

“I COLLECT ONLY NABOKOV”

An interview with Terry Myers

Terry Myers began collecting Nabokoviana in the mid-1970s. He established the non-profit organization, *Friends of the Nabokov Museum* (FNM) in 2003, with the support of Brian Boyd and Dmitri Nabokov, and subsequently donated most of his private collection of the rare books to the museum. Both as a Nabokophile enthusiast and an entrepreneur, Myers supports the Nabokov Museum. Open to public, it is part of the former family residence of the Nabokovs, in the beautiful center of St. Petersburg, Russia.

YURI LEVING: How did the “odd Russian theme” in your life begin?

TERRY MYERS: The odd Russian theme that has pursued me throughout my life began with my American father and Japanese mother, who met on the northern Japanese island of Hokkaido during the Korean War. I was, in fact, born in the city of Sapporo. My father worked as a translator for Army Intelligence and monitored Russian military transmissions. As the years passed, he lost his mastery of Russian but retained his taste for Russian literature,

especially Pushkin's novella "The Queen of Spades" and Lermontov's novel *A Hero of Our Time*. I can still hear him repeating his favorite quote: "я не в состоянии жертвовать необходимым в надежде приобрести излишнее." My mother's family had direct interactions with Russia. My Japanese grandmother, Toki Taga, loved to relate the story of how as a young girl during the Russo-Japanese War she and the other residents of the fishing village of Esashi repelled a landing by a Russian ship. They all lined up on the beach and threw stones at the small boats attempting to set ashore. My two Japanese uncles knew about the Soviet system firsthand. Stationed in Manchuria, they were captured by Russian forces at the end of World War II. According to my father, they escaped from their Siberian prisons after 10 years and refused to discuss the hardships they endured. I'd love to find out if they actually escaped or were just repatriated. I thought no one escaped. I'd also love to know intimate details about their horrific experiences in the Gulag. A couple of years ago, the writer Yuz Aleshkovsky, whom I had the honor of meeting at the home of my friend Vladimir Mylnikov in California, gave me some insight, since he had met Japanese inmates during his own imprisonment. He remembers being ashamed of having to order a Japanese admiral to take out the "параши" ["chamber pot"].

Russia thus occupied a prominent place in my childhood imagination. Thanks to a photo taken in Tokyo when I was two, just before we moved to the United States, I sometimes even fantasized that I was Russian. The photo depicts a group of people from the same apartment building. My parents are far off to the side and at the back, whereas I am in the front row, seated on the lap of the wife of a Russian tailor. Their son is standing to my left in what appears to be a school uniform. A jolly *babushka* is sitting to my right.

YURI LEVING: From Pushkin and Lermontov your way to Nabokov was short, I presume?

TERRY MYERS: The Nabokov theme entered mysteriously into my life when I was about eight or nine, living in Southern California. Our next door neighbor was moving out and left us a box of books, mostly children books. I was bored by *Hans Brinker and the Silver Skates* but intrigued by an ominous black paperback with the bizarre title of *Bend Sinister*. I was mesmerized by the first two or three pages, which contained exotic words such as "spatulate," "triskelion," and "alembic" and a series of descriptions and thoughts that I could not follow or

even imagine someone devising. I wanted so desperately to understand. Years would pass before I realized that I was dealing with a genius describing what he observed and experienced with utmost precision. At times I would argue to myself that my father, given his Russian connection, must have bought the book himself, but no, he fell in love with Nabokov, at least *Speak, Memory*, through one of his university professors. His recommendation that I read this memoir proved to be salvation for me.

