

PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

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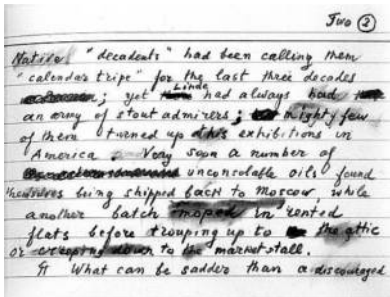
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THE ORIGINAL OF LAURA (DYING IS FUN). (2009). BY VLADIMIR NABOKOV. EDITED BY DMITRI NABOKOV. NEW YORK: KNOPF.

Reviewed by Miles Beller

Grace, mystery, intrigue, invention . . .

These are some of the qualities distinguishing *The Original of Laura*, Vladimir Nabokov's posthumously published work printed against his will two years ago. However, the above description is not directed at the writing but the binding. Concerning the writing, one can say that *Laura* is far from the fully formed fiction of Nabokov's *Lolita* or *Pnin*. Rather, it's a clutch of notations and observations, "A novel in fragments," as the book's subtitle advises, jottings adding up to a sketchy record of story and characters. But more on this later. For as a physical object, influential product designer Chip Kidd has built *Laura* into a book that is literature as sculpture, something to be held

and weighted and appreciated. As paperbound entity, *The Original of Laura* is a visual tome poem.

A funereal fade-to-black typeface dust jacket conceals light beige covers that to the touch feel like stretched gessoed canvas. Reproduced on these covers are enlarged facsimiles of the first and last smeary index cards of the 138 that Nabokov handwrote in pencil to strategize the novel. Then following an introduction by Dmitri Nabokov (the author's only child and a recognized translator in his own right), the reader receives a greater surprise. On heavy stock pages tinted light gray Kidd has placed not only the typeset text of Nabokov's words but also has provided perforated reproductions of the front and back of the actual index cards on which Nabokov wrote. In fact, fanning *Laura's* 278 pages is akin to thumbing a big flipbook, Nabokov's large "X's" on many of the index cards' rears somersaulting with sketchy grace in jumpy progression. Given the intelligence and interactive enlightenment of Kidd's container, the book's design is integral to Nabokov's content, establishing itself as central to the work's being. Here the idea of book as "thing" is keenly felt, form as important as function. No Kindle or iPad could possibly evoke *Laura* the way Kidd's creation does, the

book's tactile do-it-yourself structure establishing the primacy of the designer's plan.

So fully does Kidd's concept become Nabokov's expression that any true consideration of *Laura* must take into account outward aesthetics as well as language and edits. To circle round for a moment, this point is critical since Nabokov did not want *Laura* to go public. A sick and suffering Nabokov was working on the novel in 1977 when he died. And though he had instructed wife Vera to burn *Laura*, the family fretted about what to do for three decades, the writing locked away in a Swiss vault and only seen by Dmitri, Vera, and select scholars.

Then some years after Vera's passing, Dmitri decided to allow the index cards to appear in book form, believing that there was value in letting the public nibble on his father's fiction even in its half-baked state. Academic and critical outrage followed *Laura's* press run late in 2009, much of the bile personally directed at Dimitri, who stood accused of heartlessly disregarding his father's final wishes.

Family members and friends wrestling with whether to release a work an artist has ordered destroyed after his or her death is nothing new. Accounts of Virgil instructing that the *Aeneid* be annihilated have circulated since antiquity. Literary history also includes stories of Kafka and T. S. Eliot wishing that writings of theirs be burned once they died. In fact, Nabokov

himself had twice come close to incinerating the *Lolita* manuscript but was stopped by Vera. Yet on *Laura's* publication, the 75-year-old Dmitri was subjected to particularly venomous attacks.

In literary terms, the anger *Laura* unleashed ranged from the self-righteously piteous to the brutally punishing. According to Alexander Theroux, the Nabokov responsible for this ill literature was the arts and letters equivalent of baseball's stricken Lou Gehrig in 1939. Fellow writer Martin Amis judged what he deemed a botch of a book on par with "a nuclear accident." Concerning the content of Nabokov's last write, one can surely say sex saturates the fiction, much of it pertaining to prepubescent action. Life's end also is a preoccupation, the last index card a synonym fest of death bearing the notations "efface," "expunge," "erase," "delete," "rub out," "wipe out," "obliterate." The book also ports the parenthesis framed injunction "(Dying Is Fun)." Moreover, *Laura* appears to be an exploration of lives going from fact to fiction and back again; a Nabokovian meta pause that simultaneously shuffles between actualities and fabrications, the play of the real a matter of contextural ordeal.

