BOOKS: ENTOMOLOGY

Blue Book Value

May Berenbaum

There are a surprising number of very famous people who (by virtue of their interests and inclinations) might have been entomologists but abandoned that career path due to circumstance, opportunity, or financial concerns. Among the ranks of these entomologists at heart are Dr. John Braxton Hicks, a 19th-century obstetrician who described false labor contractions; Lord Lionel Walter Rothschild, a banker and Conservative member of the British Parliament in the early 1900s; and Alfred C. Kinsey, the Indiana University zoology professor who won lasting fame for his landmark studies on human sexual behavior.

Perhaps the most famous of these entomologists whose talents took them in other directions is Vladimir Nabokov, one of the most celebrated figures of 20th-century literature. Nabokov had a lifelong fascination with insects, particularly butterflies, and he published 22 scientific papers and notes on entomological subjects. For six years, he was actually employed as an entomologist in Harvard's Museum of Comparative Zoology. Although circumstances led him toward lasting fame as a writer of elegant and allusive fiction, Nabokov never completely broke from his scientific self; entomological facts, names, images, and metaphors burst from his writings. As he proudly proclaimed in a 1962 interview, "There's a butterfly in every one of my novels."

Thus, it is not surprising that many entomologists hold Nabokov in special regard nor that some have contributed to two recent books celebrating his entomological leanings. *Nabokov's Butterflies*, edited and annotated by Brian Boyd and Robert M. Pyle, is a comprehensive collection of Nabokov's writings on insects. Boyd, the author of a celebrated biography of Nabokov, and Pyle, a lepidopterist who has written several highly regarded books on butterflies, present a dazzling span of work. Their volume encompasses text from novels, stories, screenplays, letters, notes, reviews, and interviews, as well as from Nabokov's scientific publications (longer papers have been intelligently excerpted by Pyle). Even samples of drawings of genitalia and sketches of wing scales are faithfully reproduced. Some selections appear in print for the first time. Noteworthy in this regard is "Father's Butterflies," an extended addendum penned to accompany Nabokov's novel *The Gift* and newly translated from the Russian by his son Dmitri. The editors also offer chapters on Nabokov written to their own strengths; Boyd recounts Nabokov's life, and Pyle details his entomological contributions.

Nabokov's Butterflies
Unpublished and Uncollected Writings
Brian Boyd and Robert Michael Pyle, Eds.
Beacon, Boston, 2000. 796 pp. $45. ISBN 0-8070-8540-5. Allen Lane, London, 2000. 796 pp. £25. ISBN 0-7139-9380-4.

Nabokov's Blues: The Scientific Odyssey of a Literary Genius, is another collaborative effort. Kurt Johnson, a lepidopterist who has published extensively on butterfly taxonomy, teamed with Steve Coates, an editor and writer for the *New York Times* and other popular publications. Together they interweave details of Nabokov's life with an account of a reexamination of his scientific work. This modern research was conducted largely by Johnson himself, along with several colleagues (notably, Zsolt Bálint and Dubi Benyamini). It focused on Nabokov's most influential scientific project, a reordering of the genera within a group of lycaenid butterflies (then known as the Plebejinae and as the Polyommatini). Johnson and his colleagues were inspired by Nabokov's 60-page paper "Notes on Neotropical Plebejinae" [*Psyche* **52**, 1 (1945)]. Their eight-year project involved arduous field work in the high Andes and exacting and meticulous laboratory studies. It produced almost 40 papers and the description of more than two dozen new species, many of which now bear names inspired by Nabokov's literary oeuvre.

Nabokov's Blues
The Scientific Odyssey of a Literary Genius
by Kurt Johnson and Steve Coates
Zoland, Cambridge, MA, 1999. 384 pp. $27. C$38. ISBN 1-58195-009-8.

