

PICK OF THE SYLLABUS

BILL BURKHART



PRISCILLA MEYER

Professor of Russian Language and Literature,
selects *Pnin* by Vladimir Nabokov

I have studied with Professor Pnin. I know him and treasure him. He is the emigré Russian who finds himself teaching his language and culture to uncomprehending undergraduates in a college in New England, here named Waindell but pronounced by our hero “Vandal.” He is the Russian professor whom American appliances delight in foiling (Wesleyan has hosted several over the last 30 years), and whose blunders baffle fellow faculty. While the novel lures us in with an initially comic and endearing version of a Pnin wary of the pitfalls of America’s oddities, we soon feel the pathos of his double life, where his lost Russian world eerily infiltrates his American present, giving him the sensation of “a shadow behind the heart.”

By the time we meet him, Pnin has developed an eccentric English that contributes to our initial willingness to be amused at his expense, as the narrator encourages us to do. But by the end of the first chapter we begin to sense the depth of his anguish in his vision of the audience at the Cremona Women’s Club, where past merges with present: “Murdered, forgotten, unrevenged, incorrupt, immortal, many old friends were scattered throughout the dim hall among more recent people.” In the fifth chapter, Pnin goes on vacation to a gathering of his emigré friends at “the Pines” and his

AN EMIGRÉ IN ACADEME

ineptitude is reversed—he speaks eloquently about the time sequence in *Anna Karenina*, swims with a dignified breast stroke, and plays masterful croquet; we realize how much the American filter has distorted our perception of the true Pnin. At “the Pines” he can control his memories for the first time; surrounded by the warmth of his appreciative friends, he allows himself to remember his first love, Mira, who perished in the Nazi camps.

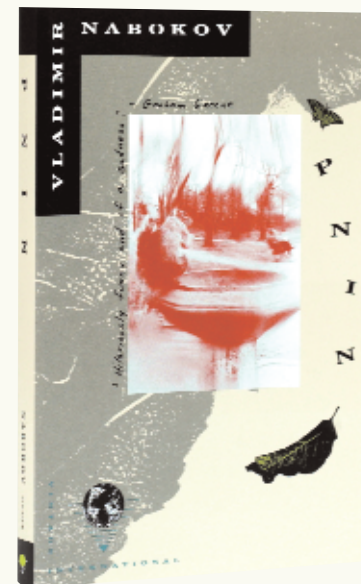
In addition to the tragedies of loss and exile that the Russian revolution caused all Russian emigrés, Pnin endures a failed marriage to Lisa Wind, whom he had married in Paris only to lose to another man on the boat trip to the United States. But the kindness with which he repays her betrayal is rewarded. He becomes friends with her son Victor—a teenager at a prep school modeled on the one Nabokov’s son attended—who sends him a “large bowl of aquamarine glass” reminiscent of Cinderella’s shoes.

Nabokov juxtaposes the endearing world of displaced Russians, who continue to enjoy nature, play chess, drink tea, and discuss literature, to the baneful hilarity of provincial American academe. Pnin’s protector tries to keep Pnin at Waindell, proposing to the French Department’s execrable Professor Blorengé that Pnin could teach Chateaubriand and Hugo, but Blorengé responds, “I sometimes think we overdo literature—we have definitely enough of the stuff,” and refuses to let Pnin teach the language because he actually knows French—“You mean he can speak French?”

Because Nabokov first published four of the seven chapters of *Pnin* in installments in *The New Yorker* in 1953–5, some took it for a disconnected set of episodes. Even the complete version masquerades as a simple touching tale about the collision between two worlds crossed with an academic comedy, Cinderella meets David Lodge. But as in any novel of Nabokov’s, there is more at stake.

The narrator who had been almost invisible at the outset, tipping his hand


with a sardonic adjective here and there, begins to obtrude, and finally reveals himself as the villain of the novel, the Anglo-Russian writer Vladimir Vladimirovich who displaces Pnin from his job. We begin to wonder how the narrator, who arrives at Waindell in the final chapter, can know all he tells us about Pnin’s life and thoughts. At their one confrontation years earlier in Paris, Pnin called him a “dreadful inventor,” denying events the narrator has described to us, while the narrator’s informant, Jack Cockerell, who dines out on his Pnin impersonations, tells how Pnin brought the wrong lecture to read to the Cremona Women’s Club, contradicting the narrator’s version of the same events. Nabokov’s self-parodic heartless narrator creates a humiliating version of the career of an emigré who has less talent than he, though is no less in the grip of an agonizing past. But Pnin miraculously escapes the bounds of Vladimir Vladimirovich’s narration; he leaves Waindell forever, “free at last,” driving off in his pale blue car with an adopted white dog, to be glimpsed again seven years later as the “grotesque ‘perfectionist’” head of the bloated Russian Department of Wordsmith College in *Pale Fire*.



for him. The show includes early 20-by-24-inch Polaroids he made in 1979 with a large-format camera, as well as recent photogravures, digital ink-jet prints, and gelatin silver and chromogenic prints dating from his first serious and sustained investigations in photography beginning in 1995.

Dine’s Wesleyan connection (he is not an alumnus) grew from his friendship with John R. Jakobson ’52, a trustee emeritus. In 1982, Dine began giving his prints, drawings, and photographs to the Davison Art Center, and today the DAC collection holds more than 400 of his works. Dine says he chose Wesleyan as a repository for his art because “one of my best and oldest friends went to the university and he, through the years, needed my support as a human. And one of the ways I could give that support was to give things in his honor to the Davison Art Center.”

