

“NABOKOV WAS THE MOST DAZZLING OF THEM ALL...”

*INTERVIEW WITH FRED HILLS,
VLADIMIR NABOKOV’S LAST EDITOR*



Mr. Fred Hills. New York, 2008.

Nabokov discussed the production design and promotional aspects of his published writings with the editor Fred Hills. Once, quite concerned about the design of a forthcoming edition of *Strong Opinions*, the writer confided: “I quite agree with you that some recent photo, noble jowls and all, might do better than a jacket Adonis” (April 13, 1973).¹ In a letter dated February 21, 1975, Nabokov conveyed that he “enjoyed the marvelous Duchess of

¹ Nabokov, *Selected Letters, 1940–1977*, 515.

Windsor and the Porcelain Pug” sent to him by his editor.² In conversation with the *Nabokov Online Journal*, Fred Hills, former editor-in-chief at McGraw-Hill, shares his reminiscences of Vladimir Nabokov.

YURI LEVING: When did you first meet Nabokov and was that your first encounter with his work?

FRED HILLS: My meeting with Nabokov took place in Zermatt, Switzerland, as we were getting ready to rush a manuscript of *Look at the Harlequins!* into production. But, perhaps, I should start with my encounter with *Lolita*: I enrolled at Columbia College as an undergraduate and then went on to grad school at Stanford University, in Palo Alto. Columbia and Stanford basically were giving money for my education, but I still had food to take care of. I worked to fund my way through school during holidays. The first time that I encountered *Lolita* was in 1958, as I was working in the book department of the Emporium department store in San Francisco.³ Money was scarce those days and I only bought books if they were required textbooks, but that was the year when *Lolita* was published in the US. I picked it up and started reading it right in the store and was struck by these lines: “Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul. Lo-lee-ta: the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three, on the teeth. Lo. Lee. Ta...” and so on, to the end of the first paragraph. I was electrified and determined to pay the entire retail price at that time—five dollars, and for me that was a lot of money. Did I ever imagine in my wildest dreams that someday I would serve as Vladimir Nabokov’s editor?

The second encounter with that novel took place when I served as editor-in-chief at the McGraw-Hill Book Company, where I inherited Alfred Appel’s edition of *The Annotated Lolita* and was charged with looking after its marketing. The third was working directly with Nabokov when he sent me his materials on the *Lolita* screenplay. The *Lolita*

² *Ibid.*, 543.

³ The Emporium was a mid-level department store chain headquartered in California that operated from 1896 to 1995, after which many locations were converted to Macy’s.

screenplay, if it were to be faithfully adapted as Nabokov wrote it, would probably take nine hours, therefore I cut it down, with his permission, to about two hours running time. He didn't feel strongly about things like that sort of extensive editing, whereas he was very cognizant of his own fiction and there would never be anything like that happening with one of his novels.

Then, in the 1970s, I served as an editor of about a half-dozen of Nabokov's works during the last years of his life; this included his nonfiction volume *Strong Opinions* and several definitive collections of his short stories.⁴ Finally, I became involved with Nabokov's last completed novel, *Look at the Harlequins!*. And it was then that McGraw-Hill became worried about rushing it into print for the October publication. Nabokov himself was very eager to meet the deadline as well, so they asked me if I would be willing to travel to Zermatt, where Nabokov was summering, in order to go over the book as he was continuing to finish it up. Of course, I was delighted to do that. That was our first in-person meeting.

What were your impressions of Nabokov when you first met him?

Nabokov wanted his new novel, *Look at the Harlequins!*, to be in bookstores by October. In order to speed up the entire process of editing and bypass the lengthy process of back-and-forth correspondence—since at that time, we did not have online communications—I flew to Switzerland. In late June of 1974, I took the train from Geneva and finally ended up in the narrow-gauged railroad with a really spectacular road to Zermatt. The Nabokovs arranged for a horse carriage to take me to the Hôtel Mont-Cervin. Automobiles were banned in the village in those days...

Shortly before this we had offered the serial rights of *Look at the Harlequins!* to Gordon Lish, fiction editor at *Esquire* magazine, who very cleverly pieced together parts of the page proof to create an excerpt that read as if it were a very liberal account of Nabokov's personal life with his wife, Véra. When I met with Nabokov, he held up the offending proof page at arm's length, as if it were some kind of foul-smelling fish. He was

⁴ *A Russian Beauty and Other Stories* (1973), *Tyrants Destroyed and Other Stories* (1975), and *Details of a Sunset and Other Stories* (1976).

appalled by Lish's heavy-handed and inaccurate treatment, and said that this simply "won't do"—and that was the end of the excerpt! It was never published.