When I was sixteen and residing in Northern California, in San Jose, I decided that I wanted to read classical literature, and Russian literature seemed a logical place to begin. For some reason I bypassed Tolstoy, settling on Gogol, Turgenev, Chekhov, and finally Dostoevsky. Except for Dostoevsky, these authors remain among my favorites. I didn't actually enjoy Dostoevsky but inexplicably I found myself drawn further and further into his outlandish melodramas. The more I read, the more weight I gained and the more depressed and hostile I became, seldom leaving my room. For several months I was never unhappier in my life, and frankly I have not read Dostoevsky since that time, afraid of getting addicted again. An antidote came my way, however, via the aforementioned *Speak, Memory*. I like to think that Nabokov would have been elated to know that he cured me of "Old Dusty." The writing was intoxicating and I grew to believe that existence can be harmonious if one aspires to high aesthetic standards, is driven by compassion, and observes and feels with intensity. For this reason his short story "Grace" remains one of my favorites: "I understood that the world is not at all a struggle, not a sequence of rapacious accidents, but a flickering joy, a benign excitement, an undervalued gift."

YURI LEVING: When did the passion of reading become that of collecting for you?

TERRY MYERS: Of course, I had to consume everything by this author, even the obscurest interview. My passion led me to collect Nabokov for a few years starting in 1977. The works I acquired included several first edition Russian works because I had the vague idea that this would spur me to learn Russian beyond knowledge of the alphabet and rudimentary grammar and the ability, in tribute to my father, to read "The Queen of Spades." This didn't happen, however. My job as a technical editor for an aerospace company eventually known as Pratt & Whitney Space Propulsion required so many long hours continuously over so many years that

by 1985 I had stopped reading literature entirely. And Russia became merely the evil empire that my company was building missile motors against. As for Nabokov, I was succumbing to the criticisms that he was ingeniously clever but ultimately superficial.

Luckily, I stumbled across Brian Boyd's massive two-volume biography of Nabokov in a Berkeley bookstore in 1993. I believed that restrictions imposed by the Nabokov family would mean no major biography until well into the next century, and I was astonished that Boyd had been able to compile so much information. Most importantly, Boyd enthusiastically made such a compelling case for Nabokov as a great writer that my love for Nabokov was revived. If not for Boyd, I would probably not have been inspired to assist the Nabokov Museum.

In 1995 I began to suspect there must be some divine plan to my life with respect to Russia, Russian literature, and Nabokov. That year my company began negotiating with Russia's leading manufacturer of rocket engines, NPO Energomash, on the development of a Russian liquid engine to lift a new version of the Atlas launch vehicle. Because I knew the Russian alphabet and had a smattering of grammar, I volunteered to prepare Russian language presentations. Energomash agreed to partner with us and now one of America's major launch vehicles is powered by Russian rocket technology. Since there was a need to produce more Russian language presentations, escort Russian visitors, and translate Russian documents and correspondence into English, I was allowed to take several Russian language courses. Needless to say, a side benefit of these courses was that I was finally able to begin reading Nabokov in Russian.

By the time of the Nabokov centennial, I was eager to participate in some way. I first attended the Cornell celebration, where I had the pleasure of meeting Brian Boyd and Dmitri Nabokov for the first time. As it turns out, Brian was looking for me since he knew I had a copy of *Korol', Dama, Valet* [*King, Queen, Knave*] in which Nabokov had inscribed some verse from an apparently uncompleted poem "Babochki" ["Butterflies"]. This verse was included in the book *Nabokov's Butterflies*. I was privileged to meet Dmitri on three other occasions, most memorably in Montreux over the course of a week. He was the most gracious and attentive host I have ever met, and my conversations with him are certainly among the highlights of my life. An unexpected discovery was that he had an excellent operatic voice, as confirmed by a recording of him performing in *Don Carlo*.



YURI LEVING: Still, it looks like there is a long way from Ithaca to St. Petersburg. What made the next step possible?

