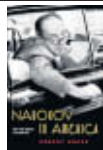


Reborn in the USA

The weird motels and vast wildernesses of America were the making of Vladimir Nabokov, says *Duncan White*

NABOKOV IN AMERICA
Robert Roper



368PP, BLOOMSBURY USA, £20, EBOOK £8.96

★★★★★

Vladimir Nabokov was a writer of such self-possessed authority that it can be hard to imagine him as just another broke immigrant milling in the crowd on Ellis Island. The Russian Revolution forced Nabokov into exile in Berlin before the rise of Adolf Hitler sent him first to Paris and then to New York. With a Jewish wife and son, there was no question of staying in France and he managed to get his family aboard one of the last ships out before the Nazis arrived. In America he found not only sanctuary after two decades of uncertainty but also a place in which to reinvent himself: he arrived an obscure Russian writer and left the most famous literary

novelist in the world. How this happened is the subject of Robert Roper's new biography, which focuses on the two decades Nabokov spent in America after arriving in 1940. While the writer repeatedly professed his affection for his adopted country ("I am as American as April in Arizona"), his feelings were complicated. He cared little for American literature and was repulsed by the prevalence of commercial vulgarity. In his later years he did not like the course the country was taking, with the Vietnam protests and rising counterculture. It is Roper's argument, however, that Nabokov's claim to greatness "rests most solidly on the American books" because his adopted nation prompted him to write with "a new audacity... an American-style effrontery." This gets a bit tenuous at times, especially when he sees Nabokov's destiny prefigured in his Russian childhood (he read Westerns), but Roper gets something fundamentally right about the directness and immediacy of Nabokov's American books, something that is missing in the nakedly modernist Russian work and the intricate novels that came out of his later years living in a Swiss hotel. As an immigrant, Nabokov had to start again in a new language, with almost nothing to his name. He was forced to immerse himself in a teeming and varied social reality in a way that he had not in Europe. In Berlin he had belonged to a relatively small émigré community understandably preoccupied by Russian politics and culture. But in America he assimilated. Instead of holing up in New York City, he lit out for the territory. He had a teaching assignment in California in the summer of 1941 and to get there he made the first of his epic road trips to the West (he didn't drive, so his wife Véra and one of their friends shared the load).

So thrilled was he by the American wilderness, and the opportunity for butterfly hunting it presented, that the road trips became a summer vacation ritual while he was teaching at Wellesley and Cornell. The Nabokovs drove in excess of 200,000 miles on these journeys and Roper has diligently followed in their tyre treads, looking up the motels and cabins they stayed in and interviewing those who remembered them. He writes superbly about these trips, placing them in the context of the mid-century boom in American tourism. He describes their arrival at Yosemite: "Sentinel Rock, Cathedral Rocks, El Capitan, and Half Dome came suddenly, wantonly into view – it was one of the most remarked-upon tourist views in North America, an astonishment of granite." Nabokov was perhaps less interested than Roper in picture-postcard scenery. He took note of the crass, the kitsch and the seedy on the American roadside; it was not just butterflies he was collecting. He was gathering material for the beautiful and strange America he was trying to invent, material that would find its



HOIST TAPE/HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES

On the wing: Nabokov found thrilling opportunities for butterfly hunting in America

most brilliant expression in the book that made his name: *Lolita*. As well as following Nabokov's itineraries, Roper has done some digging in the archives and has found interesting material in diaries and correspondence. He argues for a reassessment of Nabokov's relationship with the American agent Altigracia de Jannelli, whom he feels has been maligned in previous biographies. Nabokov signed with her in 1934 and she tirelessly submitted his work to American publishers, racking up nearly 100 rejections. She repeatedly encouraged Nabokov to write books with a better chance of selling (much to his distaste), but Roper argues that she was proved right. She died in 1945, so did not live to see the success of Nabokov's more accessible books: *Invitation to a Beheading* and *Lolita*. Roper also comes to the defence of Edmund Wilson, America's foremost literary critic. Nabokov and Wilson became close friends before bitterly, and publicly, falling out. Wilson was a perverse reader of Nabokov's fiction and did not come off well in their



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Read it and weep

A Booker-longlisted story of abuse is almost too distressing to finish, says *Anthony Cummins*

A LITTLE LIFE
by Hanya Yanagihara



736PP, PICADOR, **£16.99**, EBOOK **£6.59**

★★★★★

Hanya Yanagihara's second novel knocked American critics for six on its publication in the United States earlier this year. It doesn't seem very remarkable at first. Four former college room-mates are making their way in New York City: there's Malcolm, an architect still living with his parents at 27; JB, a portrait painter struggling to stand out from more experimental peers; Willem, an actor who mostly waits tables; and Jude, a junior state prosecutor. The early pages lay out their personal histories. Malcolm feels

