

Vladimir Nabokov-1899-1977

Ann-Margret “Maggie Yonan” 1998

The eldest son of Vladimir Dmitrievich Nabokov and his wife Elena, Vladimir Vladimirovich Nabokov was born on April 22, 1899 into a Russian aristocratic family who fled Russia in the wake of the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution. One of five children, Nabokov was born and raised in Saint Petersburg, Russia, and was part of a household that spoke Russian, English, and French, making Nabokov tri-lingual at an early age.

In 1917 the Nabokov family left Vyra for a friend's estate near Yalta in the Crimea, where they remained for 18 months. Following the defeat of the White Army in the Crimea, the Nabokovs left Russia for exile in western Europe. After emigrating from Russia in 1919 the family settled briefly in England, where Vladimir enrolled in Trinity College in Cambridge and studied Slavic and romance languages. In 1923 he graduated from Cambridge and relocated to Berlin, where he gained some reputation within the colony of Russian emigres as a novelist and poet, writing under the pseudonym Vladimir Sirin. Nabokov had lived in Vyra, Russia with his family, and in 1925 marries Véra Slonim, a Russian émigré, living in Berlin. Their son, Dmitri, was born in 1934. In 1937, Vladimir and his family left Berlin for Paris due to their disgust with the Nazi regime and in light of Mrs. Nabokov's Jewish heritage. In Paris, VN continued to write in Russian, composed a few works in French, and also wrote his first novel in English, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*. He had determined that his most harmonious future lay in the English language; but since England was not prepared to supply him with an academic appointment, the Nabokovs moved to America.

In 1922, Nabokov's father was assassinated in Berlin by Russian monarchists as he tried to shelter their real target, Pavel Miklovich, a leader of the Constitutional Democratic Party-in-exile. This episode, of mistaken, violent death, would echo again and again in the author's fiction, where characters would meet their violent deaths under mistaken terms. In *Pale Fir*, for example, John Shade is mistaken for the king of Zembla and is assassinated.

Nabokov was a synaesthesia, (a neurological blending of the senses) and described aspects of synaesthesia in several of his works. In his memoir *Strong Opinions*, he notes that his wife also exhibited synaesthesia; like her husband, her mind's eye associated colors with particular letters. They discovered that their son Dmitri also shared the trait, and moreover that the colors he associated with some letters were in some cases blends of his parents' hues—“which is as if genes were painting in aquarelle” wrote one of his biographers. Vladimir Nabokov could hear color as he described it. Brian Boyd, Nabokov's biographer wrote the forward to Jean Holabird's book, *Alphabet In Color* saying, “He saw “q” as browner than “k” and “s” as not the light Blue of “C” but a mixture of Azure and Mother of Pearl. For anyone who has wondered how the colors Nabokov hears might manifest themselves visually, *Alphabet In Color* is a remarkable journey of discovery. Jean Holabird's interpretation of the colored alphabets of one of the twentieth century's literary greats is a revelation. Nabokov saw rich colors in letters and sounds and noted the deficiency of color in literature, praising Gogol as the first Russian writer to truly appreciate yellow and violet.”

Nabokov left Germany with his family in 1937 for Paris and in 1940 fled from the advancing German troops to the United States. It was here that he met Edmund Wilson, who introduced Nabokov's work to American editors, eventually leading to his international recognition.

Nabokov came to Wellesley College in 1941 as resident lecturer in comparative literature. The position, created specifically for him, provided an income and free time to write creatively and pursue his lepidoptery, (the branch of science dedicated to the study of butterflies and moths.) In *Strong Opinion*, he wrote, "Frankly, I never thought of letters as a career. Writing has always been for me a blend of dejection and high spirits, a torture and a pastime — but I never expected it to be a source of income. On the other hand, I have often dreamt of a long and exciting career as an obscure curator of lepidoptera in a great museum".

Nabokov is remembered as the founder of Wellesley's Russian Department. His lecture series on major nineteenth-century Russian writers was hailed as "funny," "learned," and "brilliantly satirical." During this time, the Nabokovs resided in Wellesley. Following a lecture tour through the United States, Nabokov returned to Wellesley for the 1944-45 academic year as a lecturer in Russian. He served through the 1947-48 term as Wellesley's one-man Russian Department, offering courses in Russian language and literature. His classes were popular, due as much to his unique teaching style as to the wartime interest in all things Russian. At the same time he was curator of lepidoptery at Harvard's Museum of Comparative Biology. After being encouraged by Morris Bishop, Nabokov left Wellesley in 1948 to become Chairman of Cornell's Comparative Literature department. In 1945, he became a naturalized citizen of the United States.

After the success of *Lolita*, Nabokov was able to move to Europe and devote himself to writing from 1960 to the end of his life, where he lived in the Montreux Palace Hotel in Montreux, Switzerland.

