The Cambridge Companion to Nabokov

Vladimir Nabokov held the unique distinction of being one of the most important writers of the twentieth century in two separate languages, Russian and English. Known for his verbal mastery and bold plots, Nabokov fashioned a literary legacy that continues to grow in significance. This volume offers a concise and informative introduction to the author’s fascinating creative world. Specially commissioned essays by distinguished scholars illuminate numerous facets of the writer’s legacy, from his early contributions as a poet and short-story writer to his dazzling achievements as one of the most original novelists of the twentieth century. Topics receiving fresh coverage include Nabokov’s narrative strategies, the evolution of his worldview, and his relationship to the literary and cultural currents of his day. The volume also contains valuable supplementary material such as a chronology of the writer’s life and a guide to further critical reading.
THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO
NABOKOV

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Notes on Contributors

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NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

The Library of Congress system of transliteration (without diacritics) has been used throughout the bibliographic references and the main text of the essays, with the following exceptions:

a. For personal names in the main text, the letters ю and я are rendered as “yu” and “ya” at the beginning of the name, and the sequence ю and я is rendered as “y” at the end of the name (e.g., “Yakov,” “Yury,” “Bely”).

b. The spelling used by Nabokov for names of figures in his works has been retained (e.g., “Chernyshevski” and “Koncheyev”).

c. We have retained the familiar English spelling of well-known Russian figures (e.g., “Tolstoy,” “Gogol”). Soft signs occurring within well-known proper names (e.g., “Olga”) are generally not denoted to facilitate reading for the non-specialist.
ABBREVIATIONS


LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS


CHRONOLOGY

Dates before the departure of the Nabokov family from Russia in April 1919 are given in Old Style (Julian Calendar); the New Style date (Gregorian Calendar) is given in parentheses. In the nineteenth century, the Julian Calendar lagged the Gregorian Calendar by twelve days; in the twentieth century, the discrepancy grew to thirteen days. Thus, while April 10, 1899 – the date of Vladimir Nabokov’s birth in Russia – was April 22 in the West, it became April 23 in 1900. The sources for the information contained in this chronology are Brian Boyd’s two-volume biography of Nabokov (Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years and Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years), the chronologies Boyd prepared for the Library of America editions of Nabokov’s English-language novels and The Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov, Michael Juliar’s Vladimir Nabokov: A Descriptive Bibliography, the volume entitled Nabokov’s Butterflies that was edited and annotated by Brian Boyd and Robert Michael Pyle, and Stacy Schiff’s Véra.

1899 Vladimir Vladimirovich Nabokov (VN) born on April 10 (April 23) at 47 Bolshaia Morskaia Street, St. Petersburg. Parents are Vladimir Dmitrievich Nabokov (VDN [1870–1922]), a teacher of criminal law at the Imperial School of Jurisprudence, and Elena Ivanovna Nabokov (née Rukavishnikov [1876–1939]).

1900 Brother Sergei born February 28 (March 13).

1901 VN’s Rukavishnikov grandparents die. Mother inherits country estate Vyra, and VN’s uncle Vasily inherits country estate Rozhdestveno. Mother travels with Vladimir and Sergei to Biarritz, France.

1902 VN and Sergei learn English from British governess, Rachel Home. Sister Olga born December 24 (January 5, 1903).

1903 VDN responds to pogrom in Kishinev in April by writing article in journal Pravo that criticizes governmental attitudes fostering climate of anti-Semitism. Family travels to Paris and Nice in the fall.
1904

Russo-Japanese War begins in February. Nabokov family travels to Rome, Naples, and Beaulieu. National congress of zemstvos (local assemblies) meets in St. Petersburg, calls for major political changes (constitution, civil rights); final session meets in Nabokov home.

1905

January 9 (January 22) – “Bloody Sunday” – tsarist troops fire on demonstrators in St. Petersburg. VDN deprived of court title after denunciation of the incident in the St. Petersburg Duma (City Council). Family travels to Abbazia (now Opatija, Croatia) in February. VDN returns to St. Petersburg and renews involvement in political activity; becomes one of founders of Constitutional Democratic (CD) Party.

1906

Family returns to Russia. Swiss governess Cécile Miauton joins family. Sister Elena born March 18 (March 31). VDN continues pushing for major political reform in State Duma until its dissolution in July. VN tutored in Russian by village school teacher Vasily Zhernosekov. VDN becomes editor of Rech' newspaper.

1907

VN seriously ill with pneumonia; studies books on butterflies while recovering.

1908

VDN serves three-month sentence in Kresty prison for signing Vyborg Manifesto in 1906 calling for civil disobedience.

1909

Family travels to Biarritz, where VN falls in love with nine-year-old girl, Claude Depré (“Collette” in VN’s memoir Speak, Memory).

1910

VN pursues his interests in lepidoptery. Family travels to Germany in fall.

1911

VN enters Tenishev School in St. Petersburg. Brother Kirill born June 17 (June 30).

1912

VN studies drawing with Mstislav Dobuzhinsky.

1914

Composes first poem. Germany declares war on Russia. VDN called up for military service as reservist. St. Petersburg is renamed Petrograd.

1915

VN bedridden with typhus. After recovering, begins serious romantic affair with Valentina (“Liusia”) Evgenievna Shulgina. In November he co-edits school literary journal, lunaia mys’ (Young Thought), in which his first published poem, “Osen’” (“Fall”) appears.