Nabokov, born in Russia in 1899, was the son of wealthy parents who were interested in natural history. Nabokov's enduring fascination with butterflies began at age seven, when his mother surrounded him with specimens and books to ease his convalescence from pneumonia. He was soon corresponding with lepidopterists. In his teens, he became intimately familiar with the European Lepidoptera fauna, and he published his first scientific paper at the age of 20. By then, his literary interests had also been awakened; he had published his first poem at 17. When the Bolshevik Revolution prompted his family to flee St. Petersburg, his collection was abandoned along with their fortune. There followed a series of moves, often occasioned by political upheaval and causing Nabokov to again leave his collections behind. Such losses were undoubtedly a factor in his ultimate concentration on literature rather than Lepidoptera.

Financial remuneration also influenced his decision; both books provide ample evidence of the difficulties Nabokov faced making a living as an entomologist. Money earned from the publication of his second novel went toward his first major butterfly expedition in 1928. More literary success followed, and literature continued to subsidize lepidopterology. In 1940, with the Nazi conquest of France, Nabokov abandoned Europe for the United States. Initially, he supported himself by tutoring students in Russian and pursued his lepidopterological interests as an unpaid assistant at the American Museum of Natural History. On the strength of his growing literary reputation, which was expanded by his decision to begin writing in English, in 1941 he received an offer to teach Russian language

Out collecting. Carrying his net and box for the day's catches, Nabokov pauses on a 1971 walk in the Swiss Alps.

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and literature at Wellesley. While there, he joined the Museum of Comparative Zoology staff and focused his attention on the Lycaenidae, the butterflies known as the blues. His financial situation remained far from secure; in a 1944 letter to the critic Edmund Wilson, he decried the "appalling condition of [his] purse (a few hundred dollars melting in the bank, my miserable museal salary and some 800 which I shall earn next semester at Wellesley)." Finally, in 1948, Cornell appointed him to a permanent faculty position in Russian literature.

In the following years, his entomological publications took a back seat to several large projects. These included an annotated translation of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* (1957) and, most notably, the novel *Lolita*. The latter cemented his already formidable reputation as a literary figure. In 1959, he took a leave from Cornell, which eventually led to retirement in Switzerland. Although he continued to collect and to sketch out writing projects involving butterflies, he never again published a scientific work. *Nabokov's Butterflies* contains fragments of several projects, including "Butterflies in Art" and "Butterflies in Europe," sadly (for entomology) never completed.

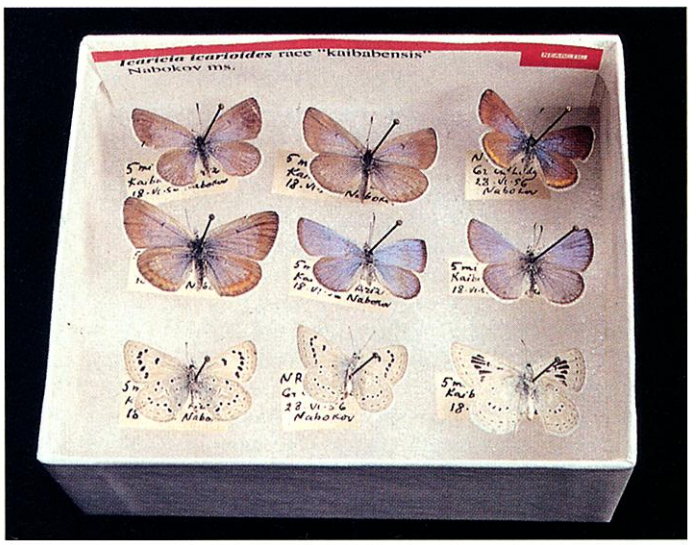
It is difficult to imagine the entomologist who would not be enamored of Nabokov's writing. With his incredible mastery of language and images, Nabokov succeeds in conveying the fascination and joy associated with the study of insects. He could turn the seemingly prosaic into lyrical poetry—*Nabokov's Butterflies* is filled with such delights as poetry about beer-baiting at night for moths, vivid descriptions of mimicry of bird droppings and parnassian copulatory plugs, and excerpts from a Cornell lecture on the possible entomological identity of the vermin into which Gregor Samsa is transformed in Kafka's *Metamorphosis*.