TERRY MYERS: After the amazing time I had at Cornell, I looked into what the fledgling Nabokov Museum in Saint Petersburg was planning for the centennial. When I learned that the museum, thanks to the Bolsheviks' redistribution of property and ban on émigré books, had few exhibits, I willingly decided to donate some of my own rare Nabokoviana, including first

editions of *Mashenka* [*Mary*] and *Podvig* [*Glory*]. I don't remember if I sent the museum a letter or an email, but in any case I received no answer. Then, out of the blue, I was contacted by this wonderful New Yorker, Galya Korovina, who put me in touch with the museum's assistant director, the even more wonderful Olga Voronina. I flew over and was overwhelmed by the attention I and my modest donations were accorded. I mean, my collection was puny in comparison with that savior of Russian émigré culture, Rene Guerra. The experience was Kafkaesque in a positive way. I attended the celebration at the Alexandrinsky Theater, not knowing that I was supposed to speak. I uttered just a few words, intimidated by the crowd and the thought that I was standing on the stage where *The Seagull* was premiered. Then there was a trip to the Rozhdestveno on my birthday, where in my exhilaration, despite my acrophobia, I climbed to the top of Nabokov's former estate, which was then under construction, and later got to ring the Easter bells at the church. I had adored Nabokov most of my life, and I couldn't believe that I was seeing all the places that were dear to him (and dear to me through his writings) and was granted an opportunity to repay him for the tingles in the spine he provided me.



Olga Voronina, Tatiana Ponomareva, and Terry Myers in the Nabokov Museum

Every couple of years I made more trips to Saint Petersburg, each time bringing more books from my own collection or books purchased with funds from my former company, Pratt & Whitney, or from the nonprofit I operate, *Friends of the Nabokov Museum* (FNM). My association with the Nabokov Museum goes beyond my donations, however. Because of my

work I have become friends with many remarkable Russians, none more admirable than the current director of the Nabokov Museum, Tanya Ponomareva, gotten to know several Nabokov scholars, and involved myself in Russian literary projects through my friend and fellow Nabokophile, the award-winning writer Margarita Meklina. It's incredible to me how Russia and Nabokov, after haunting the periphery of my life for so long, have materialized in the center. I wonder what my Japanese grandmother, who prided herself on repulsing the Russians, would say.

YURI LEVING: What were the major phases of your Nabokov collecting?

TERRY MYERS: The first phase of my Nabokov collecting began in the mid-1970s when my friend Rod Moore, who was studying in Berkeley, took me to Serendipity Books, then located in North Berkeley a couple of blocks from where he lived. We both doted on Nabokov and were astonished to find that the owner of the store, Peter Howard, had several rare Nabokov books, many with inscriptions, that had belonged to Nabokov's friend Bertram Thompson. As a student, I couldn't afford any of these books, although I desperately wanted to own some. Once I found my first job, I started using my modest salary to buy rare Nabokoviana one or two at a time. Peter, who sadly passed away last March, was one of the greatest antiquarian book dealers of his time. Although mercurial and often difficult, he was generous to enthusiastic collectors. In my case, I was allowed to buy books through instalment payments over lengthy periods of time. I would otherwise not have been able to acquire the copy of *Korol', Dama, Valet* with the inscribed poem. Before I stopped serious collecting, I had amassed most of the English first editions, several of the Russian first editions, and a few issues of *Sovremennye zapiski (Contemporary Annals)*. There were also fantastic oddities such as Nabokov's poem "Rodina" ["Motherland"] printed on a program for a 1927 Pushkin celebration in Berlin and a copy of *Yakor [Anchor]* signed by Mikhail Gorlin and Raissa Blokh. This copy of *Yakor* became a cherished item for me after I read Boyd's biography, learning that Nabokov had tutored Gorlin and that both Mikhail and Raissa had perished during the war. My greatest regret is not being bold enough to obtain a second copy of *Anya v strane chudes* from Peter (I'd sold my first one).

I also purchased Nabokoviana from other dealers and private individuals, most notably a copy of *Stikhi*.¹ Foolishly I sold this copy to fund amateur diving trips with the Scripps Aquarium in the early 1980s. I like to think Nabokov would have approved, since on these trips we collected fish for the aquarium, including butterfly fish.