Nabokov's first writings were in Russian, but he came to his greatest distinction in the English language. For this achievement, he has been compared with Joseph Conrad; yet some view this as a dubious comparison, as Conrad only composed in English, never in his native Polish. Nabokov himself disdained the comparison for aesthetic reasons, declaring, "I differ from Joseph Conradically." Nabokov translated many of his own early works into English, sometimes in cooperation with his son Dmitri. His trilingual upbringing had a profound influence on his artistry. He has metaphorically described the transition from one language to another as the slow journey at night from one village to another with only a candle for illumination.

"Sounds" was written in 1923, when Nabokov was just a young man. Brian Boyd writes, "Sounds is a semi-autobiographical story." In the story, an unnamed narrator recalls, quite romantically, his unnamed paramour, a married schoolmarm. She plays the piano beautifully, they stroll, visit a friend and return home. The day is uneventful except that her husband has announced his unexpected arrival that night, thereby ending the relationship. At first reading, the story sounds so wonderfully romantic, and full of sublime perfection of sounds and colors and shapes and humidities and animals and hats. After reading it a few times, you begin to see it in a different way. It is playful, as well as beautifully and cleverly written describing a young man caught in his fancy. It presents a delusional observer and expect that

you, the reader, will somehow correct their myopia long enough to see the sadness in so blind a soul. The narrator's naivety also shows an aspect of real, true love. Somewhere among the sentimental wobbling eye mole and the romantic exploding toads is a man in love, and Nabokov presents it in an original and brilliant way. With its narrator's youthful rhapsodizing about Life, "Sounds" is about as close to the voice of a teenage Carlos Castaneda fan as Nabokov ever got (and perhaps closer than he wanted to get). But it is intelligent, finely-tuned rhapsodizing, describing an early experience of passion with a profound and glorious ambivalence. A young man enjoying a quiet love affair with a married woman suddenly realizes that "she alone is not my lover but the entire earth," and experiences an intense and subtly erotic understanding of his metaphysical connection with everything that lives -- all the while retaining his sense of self. In such a state, even a friend's grief becomes a source of delight - "I was radiant with his tears" -- because it is "happy as any moment or radiance is happy." Oblivious to this, his mistress tells him that she wants to run away with him. He responds with trivial talk about her cigarette case, and she realizes that he has said no. He rides off on his bike, still enrapt in his new vision, imagining that she will write to him and that he will not answer.

Superficially, this is about a blithe young man, selfishly obsessed with beauty and his own perceptions. But in a deeper way, the story is about a budding apprehension of life in all its layers, any of which can be experienced as beautiful and vital. On one hand, his desertion of the woman seems calloused. But even in his detachment, he cherishes her: "It was delicious losing you. You went off, jerking angularity at the glass door. But a different you departed otherwise, opening your pale eyes under my joyous kisses." In these lines, the story bears the seed of a parallel universe in which the woman, realizing that the entire earth is also her lover, rises out of her sorrow to meet the narrator in his place of detached perception, if only to wave goodbye. One can even say that this is the way Nabokov might have left Russia, his first love, his home, his earth. We can even go so far as to assume that as a young writer, Nabokov, might have purposely used the feelings of desertion and detachment in this work to reflect his own personal loss and tragedy.

Although *Sounds* was written in 1924 in Russian, it was not to be translated in English until 1996. The story of the break-up of his love affair with a married woman is set against the break-up of the world, as World War I comes to full-scale and Nabokov says goodbye to his lover, his life, his estate, his grand pianos, and his privileged life.

The fusion between a large, ecstatic vision and human-scale events, and his ability to inhabit both, characterizes all of Nabokov's work and is part of what gives it such an unusual, muscular poignancy. Far from being cold or inhuman, Nabokov's writing is suffused with a great joy that is supremely human, and that can take in all facets of being at once, although many humans may never allow themselves to experience this.

Nabokov's critics have pointed to the many contradictions in what he wrote as opposed to what he believed, and the way he lived his life. Nabokov was not a social commentator, as people expected him to be, having lived through war, revolution, displacement, exile, and even flight. He was a product of those times, yet never wrote in that context, instead, focusing his efforts on fiction and classic literature.

In his own words: "It is a combined sensation of having the whole universe entering you and of yourself wholly dissolving in the universe surrounding you. It is the prison wall of the ego suddenly crumbling away with the non-ego rushing in from the outside to save the prisoner -- who is already dancing in the open." Nabokov's *Lectures on Literature* also reveals his controversial ideas concerning art. He firmly believed that novels should not aim to teach and that readers should not merely empathize with characters but that a 'higher' aesthetic enjoyment should be attained, partly by paying great attention to details of style and structure. He detested what he saw as "general ideas" in novels.

Nabokov's detractors fault him for being an aesthete and for his over-attention to language and detail rather than character development. In his essay "Nabokov, or Nostalgia," Danilo Kiš wrote that Nabokov's is "a magnificent, complex, and sterile art."