I spent a week working with Nabokov, sharing time with Véra and sometimes with their son, Dmitri, in the hotel's dining room. We went butterfly hunting in the mornings in the foothills of the Matterhorn. The public persona of Nabokov was that of a formidable, rather off-putting, famous presence. In fact, I found in him a great sense of playfulness and teasing. He sometimes teased me because I was wearing sneakers rather than hiking boots.

I remember one morning we were taking a cable car to the midpoint stop going up the Matterhorn, just at the foothill of this mountain. And we had breakfast at a little side chalet-type café. We ordered bacon and eggs. Sitting next to us was a very attractive young woman (not a nymphet), and Nabokov made a slight nod in her direction, then turned to me and said: "There's so much to enjoy!" So he was delighted with everything surrounding him—from a young lady to that bacon bubbling on the grill... He was about seventy-five years old at the time, and I was thirty-nine, but he had a great talent of making me feel as if we were equals. He was very warm, witty, and engaging, totally charming in a courtly way despite the thirty-six-year spread in our ages. He had this wonderful ability to conduct a conversation making you believe that you were just another worldly intelligent person like him, at least for a moment, which is quite a gift, and quite generous on his part, as you can imagine.

What were the subjects of your conversations beyond the obvious professional matters?

I remember asking him once whether mortality was on his mind at the time at all. I was wondering about this because it seemed to me that shadows of that topic were present in *Pale Fire* and *Lolita*, and can be found in many of his other works. And he paused, reflected, and deflected saying: "No, I don't like to think about it." However, in fact he did think about it very much. He was very concerned whether he'd be able to finish *Look at the Harlequins!* in time: he didn't want to leave an unfinished manuscript on his desk. Although, of course, this was not exactly a "manuscript" either: his technique was to write

the novel on little cards, which he then put together and dealt himself what seemed like a kind of...

An assemblage?

Yes, it was a wonderful invention. Nabokov was pretty upset at that time because Andrew Field was preparing his biography, which was still in manuscript form.⁵ I remember his shock at Field's suggestion that there was a strain of homosexuality in the Nabokov bloodlines and citation of his cousin, the composer Nicolas Nabokov. Nabokov sent many corrections to Field's editor at The Viking Press, Elisabeth Sifton, and I offered to intervene with Thomas Guinzburg, the president of The Viking Press, which he really appreciated but said was unnecessary. Finally Nabokov threatened legal action and Field removed the reference to his cousin and several other offending passages.

As I am thinking of the many writers that I have worked with, such as the Pulitzer Prize winner William Saroyan, the acclaimed minimalist Raymond Carver, the Nobel Laureate Heinrich Böll, and many other well-known names, Nabokov, to my mind, was the most supremely self-confident writer and a glorious stylist.

Is this something that you came to appreciate in Nabokov's prose over the years or was it clear to you even back then?

It was over a period of time, and as I continued collaborating with Nabokov. For example, cutting the *Lolita* screenplay: he was perfectly happy for me to do that, but he considered his novels inviolate. So we would only focus on very-very minor stuff. All of his fiction offered a pure joy, a dazzling gift of language, and in that respect he was surely superior to any other novelist I worked with, no matter how widely acclaimed that writer might be such as William Saroyan, or Raymond Carver, or William Burroughs.

⁵ On April 3, 1975, Nabokov finished revising Field's final typescript, *Nabokov: His Life in Part*; their correspondence was conducted mainly (especially after this point) through the law firm of Joseph S. Iseman.

Speaking of the aesthetic qualities of Nabokov's novels, as an admirer of *Lolita* you probably felt that his later novels, including *Look at the Harlequins!*, were not up to the standard of his earlier achievements. Did you have any qualms about that at the time?

That is certainly true, you are absolutely right. But there was only one *Lolita* (other than the screenplay) and that, to my mind, was the height of his achievement. All of his novels were brilliant to some degree, but nothing came close to *Lolita*. And that is what I meant at the opening of our conversation about my brush with *Lolita* as a clerk at the Emporium bookstore, never dreaming that I would become his editor and later looking after the edition of Alfred Appel's *Annotated Lolita*, which you are probably familiar with.

Not just familiar: I often use this edition when teaching Nabokov. Here we can attest to its lifespan, from an embryonic state in production at McGraw-Hill to a resource that helped educate generations of readers all over the world.

Very good! In any case, for me his genius was never in doubt. For me *Look at the Harlequins!* is an intriguing novel: it is a fictional autobiography with an uncanny biographical likeness of Nabokov himself, but also very different because Nabokov was totally monogamous and in *Look at the Harlequins!* he is married many-many times. Of course, it does not feature a triumphant tragic ending like we have in *Lolita*. (By the way, I was always struck by the affinity of this novel with Henry James's *Watch and Ward* [1871], about an older and wealthy man who is entranced by a twelve-year-old.⁶) I believe it was not on a par with *Lolita*, nonetheless, I was delighted to be part of the process when Nabokov was finishing *Look at the Harlequins!*. I also enjoyed helping Nabokov with his other books, which included nonfiction, volumes of short stories (*Details of a Sunset* and *A Russian Beauty*), as well as a selection of interviews that were compiled under the title *Strong Opinions*.

