

VN: The Life and Art of Vladimir Nabokov by Andrew Field

One of the supreme ironies of 20th Century American literature is that its most distinctive and stylistically innovative voice was developed by an exiled Russian who came to America at age 40 by way of Germany and France. Vladimir Nabokov never returned to the land of his birth, but he passionately held on to his cultural heritage for as long as he lived. From these somewhat opposed elements, Andrew Field has crated an intriguing study that deftly combines, as the book's subtitle correctly proclaims, Nabokov's life and art.

Field, who has written two previous books on Nabokov and also compiled a comprehensive bibliography of the writer's works, not surprisingly got minimal help from his cordial but persistently evasive subject. In all, he managed to interview the writer over a period of but six weeks. Nabokov was impressed with Field's knowledge of his books and amused by the biographer's boldness and tenacity in ferreting out facts that Nabokov characteristically obscured but did not completely hide. In this he seems to have adopted Samuel Beckett's strategy of "neither helping nor hindering" his biographer.

According to Field, Vladimir Vladimirovich Nabokov was born in the 1st year of the 19th century into an enormously wealthy and influential White Russian family. His childhood was remarkable for its absence of any kind of stress. Young "Volodya's" parents were loving and lavish with their precocious child, sending him to the finest private school in Russia. Volodya thrived there and began to show signs of the classic narcissism (as opposed to egotism) that Field believes is central to an understanding of Nabokov's books. At the tender age of 17, he self-published a slim volume of his own poetry. (Today it is one of the rarest, most desirable, and expensive of modern first editions.)

One year later the Bolshevik Revolution uprooted the Nabokovs and their social class with savage finality. It was the pivotal event of the young artist's life, and it changed forever his way of engaging the world. Never again would he confront it head-on. Many years later, while teaching at Cornell, Nabokov confessed to a student that he didn't own a house because he was afraid he might lose it as his family had lost theirs to the revolution.

In an even rarer moment of self-revelation, Nabokov told his biographer: "The past is my double." Though his possessions had long since been confiscated, he stored ideas in an emigre's suitcase,

ready to be unpacked and used wherever he might find himself. Nabokov's attitudes and world view surfaced in mutated form in his fiction as he re-created his life with subtlety, understatement and verbal ambiguity enhanced by a thorough fluency in Russian, French and English.

The loss of a fortune, while materially catastrophic, can serve—for one who is strong-willed—as a builder of character. Having been deprived of the silver spoon with which in his early years he had tasted the best of life, Nabokov, according to Field, refused to feel sorry for himself and single-mindedly channeled all of his inner resources to transform himself into that most ephemeral of callings—an author.

In his fiction and in such autobiographical works as “Speak Memory” Nabokov conjured, fabricated and embellished his own experience through an exquisite use of language that was inimitable and with a telltale fastidiousness and condescension toward others that betrayed his patrician beginnings.

In reality, Nabokov was just one more fleeing European who landed on these still-peaceful shores in 1940. But Field shows that with the help of American acquaintances who admired his little-known Russian novels—notably Edmund Wilson—Nabokov found employment as a free-lance book reviewer and later as a professor of Russian literature. He also spent much of his spare time at New York's Museum of Natural History classifying rare butterflies that he had discovered and captured in what amounted to a lifelong hobby. It was while driving cross-country in search of new butterflies that Nabokov first witnessed the less-than-elegant Motel Six side of America. He would soon mercilessly (and hilariously) satirize America's junk-culture values in “Lolita,” the sensational novel that brought him literary fame.

The idea of a middle-aged professor who lusts after a pre-teenybopper and who bribes his way into her not unwilling arms with milkshakes and movie magazines is one with which a repressed '50s readership felt uncomfortable. Though, in fact, “Lolita” is now regarded as an American classic, its publication brought Nabokov unwanted notoriety. It also brought to an end four decades of hand-to-mouth living.

There was little in his own life that might have prompted Nabokov to create such a *succes de scandale*. Field tells us that as a dashing young emigre in Berlin, Vladimir had a number of affairs, several with older women. None were with “nymphets,” the new word

“Lolita” ushered into the language.

At age 26 he married a young Russian woman with whom he lived happily for more than 50 years until his death in 1977. Vera Nabokov was herself remarkable, capable of holding her own with a sharp-tongued, sometimes irascible husband. Field amusingly describes their spirited yet amiable sparring over incidents long in their mutual past. Vera served as Nabokov's amanuensis and as his buffer to the outside world when the author's fame brought scores of admirers and interpreters to his door.

I can think of few biographies that better integrate a man's ideas with his deeds. Field's perspicuous analyses of the books illuminate what he terms Nabokov's “nobility of spirit.”

In actual experience, as well as in his fiction, Vladimir Nabokov was an uncompromising marksman who disdained anything less than a bull's-eye. His arsenal—unshakable self-confidence, a linguistic capacity for the subtlest of wordplays, structural sleight-of-hand that disguised thematic intentions and an enduring belief in the primacy of art—was formidable enough to catapult this singular Russian into the upper reaches of American literature.

San Francisco Chronicle, 1986