As for plot, there's not a lot. The story involves obese academic Philip Wild, husband to a skinny and promiscuous gal named Flora, his attraction to Flora initially ignited by his love for another woman. The book begins at a party and

advances through a continuous quartet of scenes, after which matters become increasingly disjointed. Though we never know Wild's age, what does emerge is his preoccupation with his own end; death and the afterlife are a recurring interest of Nabokov. There's also the business of Wild's efforts to deploy a kind of meditation to will himself out of existence, a mind game to dematerialize life and living. "I hit upon the art of thinking away my body, my being, mind itself," Wild informs us, adding, "To think away thought—luxurious suicide, delicious dissolution!"

Nabokov inhabits *Laura* in hazy absentia; rumor rather than vigor, a suggestive shadow versus corporeal reckoning. Yet however slight the story and tenuous its structure, does not a privileged peek into a great artist's process hold significance? Da Vinci's incomplete *Adoration of the Magi*, Schubert's unfinished *Symphony No. 8 in B Minor*, and Fitzgerald's patchy *The Last Tycoon* offer lessons in how masterworks are assembled, revealing the artist's early impulses and formative decisions. Access to these considerations more fully informs us about intent and execution, about the particular qualities and quirks that uniquely make an enduring artist. In fact, contrary to a reviewer's rage, one does encounter in Nabokov's *Laura* pleasures of phrase and imagery. With a great writer even failure is veined with minor miracles. Nabokov writes: "She

saw their travels in terms of adverts and a long talcum-white beach with the tropical breeze tossing the palms and her hair; he saw it in terms of forbidden foods, frittered away time, and ghastly expenses." Consider, too, this appraisal of Philip Wild: "A brilliant neurologist, a renowned lecturer and a gentleman of independent means, Dr. Philip Wild had everything save an attractive exterior. However, one soon got over the shock of seeing that enormously fat creature mince toward the lectern on ridiculously small feet and of hearing the cock-a-doodle sound with which he cleared his throat before starting to enchant one with his wit."

(As an aside, the name "Laura" resonates with intriguing mass culture echoes, evoking sex and death in sure pop terms. There's the 1944 movie by Otto Preminger bearing the one word title, *Laura*, a black-and-white noir-ish love story thriller described by one critic as "a psychological study of deviant, kinky obsession." Some 15 years later, a squishy 1960s radio hit quoted a dying young man's last treacly words in the title to "Tell Laura I Love Her").

John Lanchester's appraisal of *The Original of Laura* for The New York Review of Books offered that this self-described "novel in fragments" might better be called "fragments of a novel." For Lanchester "the simplest and perhaps most enduring reason for reading Nabokov is that his work is so full of

sensual detail, and those sensual details are so precisely and vividly evoked.” While Nabokov’s pinning of the viscerally senuous is surely diminished in *Laura*, the passages that are precisely fixed display an indelible immediacy, as when he writes: “This is Flora of the close-set dark-blue eyes and cruel mouth recollecting in her midtwenties fragments of her past, with details lost or put back in the wrong order, *Tail* between *delta* and *slit*, on dusty dim shelves, this is she. Everything about her is bound to remain blurry, even her name which seems to have been made expressly to have another one modeled upon it by a fantastically lucky artist. Of art, of love, of the difference between dreaming and waking she knew nothing but would have darted at you like a flatheaded blue serpent if you questioned her.”

Many years ago, Nabokov identified three essentials that he believed marked a major writer; these were the ability to be a storyteller, to serve as a teacher, and to function as an enchanter. It was the last, however, that the Russian émigré deemed most important: the skill to enchant. While the overall spell cast by Nabokov’s *Laura* is thin compared to his earlier incarnations, this final offering ought not be missed. This advice returns us to the top of things, to Chip Kidd’s entrancing delivery of *Laura* as a book. Kidd has conjured depth and delight, his kinetic packaging bringing us that much closer to Nabokov’s

consuming fire for words and linguistic paradox. So go ahead, in this instance, judge a cover by its book. No Kidding.

The following link (below) is a webpage that shows a historical video of Nabokov’s passionate interest in his books and their design. . . .

<http://lauraoriginal.weebly.com/>

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