⁶ In this, Henry James's debut novel, man-of-means Roger Lawrence adopts young Nora Lambert after her father commits suicide in the hotel room neighboring his own. Lawrence resolves to marry Nora, but once mature, the heroine is attracted to another man, whose first name happens to be Hubert.

Speaking of *Strong Opinions*: from Nabokov's letter to you dated April 13, 1973, it seems that you were instrumental in publishing this book, and he appreciated it: "I am pretty sure that I can accept all your excellent suggestions."⁷

Indeed I presided over the publication of that book as well, though a pinnacle of my personal relation with him was the time that we spent together in Zermatt. We had a really lovely relationship: we did not just work but also had fun and chased butterflies. At the end of our little sojourn in the Alps he gave me a mock quiz: when teasing he addressed me as "Mr. Hills," but when less serious he called me "Fred." I went over every line in the proof of *Look at the Harlequins!* and helped speed up the production process.

Were you working with galleys or was it still a manuscript?

It was partly a manuscript and partly galley proofs. We were moving so fast during that week.

Did you stay in the same hotel as the Nabokovs? When you were dining together, who paid the bill? What were his culinary and wine predilections?

Yes, I stayed in the same hotel, and shared dinner with Vladimir and Véra, and occasionally with Dmitri as well. For all his focus on food in his novels, he struck me as an indifferent eater in person, with little interest in food and wine. I requested that the bill be put on my account but no longer recall how it was charged.

Nabokov was, as he puts it, "a little upset" by your cable asking him to provide a description for his new novel for the McGraw-Hill catalogue. "Believe me," Nabokov writes, "to produce the description of a book which I have not finished writing is for me no less difficult than the writing about an unread book is for you."⁸

⁷ Nabokov, *Selected Letters: 1940–1977*, 514.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 527.

Interestingly, Nabokov made a decision not to have a novel's abstract appear on jacket copy, which was unlike what any other author did at that time. It was as if his novels were too multifaceted to try to capture their essence in a paragraph or two. Hardbound copies of Nabokov's novels could feature just one line stating only the date of publication. This approach intrigued his readers because nobody else had done something of this sort.

I presume that during that week together you had a chance to socialize with the Nabokovs—to dine, have wine, etc. What sort of man was the writer during these occasions?

We had dinner together every night. Once in a while Dmitri would join us but not always. Vladimir and Véra were so bonded together that it was almost as if Dmitri (I am exaggerating, of course) were, if not an interloper, almost as much of an add-on as I was. Véra handled much of Nabokov's correspondence: often she would write to me and communicate on her husband's behalf. They adored one another, which was very different from the pseudo-fictional autobiographic character of *Look at the Harlequins!*.

In 1975, Nabokov tasked you with representing him at the *Playboy* award ceremony when he was given the editorial prize for the short story "The Admiralty Spire."

I do remember it, of course, because he elected not to be there to accept the award in person. My comments were very brief at that time and I basically followed his modest instructions: "I am sure you will do it much better than I could suggest. I would imagine you might include in your brief speech something on the lines of the following lines (as this wizard of words would put it): 'I am delighted when *Playboy*'s best readers appreciate the stories translated by my son Dmitri from Russian originals written by me half a century ago.'"⁹ The *Playboy* staff was thrilled with Nabokov and that is why they gave him the accolades that they did. He was a dazzling talent, brilliant writer, and more awards were due him. I

⁹ VN to F. Hills. The entire letter (December 13, 1975) is reproduced in Nabokov, *Selected Letters, 1940–1977*, 552–53.

felt that he should have won the Nobel Prize, but I think his eroticism may have worked against the likelihood of that happening. Do you have an opinion on that?