The second phase in my collecting was connected with gathering more Nabokoviana for the museum after I had donated all of mine. Since my company Pratt & Whitney Space Propulsion was working with Russian partners and the parent corporation United Technologies was a major investor in Russia, I succeeded in getting money donations from them for the Nabokov Museum. These donations went not only directly to the museum itself, but also toward the purchase of books such as Morris Bishop's copy of *Pale Fire* and a copy of *Dar* from Nabokov's personal library. I lost access to these corporate resources when my facility shut down in 2005.

By this time, however, the Friends of the Nabokov Museum (FNM) (the non-profit organization that I established with the support of Brian Boyd and Dmitri Nabokov) had been in existence since 2003. At first all the donations collected were forwarded to the museum to help cover their expenses. Until a couple of years ago, however, FNM funds remained untouched because of the serious possibility that the city property commission, which owned the building where the museum resides, might close this independent institution down. Only when the museum's heroic director, Tanya Ponomareva, successfully saved the museum by having it become part of Saint Petersburg University did I feel comfortable spending more money. In the past year I have exhausted most of the FNM's resources in buying not only three major Nabokov books at Christie's auctions, but a magnificent operating magic lantern and early 1900s Russian magic lantern slides as well. The magic lantern is already at the museum, and I just brought over the books and slides. The three books were signed copies of *Kamera Obscura* and *Nikolka Persik*, and Dieter Zimmer's bibliography in which Nabokov inscribed his poem, "Kakoe sdelal ia durnoe delo" ["What Evil Deed I Have Committed"].

¹ Nabokov's juvenile collection entitled *Poems* was printed in St. Petersburg in 1916 – *Ed. note.*



**The display of selected items donated by Terry Myers from his private collection
to the Nabokov Museum**

YURI LEVING: Could you share your general philosophy of collecting: Why do you collect what you collect?

TERRY MYERS: I collect only Nabokov and some associated Russian émigré literature because my limited income does not allow me to collect all the classic works I'd love to own. Besides, I'd rather understand one author well rather than numerous authors superficially. With Nabokov, this means learning to read and appreciate him in Russian. Having gained a facility for Russian only late in life, I'll need to devote all the time I have left to the Russian Nabokov.

Since my other goal is to supply the museum with exhibits relevant to Nabokov's life, my search for collectible items goes beyond books. I mentioned the magic lantern and lantern

slides, but I would be grateful for any suggestions as to what objects, preferably inexpensive, to get next.

YURI LEVING: Why did you decide to make your first donations of rare Nabokoviana to the Nabokov Museum in St. Petersburg?

TERRY MYERS: As I mentioned earlier, I'd heard that the Nabokov Museum had no exhibits for the centennial celebration and I wanted to help out somehow, to repay Nabokov for all the years of aesthetic bliss he has afforded me. I'm a dismal scholar but a diligent collector, so this was the one way in which I could honor him. Another contributing motivation is that although I rejected Dostoevsky almost entirely, I retained an abiding fondness for Prince Myshkin and subconsciously want to pursue a life of uncompromising benevolence. If you ask my wife, my success in accomplishing this goal is decidedly mixed; however, I love the idea of trying to be selfless and to bring as much happiness to others as possible. When I contemplated giving rare Nabokov books to the museum, I kept in mind the time when I went on a collecting expedition by the Scripps Aquarium to the Socorro Islands in the 1980s. Most of the Clarion angelfish collected on the trip were caught by me. A few months later I visited the tank in the old Scripps Aquarium building where these angelfish were housed and enjoyed the delight that several children expressed as they gazed at them. I hoped that my Nabokov books and other donations would give similar delight to Nabokophiles.