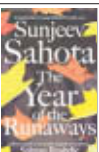
unloved at home compared with his sister. Willem's brother died as a boy. JB, who has Haitian roots, used to pretend he was poor and uncultured to discomfit his white friends. Exempt from the flurry of exposition is Jude, who has problems walking and always keeps his body covered. Someone asks why he's never told what happened to his legs; Jude says only that it was a car "injury" (never "accident"). Visceral later scenes show Jude regularly locking himself away to slash his own skin. Dozens of opaque references to the possible reasons for this make the novel's first 300 pages a grisly guessing game. We're told Jude "can't remember being a child and being able to define happiness: there was only misery, and fear, and the absence of misery or fear, and the latter state was all he had needed or wanted". Yanagihara's teasing structure suspends the action between this shadowy prehistory and Jude's future death, hinted at in proleptic monologues from his former law teacher, who refers to him in a regretful past tense. Occupying the novel's here and now is the group's rise to the top of their various fields as they criss-cross continents for work and play. Despite catastrophic setbacks – not least the brief appearance of a violent boyfriend who prohibits Jude from using a wheelchair – Jude's life in the present seems almost charmed. His friends stay loyal whatever their own pressures. At one point his ever-present personal doctor, Andy,

leaves his week-old baby to come to his aid – in a late cameo, Andy's wife says his devotion to Jude is what first attracted her to him. That sort of line might seem a weak cover for vital plot machinery. But Yanagihara knows what she's doing: her point is to contrast the relative harmony of Jude's adulthood with the horrors of his boyhood. While those horrors aren't a complete surprise – his friends suspect sexual abuse – the actual revelations are poleaxing and render even the novel's title repulsive. If it makes difficult reading, spare a thought for the author. Yanagihara sets up the narrative in such a way that its power rests on her ability to select details that will make us squirm and flinch – and yet at the same time she has to avoid seeming to exploit the sensitive subject matter. I think she succeeds: her close attention to the texture of a life lived in the aftermath of abuse left me feeling distressed but not diminished. But I can imagine it might anger readers who would wish for a more positive conclusion to Jude's story. There's something almost heretically pessimistic about this book, as though it were an experiment calibrated purely to demonstrate that neither love nor money can heal past hurt. It's an achievement, for sure, though I'm not sure I'll want to return to it any time soon – perhaps because it leaves an imprint so stark you don't have to.

A morality tale for our times

For many migrants who make it to Britain the suffering has only just begun, says *Lucy Daniel*

THE YEAR OF THE RUNAWAYS
by Sunjeev Sahota



480PP, PICADOR, **£14.99**, EBOOK **£5.99**

★★★★★

Given the current crisis in Calais, Sunjeev Sahota's second novel is certainly a book for our times. Longlisted for this year's Booker Prize, it relates the exploitation of Indian illegal labourers in Britain, a whole invisible underclass of "faujis". In the time-worn pattern of the immigrant novel, recent arrivals out obscure references in order to say something "simpler, possibly more urgent" about what makes him such an important writer to so many. It is to his great credit that he does exactly that. flawess. There are quite a few small errors that provoke the Nabokovian pedant (for example, not distinguishing between the two memoirs, *Conclusive Evidence* and *Speak, Memory*) and while the writing is for the most part limpid, there are blemishes ("over the moon", "open sesame", "through the wringer"). Perhaps more seriously, Roper tries to have it both ways in claiming that Nabokov was alone in noticing "an American obsession with child rape" in one part of his book, while in another speculating that Nabokov's interest in young girls was down to his "own private fascination". Is Nabokov pointing out the creepiness, or is he just a creep? Overall, though, Roper's enthusiasm for his subject wins out. In his introduction he says his aim was to "borrow" Nabokov from the scholars who have spent the last few decades "fossicking" out obscure references in order to say something "simpler, possibly more urgent" about what makes him such an important writer to so many. It is to his great credit that he does exactly that.

men, all of whom have arrived in Britain by unorthodox means. Randeep, for instance, is on a marriage visa; the son of a government bureaucrat in India, this "little prince" is running away from something shameful. Tarlochan, a former rickshaw driver who arrived in the back of a vegetable lorry, is an "untouchable" who finds himself persecuted by caste even in Sheffield. Nearby lives Randeep's visa-wife, Narinder, a British-born Sikh woman, whose devout beliefs are about to be sorely tested. The main characters are superbly well drawn. Salutory revelations about their pasts in India round out each figure, now so crushed by immigrant life. The portrait of men living together through cold and squalor is also eloquent. The housemates share the milk run and roti-cooking, but feel unable to reveal their pasts to each other. There is jealousy and paranoia as they steal each other's jobs and stash wedges of cash in their wardrobes, divvied into piles for sending home to pay off the debt collectors. With all the grimy detail of back-breaking manual labour on building sites, in fast-food restaurants and sewers, the novel feels like a work of social protest. Tarlochan's spell as a dish-washer inevitably recalls Orwell's *Down and Out in Paris and London*. A veteran fellow worker tells him, "Take my advice and go back now. Before there's nothing to go back for and you're stuck here. Just a body needing to be clothed and fed." However, *The*

Year of the Runaways is never explicitly polemical, but is steered instead by a humane morality. Sahota's restrained voice gives a documentary feel to his characters' transit through Russia and France on fake visas; their desperate scrabbling for casual labour when a van pulls up; the freezing car park shed in which they are locked at night, their passports confiscated; their utter isolation in England when they arrive. The narrative unfurls with an enormous variety of characters; when it reaches India, the story seems to burst out of its own framework with incredible confidence. Without flights of fancy, neither sensationalising nor preachy, its greatest asset is that it doesn't oversimplify. It tells of the gradual sapping of young men's strength and spirit. "It's important that a man has a sense of a real home. A sense of his own ending," says Avtar's tutor, touching perhaps on the essence of the novel. Sahota is tuned in to a frequency that slips under the radars of most people who live comfortably in Britain, and the novel convinces with the keenness, and perhaps the sheer bulk, of its observations. If the ending is somewhat pallid, conscientiously tying up storylines, the bulk of the book is thoroughly believable, irresistibly humane and often funny. There is enough fine drawing of human foibles, of different idioms and of modern British life to fill up several lesser novels.