1916

1917

October 25 (November 7) – Bolshevik Revolution. VDN sends sons Vladimir and Sergei to Crimea to avoid their conscription into the Red Army; they are soon joined by their mother and siblings. Arrested and imprisoned for several days by the Bolsheviks, VDN leaves Petrograd and rejoins his family in December. VN composes first chess problems.

1918
German army takes Crimea in April. VN hunts butterflies, composes poems. After departure of German troops, VDN becomes Minister of Justice in Crimean Provisional Government.

1919
Facing approach of Bolshevik troops, Nabokov family departs Sebastopol for Athens on Greek ship on April 2 (April 15). From Athens, Nabokov family moves on to London. VN enters Trinity College, Cambridge, in October; begins studying zoology and then modern languages (French and Russian). Writes poetry in Russian and in English; also writes first entomological paper (published 1920).

1920
Nabokov family moves to Berlin; VDN helps establish Russian-language newspaper Rul’ (The Rudder). VN’s poem “Home” appears in Trinity Magazine; his poem “Remembrance” appears in The English Review. He also publishes Russian poems in Rul’ using the pen name “Cantab.”

1921

1922
On March 28, VDN is shot and killed while trying to defend Pavel Miliukov from assassination by two monarchist gunmen. In June, VN receives BA degree and moves to Berlin, where he becomes engaged to Svetlana Siewert. Receives commission to translate Lewis Carroll’s Alice in Wonderland. Collection of poems entitled Grozd’ (The Cluster) published in December.
Chronology

1923

1924
Publishes several short stories, including “Kartofel’nyi elf” (“The Potato Elf”), “Katastrofa” (translated as “Details of a Sunset”), and “Bakhman” (“Bachmann”) in Russian periodicals. Drama *Polius* (The Pole) published in August. Nabokov supports himself by giving private lessons in tennis, boxing, Russian, and English.

1925

1926
*Mashen’ka* published in March.

1927
Short story “Uzhas” (“Terror”) published in *Sovremennye zapiski*, the premier literary journal of the Russian emigration. Long narrative poem “Universitetskai poema” (“A University Poem”) also appears in *Sovremennye zapiski*.

1928
Novel *Korol’, dama, valet* (King, Queen, Knave) published in September.

1929

1930

1931
Novel *Podvig* (Glory) published serially in *Sovremennye zapiski*.

1932

1933

1934
Novel *Otchaianie* (Despair) appears serially in *Sovremennye zapiski*. Son Dmitri born in May.


1941 Gives lectures on Russian literature at Wellesley College. *The Event* is produced in New York City. Nabokov is driven to Stanford by former student Dorothy Leuthold; on route west, Nabokov
disCOVERS new SPECIES of butterfly he names Neonympha dorothea dorothea in Leuthold's honor (the butterfly has since been reclassified as a subspecies, Cyllopsis pertepida dorothea). Begins one-year appointment as Resident Lecturer in Comparative Literature at Wellesley College in the fall. Begins helping put Lepidoptera collection at Harvard's Museum of Comparative Zoology in order. Publishes articles on Lepidoptera in the Journal of the New York Entomological Society. The Real Life of Sebastian Knight is published by New Directions in December.


1943 Begins teaching non-credit Russian language course at Wellesley College. Receives Guggenheim Fellowship to work on new novel, Bend Sinister. During summer, collects butterflies and works on novel in Utah.


1946 Works on lectures for course on Russian literature at Wellesley. Finishes Bend Sinister.


1949 Continues to publish excerpts from autobiography and to teach at Cornell. Participates in writers’ conference in Utah in July.

1950 Begins working on novel entitled The Kingdom by the Sea, which later evolves into Lolita. Discouraged, he is prevented from burning
his early drafts by Véra. Begins teaching major course on European fiction at Cornell.


1953 Takes leave from Cornell to work on translation of Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin*. Publishes first chapter of *Pnin* in the *New Yorker*. Finishes writing *Lolita* in December.

1954 *Drugie berega*, a revised Russian version of Nabokov’s autobiographical memoir, published. Nabokov unsuccessful in finding an American publisher for *Lolita*.


1961  Works on *Pale Fire*, finishes novel in December. Takes rooms in Montreux Palace Hotel, Switzerland.


1964  Nabokov’s last public reading takes place in April, at Harvard University. His translation of *Eugene Onegin* with extensive notes and commentary published in June. *The Defense*, Michael Scammell’s translation of *Zaschita Luzhina*, appears in September.


1968  *Ada* published in late spring. Joseph Papp stages Russell McGrath’s adaptation of *Invitation to a Beheading* at the New York Shakespeare Festival in March.


1972  *Transparent Things* published in October.

1974  

1975  

1976  
Third collection of early stories, *Details of a Sunset and Other Stories*, published in March. Nabokov sustains concussion from a fall, hospitalized for ten days. Later infection sends him back to hospital from June to September. Selects poems for extensive collection of Russian poetry entitled *Stikhi (Poems)* that will not be published until 1979.

1977  
Hospitalized in Lausanne with fever and influenza from March to May. Returns to hospital in Lausanne in June. Dies on July 2. After cremation, body is interred in Clarens cemetery.

1991  
Véra Nabokov dies on April 6.