

**Meeting of The Novel Club**  
**April 2, 2019**  
**Pnin, by Vladimir Nabokov**

President Catherine LaCroix called the meeting to order at 8:20 pm at the new home of Tricia and Kent Smith and thanked them and Louise Mooney for their gracious hosting.

Guests: Tricia introduced her husband Kent, the Ogans introduced Rosemary Kelly, who will be proposed for membership, and Linda Sandhaus introduced her mother, Shirley, who is visiting from Rockville, Maryland.

Membership: Peter Haas reported that we have 32 active members and 11 emeritus members, with two prospects and possibly a third in the pipeline.

Programs: The Annual Meeting will be held at the LaCroix home on Sunday April 28 at 4:00 pm. Food will be provided; it is not a potluck but members should bring adult beverages of their choosing. Desserts will be welcome.

Art Stupay will send an email to members regarding the May visit of author Bruno Schultz, who will speak at Suburban Temple. Whitney Lloyd announced that Viet Thanh Nguyen, author of The Sympathizer, one of the books proposed for next year, will speak at CWRU on April 11. He will send information by email.

Roland Philip presented the biography of Vladimir Nabokov.

Nabokov was born April 22, 1899 (or April 10 in the Julian calendar), to a prominent, wealthy family in St. Petersburg. His father had been in service to the Czar and the family moved to their country estate during the Revolution. In his childhood, he was tutored and Nabokov's mother read to him constantly. His close companion was his younger brother Sergei. Young Vladimir developed an interest in both boxing and butterflies; butterflies became a lifelong obsession.

In 1911 he entered school for the first time and, also for the first time, found himself in the company of "strangers," i.e. non-family. In 1914 he started writing poetry. His father had spent three months in prison and the family eventually left Russia via Crimea. Just prior to his 20th birthday he left his homeland, never to return. In Paris and then London his abiding topics for his poetry were Russia and women. He studied at Trinity College, Cambridge, taught and wrote poetry and short fiction. He met his future wife Vera, who came from a wealthy Jewish family, when she quoted his poetry back to him.

Nabokov felt despair for conditions in Russia, and it was difficult to get into the United States but he eventually succeeded, with help from Edmund Wilson. In 1940, having accepted a position at Stanford where he taught Russian language and literature and was a writer in residence, he and Vera traveled by car across the United States, staying in motels - an experience he put to creative use in Lolita.

He continued to translate Russian poetry and to collect butterflies. He was hired to teach Russian at Wellesley on a contract, but financial stability did not come until his professorship of Russian Literature at Cornell in 1947. He and Vera enjoyed summer road trips - with Vera driving - when he collected butterflies. Nabokov wrote most of his novels while at Cornell but finding a publisher was not easy. It took eighteen months to find a publisher for Pnin, and Lolita took much longer. First published in France, the novel did not become a major success until the late 1950's. In 1955 Graham Greene named it one of the three best books of the year.

In 1961 Nabokov and Vera moved to the Palace Hotel in Montreux, Switzerland, where they lived until his death in 1977. Finally, the success of his novels meant that he no longer had to teach to make a living.

David Novak presented the critical paper of Pnin, which he described as a "fraternal twin" of Lolita. Nabokov needed the income, and wrote it at the same time, often in American motels. Waindell College, where Pnin teaches Russian and struggles with the English language and American idioms, to comic effect, bears oblique references to Cornell and Wellesley - is the novel a self-parody?

David made note of the structure of the novel's four themes: language and communication, love and relationships, home and exile, the vision of the United States and longing for Russia. Like his character Pnin, Nabokov missed the Russian language and suffered the isolation of exile. Both the author and the fictional character changed lodgings frequently, finding no comfortable place to be. Pnin is revealed to be out of place to himself and others. He often dreams of Russia. His vision of America is illustrated in the anecdote about buying a "football" for his son Victor. Pnin understands neither America nor football - and he doesn't know or understand Victor.

Discussion followed. Is the character Pnin believable? The consensus was yes, and several members recognized his characteristics in people they knew. A slightly overdrawn but true portrayal of academia. One described it as if Pnin were surrounded by a veil, that is to say the culture he isn't part of and cannot understand. Nabokov portrays him as he understands himself but also as others see him. Pnin is a somewhat ridiculous but sympathetic character.

What emotions does Pnin elicit from the reader? Sadness, affection, distraction, compassion (from a French speaker). Similarities were noted with Nabokov's own childhood. Are we laughing with him or at him? Answers on both sides.

Themes: general admiration for Nabokov's use of language, descriptive powers. One noted that the word "squirrel" appears in every chapter. Nabokov's brother died in a concentration camp during the Holocaust, and "squirrel" has a connection to the name of a commandant At Buchenwald.

Would Novel Club members invite any of the book's characters to a Novel Club meeting, or home for dinner? David's last discussion question elicited lively speculation (and might be a standard question for future reading! After enjoying the hosts' excellent wine and food, members are well disposed to consider such.)

With thanks to our hosts Tricia Smith and Louise Mooney, to Roland Philip and David Novak for excellent papers, and apologies for lapses and errors when this writer could not read her own notes -

Leigh Fabens  
Substitute secretary