Nabokov hardly showed any public concern about getting that prestigious award and, in fact, it was your colleagues at McGraw-Hill who had constantly built up anticipation. In the Nabokov papers in the New York Public Library's Berg Collection, I found a letter signed by Anthony D. Velie, editor of the Trade Book Division, who stated on May 5, 1969: "All I can say, sir, is that *Ada* is incontestably one of the great works of this century, and, as such, is perhaps the major jewel in your literary diadem. May I congratulate you in advance for the Nobel Prize you are certain to win." Then on September 5, 1969, your predecessor in the position of editor-in-chief, Frank E. Taylor, also shared his high hopes when writing to Montreux: "On the delicate subject of the late Nobel, I am completely inexperienced and unsophisticated on this entire subject, and I do not wish to be indelicate herein. However, magazines like *Life* have inquired as to anything I might know concerning you and the important event in Sweden. We, of course, know nothing and superstitiously avoid even dreams of it. *Life* magazine was particularly interested in that 'were anything to happen' they would hope to know sufficiently in advance to send Jane Howard to you. As an impossible former employer often said to me, 'What is your thinking?'—providing of course that you care to think about it." But I think that ultimately Nabokov remained sceptical about any prizes. When soon after the message cited, Taylor had nominated *Ada or Ardor* for the 1969 Pulitzer Prize on behalf of McGraw-Hill, Nabokov thanked him by quoting the beginning of his own old poem: "Always the best man, never the groom" (November 11, 1969; Berg Collection, NYPL). This declaration comes a mere two weeks after Stockholm announced Samuel Beckett as the winner of the 1969 Nobel Prize in Literature on October 23.

As I mentioned earlier, Nabokov was supremely self-confident. I think he believed he was a better judge of his work than others would have been. I doubt he was too disturbed by

that, but who knows what his interior thoughts were? But he never voiced them on that subject to the best of my knowledge.

Between 1974 and 1976 Nabokov on several occasions updated you on the progress of his new novel, *The Original of Laura*, which, it turned out, was not destined to see the light of day during its author's lifetime. How did you feel then about *TOOL* (it was Véra Nabokov who conveyed in a letter to you her husband's abbreviated title, saying that he did not know "what is more brilliant, the novel itself or its acronym"¹⁰)? And what was your reaction when you finally read the unfinished book almost thirty-five years later?

I was certainly enormously impressed with it as I was with every one of his works of fiction, but I confess it never really engaged me. What did you think?

I think Dmitri struck a marvelous deal by creating a sense of immense anticipation of a novel that hardly deserves a place in Nabokov's canon. On the other hand, the campaign itself proved a very effective tool (pun intended), as it was able to reinvigorate and reenergize the field and bring public attention to Nabokov's old novels that are much worthier than this incomplete book.

Indeed this was an opportunity for publishers to re-promote all of his works and that was pretty successful. But I agree with you that this is a far cry from *Ada* and *Pale Fire*, much less *Lolita*.

Were you somewhat disappointed by the quality of this last surviving unpublished long piece of Nabokov's prose? After all, it was you to whom Nabokov reported that he had "practically finished it in [his] head."¹¹

¹⁰ VN to F. Hills, April 20, 1976. Cited from Leving, *Shades of Laura*, 20.

¹¹ VN to F. Hills, November 8, 1976. Cited from *ibid.*, 21.

Anything by Nabokov, I thought, was worthy of publication. It seemed to me that one could applaud and celebrate Nabokov for his works at their best. He was a sick man toward the end of his life, suffering from a number of infections and being misprescribed with antibiotics as I have been. I am especially indulgent and sympathetic to his situation as I am even older now than he was at his death. He was seventy-seven and I am eighty-three, and certainly feeling my mortality to some degree. Having been prescribed wrong leads in antibiotics and hospitalized just a couple of weeks ago after falling down, I am now back on track and feeling fine.

And you have an excellent memory, I might add. How did your career unfold after Nabokov the writer was no longer your publisher's client?

Having worked with many other writers I still believe that Nabokov was the most dazzling of them all. At the beginning I was awed by *Lolita* and hoped to do anything that would allow me to collaborate with him (and later in 1983, I was happy to be in correspondence with Brian Boyd, who was undertaking a lengthy, multivolume biography of Nabokov). After Nabokov died, I no longer felt any great inclination to hang around McGraw-Hill. All I had to do was to walk across the street to Simon & Schuster in the halls of Rockefeller Center and they would pay me more as a senior editor than I was making at McGraw-Hill to be editor-in-chief. I liked not getting involved with management but working one-on-one with authors. By the time of my retirement, I ended up having edited hundreds of manuscripts and I am grateful for the enormous variety that that allowed me to undertake. But Nabokov, for sure, was a pinnacle of my career and even in his weaker works such as *The Original of Laura* he still remains superb.

Was your decision to leave McGraw-Hill triggered in any way by Nabokov's death?

He died in 1977, and I left the publishing house in 1979. All that held me at McGraw-Hill was now absolutely over. It was such a privilege to work with that gentleman during the last few years of his life. I started at the College Textbooks Division and I would represent it before the board, which consisted of people responsible for elementary and adult

textbooks as well as the general type of books that you would encounter at Barnes and Noble. At that time, frankly, I was more articulate than now, at the age of eighty-three, so they tapped me to become editor-in-chief of the General Books Division over the whole fleet, the cadre of editors who had had a great deal of experience. You can imagine the annoyance of those editors at this guy coming from the College Textbooks Division and being their boss, but I finally won them over and took it from there.

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