I also liked the thought that my books would be part of an institution where Nabokov's life and legacy would always be on display for the general public, not stored in the depths of a university archive and trundled out only on special occasions every several years. I think it repugnant that one would find intrinsic value in just hoarding valuable cultural artifacts like a serpent jealously guarding his gold, granting access only to a lucky elite. Of course, on the other hand, I admire collectors such as Guerra who rescue literary legacies from diasporas and preserve them until they can be safely preserved somewhere.

YURI LEVING: Tell us about the non-profit organization, the Friends of the Nabokov Museum, its mission and structure?

TERRY MYERS: The Friends of the Nabokov Museum (FNM) came about because I wanted to establish a non-profit to promote the study of the works of Vladimir Nabokov through collaboration with the museum. Besides providing book donations for displays, the FNM helped cover the museum's operating costs until it became part of Saint Petersburg University and supported the Nabokov 101 seminars which were attended by students and scholars from the United States and other countries. Currently I am working with the museum on a plan that would allow The American Magic Lantern Theater to perform in Saint Petersburg. Tanya Ponomareva and Olga Voronina recently convinced me, however, that funding would be more forthcoming if the theater's performances were part of a project with more general appeal to Russians, specifically an exhibition of and a lecture on the amazing color glass slides produced by Sergei Mikhailovich Prokudin-Gorskii, who conducted a survey of the Russian Empire during the time of Tsar Nicholas II. These slides now reside at the Library of Congress. Anyone know whom we should contact?



Dr. Evgeny Belodubrovsky admiring the first edition copy of *Дар* donated by Terry Myers in 1999 (Vadim Stark is in the background)

Olga Voronina, a former museum director and now a scholar working on the *Letters to Véra* project, was instrumental to the FNM's existence because she found the legal firm that

executed all of the steps necessary to set up the non-profit. Also instrumental were both Dmitri Nabokov and Brian Boyd, who agreed to be co-founders with me. I essentially run the FNM and periodically report to Brian and Dmitri on the FNM's activities and its finances.

Other than at the beginning of the FNM back in 2003, I have not collected more than a few thousand dollars each year. In fact, after the recent purchase of the three expensive Nabokov rare editions, the coffers are frankly exhausted and I have to start a drive for more donations. I am so pleased, however, that these modest thousands of dollars, and not several hundred thousands of dollars as one might expect, helped buy the museum's director, Tanya Ponomareva, enough time to rescue the museum from the avarice of the Saint Petersburg's city property commission and bring it under the wing of Saint Petersburg University. Thank you Sergei Bogdanov, Dean of the Faculty of Philology and Arts; Oleg Mukovsky, Director of the St. Petersburg branch of the Russkiy Mir Foundation; and my dear friend Andrey Mashinan, Director of the Irish Culture Center! Unfortunately, at the present time the FNM finds itself among the over 275,000 non-profits that had their tax-exempt status revoked in June 2011 because of changes in IRS filing requirements. In the FNM's case the organization's lawyer and I believe the revocation is in error since we can demonstrate that, in advance of the deadline, a tax filing was received and registered on the new IRS automatic filing system. Accordingly, we have requested reinstatement of tax-exempt status. If this fails, we will simply refile an application.

YURI LEVING: What is the provenance of various objects that passed through your hands over the years? Any particularly curious stories?

TERRY MYERS: Unfortunately, I don't know the provenance of most of the books I collected over the years. As far as I am aware, several were purchased from dealers or individuals in Paris and then resold in the United States. I have no idea who the original owners were. One exception is the copy of *Korol', Dama, Valet* with the inscribed poem fragment "Бабочки" that I bought in 1977. The poem was dedicated to a person unknown to the dealer, Nikolai Kardakov. Through Véra Nabokov, whom I contacted in the early 1980s, I learned that the poem "Бабочки" was authentic, although she could not find an original manuscript, and that Kardakov was a fellow lepidopterist who would accompany Nabokov to

the Entomological Institute in Dahlem. In 1993, from Boyd's biography, I found out that Kardakov and Nabokov would meet another lepidopterist, Arnold Moltrecht, at this institute.