By featuring entomologists as protagonists in his works of fiction, Nabokov also brought respect and dignity to a profession too long associated with mild amusement, if not ridicule. His literary gravitas carried over to entomology. It is remarkable, in retrospect, that he succeeded in publishing a review of Alexander Klots's *A Field Guide to the Butterflies of North America, East of the Great Plains* in both the *New York Times* and *The Times* of London.

The principal flaw of these two books is that both sets of authors try too hard to enhance Nabokov's reputation as scientist. The central thesis of Johnson and Coates is that Nabokov was an unappreciated scientific genius. Although many of his conclusions may have been correct, the fact remains that his research was of modest extent and of interest to only a small segment of the scientific community. And there is nothing wrong with that; Nabokov may well have had dual passions, but they were not identical twins.

Johnson and Coates do an outstanding job of laying out the importance of alpha-taxonomy (the classification and description of species), and it seems safe to say that never before has this desperately underfinanced and utterly essential subdiscipline of biology been so engagingly depicted. Their conservation message, tied to taxonomy (or what is now called "biodiversity inventory"), is also eloquent and compelling. But they are too strident in their criticism of others and too careless in their discussions. Johnson and Coates continually search for villains, trying to establish how the world of lepidoptery "had conspired to eclipse Nabokov's most important scientific work." Nabokov was respected and admired by his lepidopterist colleagues and readers; three species were named in his honor before 1950. In addition to overstating their case, Johnson and Coates undermine their efforts by using incorrect scientific terminology. For example, they refer to the nonexistent "Phylum Invertebrata," consistently use "genuses" instead of "genera," and call a species epithet a "species epitaph."

Perhaps even more distracting is the excessive determination of Johnson and his colleagues to honor Nabokov's memory. They have named over 30 species after characters in Nabokov's novels. Patronyms (scientific names that refer to people) are supposed to honor individuals who have made a contribution in the field, although it is true that in many cases the contributions are indirect; species are routinely named for spouses and offspring, and occasionally even for sports heroes, rock bands, cartoonists, or politicians. But it is downright creepy to name a species after Humbert in *Lolita* (whose principal claim to fame is unchecked pedophilia) and then to reassure readers that "the scientists made certain to place *humbert* in a separate genus and assigned to that name a species with a limited range living some fifteen hundred miles from where *lolita* might ever be found roaming."



Boxed blues. Nabokov collected this series of Boisduval's blue (*Icaricia icarioides*) from Arizona lupine fields in 1956. He had erected the genus in 1944 to receive several North American blues.

Boyd and Pyle also try too hard. Nabokov actively rejected the theory of natural selection. (In his autobiography *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov wrote: "'Natural selection,' in the Darwinian sense, could not explain the miraculous coincidence of imitative aspect and imitative behaviour, nor could one appeal to the theory of 'the struggle for life' when a protective device was carried to a point of mimetic subtlety, exuberance, and luxury far in excess of a predator's power of appreciation.") Given the abundance of evidence in support of the theory marshaled by Nabokov's contemporaries, it is difficult to accept Pyle's thesis that "by no measure...does this diminish his legacy as a scientist." His reluctance to endorse statistical analysis also did little to induce other entomologists to embrace his admittedly innovative morphological approaches to classification.

There is no reason to inflate Nabokov's scientific contribution; it is not necessary for him to have been one of the greatest lepidopterists. He achieved distinction in another arena; he is the best writer about insects of the 20th century, and possibly ever. As Pyle so aptly says, Nabokov is simply the "foremost literary interpreter of butterflies and moths." This is no small accomplishment. Both of these books provide readers the opportunity to appreciate his genius. With an eloquence borne of deep knowledge, he brought the excitement and wonder of insect lives to millions around the world.

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