At this point the trail remained cold until my dear friend, the writer Rita Meklina, did her own research and posted her article "Боны и бабочки" ["Paper Money and Butterflies"] on the internet in 2000. She discovered that Kardakov had collected paper money ["боны"] as well as butterflies. More importantly, her article caught the attention of the entomologist Evgeny Novomodny, who was working as a researcher at the Khabarovsk Regional Museum. Novomodny was familiar with and had written about Kardakov's butterfly expeditions in the Far East, but had no idea that Kardakov had emigrated to Germany and was astonished that he had become friends with a writer the stature of Vladimir Nabokov. Dieter Zimmer completed the puzzle for me in 2001 when he published his excellent book *Nabokov's Berlin* in 2001. There I read about the lives of both Kardakov and Moltrecht in Europe and, most amazingly, saw photographs of them. After almost a quarter century I finally gazed on Kardakov's face.



Zimmer did not have information about Kardakov's Siberian research, so it was nice to be able to put him in contact with Novomodny. Novomodny took what Zimmer knew and included it in his online biography of Kardakov in 2003 (<http://jugan2.narod.ru/kardakov.html>).

YURI LEVING: Could you highlight the most cherished items in your collection?

TERRY MYERS: The most cherished items in my collection were two books that made a major impact in St. Petersburg: Edward Newman's *The Natural History of British Butterflies and Moths* and a copy of the first published edition of *Дар* [*The Gift*] from Nabokov's personal

library. Vadim Stark, the founder of the Nabokov Museum, had discovered the Nabokov family's copy of Newman's book at the Library of the Russian Academy of Sciences. The young Nabokov had hand-colored some of the black and white illustrations. Through the efforts of Stark and the museum librarian Elena Kuznetsova, the library agreed to exchange its copy for the one that I had donated. As for *Дар*, the copy I had given the museum was displayed at the Russian National Library in celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the novel's publication back in 1952. It seems no other copy could be found. When I visited the museum the following year, several people expressed their sincere gratitude for making my copy available, and I am always deeply moved when I recall this. It's a solid reminder that I have in my own small way successfully honored Nabokov's legacy. I can imagine no greater reward in my life, other than being able to appreciate Nabokov's Russian works.

Two other cherished items in my collection were just married together during my recent trip to Saint Petersburg. The English magic lantern I bought was already at the museum, but I had still to deliver the authentic Russian magic lantern slides from the early 1900s. The museum staff spent several minutes adjusting the lantern, and then an image from Pushkin's "The Tale of the Fisherman and the Fish" magically coalesced on the wall. The first magic lantern display at the Nabokov home for over a century.





**Pushkin's "The Tale of the Fisherman and the Fish"
is being projected using the antic magic lantern**

All my Nabokov collection is now with the museum, except for two books that have sentimental value for me: a first edition copy of *Защита Лужина* and Dieter Zimmer's collection of twenty-three Nabokov short stories, *Frühling in Fialte*, both from Nabokov's personal library. Nabokov had the copy of *Защита Лужина* beautifully rebound in leather. It is difficult to find a copy of the original edition with the fragile cover in good condition. The book is special for me because I like to think Nabokov's effort to restore it meant it was special for him. *Frühling in Fialte* is special because it reminds me of my student days when I bought a copy of this book in Freiburg, Germany (I was studying at the local Goethe Institute during the summer) and then spent a blissful August traveling via Eurail Pass throughout Europe and reading as many of the Nabokov stories as my rudimentary German would permit me. At the time I had not read most of these stories in English. Even to this day stories like "Signs and Symbols," "Spring in Fialta," and "The Sisters Vane" exist for me foremost in their German

incarnations. Dieter Zimmer and his fellow translators did too good a job. Zimmer was such an able translator that Véra Nabokov, who knew German well, didn't bother to check his work.