The artist’s affection for Wesleyan grew through his working relationship with DAC curator emeritus Ellen G. (“Puffin”) D’Oench ’73, whose own scholarly work on Dine’s prints was published in a 1986 *catalogue raisonné*. Dine calls her “a wonderful scholar of photos, drawings, and prints,” adding, “I love her, and I knew the work would be taken care of there.”

Following its Paris venue, the show will travel to the Hasselblad Center at the Göteborg Museum of Art in Göteborg, Sweden (January 17 to March 14, 2004), and Die Photographische Sammlung/SK Stiftung Kultur, Cologne, Germany (May 14 to August 1, 2004). It will open at Wesleyan in fall 2004. For more information or to purchase a catalogue, visit the Davison Art Center Web site, www.wesleyan.edu/dac. 

Inspired by Serendipity

Upon its publication, *The Dogs of Babel* (Little, Brown, 2003) by Carolyn Parkhurst '92 became a *New York Times* best seller and was featured on the *Today* show. The author describes the unpredictable process of writing a first novel about a man coping with grief.

I'm not particularly fatalistic about my future, but I am about my past. I'm very aware, for example, that if I hadn't made the decision to live in the Foss dorms my first year at Wesleyan—a decision that was almost entirely random on my part—I probably never would have met the man who went on to become my husband. Wesleyan's not a vast school, but it's easy to miss people, and in four years the two of us never had a class together or a mutual friend who hadn't also been in Foss 7 with us. I can't help but think that if I'd lived in Butterfield or Clark, my life might have taken a different path.


This is the kind of thinking that trips me up when people ask me how I came to write the particular book I wrote. My novel, *The Dogs of Babel*, is about a grieving widower who tries to teach his dog to talk in order to untangle the circumstances of his wife's death; it's an unusual premise, so people are always asking me how I came up with it. I have a number of answers I give. Sometimes I say that I started with the characters first, and that the dog part came later. Other times, I say that anyone who's ever lived with a dog has, at one time or another, wondered what's going on inside that furry head. Or I say that I was intrigued by the idea that a character might be so desperate in his grief, so blindsided by its sudden heft, that he might take on a project so outlandish that he never would have considered it under normal circumstances. This is all true. But beneath it all, I suspect that the answer is more complicated. I have a keen sense of the pre-

cariousness of the circumstances that resulted in my writing this particular book. Aren't we, all of us, the products of all the books we've read, all the conversations we've had, all the cities we've touched down in? If my life hadn't worked out exactly the way it did, who knows what I might have written? A butterfly flaps its wings in Brazil, and I end up writing a thriller about murder among a group of hand surgeons, or perhaps a poignant allegory about a gangster who gives it all up to open a custom framing shop.

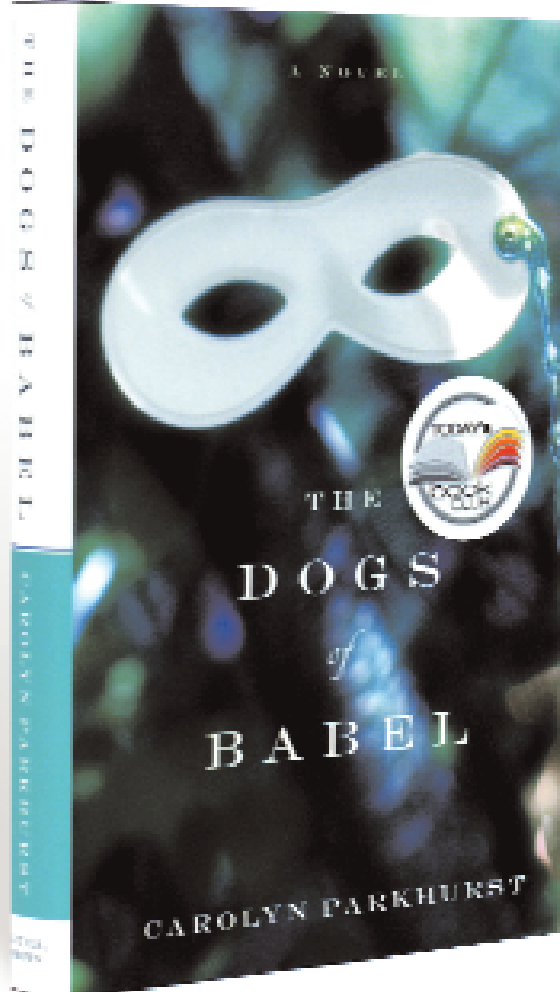
The novel I did write has its origin in a strange little piece I wrote in graduate school, a pseudohistory of the field of "canine linguistics." I liked the idea of using a very dry, academic voice to describe something utterly ridiculous and fantastical, and people teaching dogs to talk seemed to fit the bill. I wrote the piece in a night, then put it away and forgot about it. Two years later, when I had in my mind the beginnings of a story—a man looking for answers, a woman fallen to her death—I came across it again and thought, yes. Maybe this can work. (But if I hadn't been cleaning out my desk and going through old papers that week? Perhaps, in his grief, my narrator might have turned his attention to carving model cities out of soap.)

This kind of serendipity helped shape many of my plot elements. A device called a square-egg press, which I'd bought at a yard sale several years earlier—its strange, unholy purpose is to change a hard-boiled egg from an oval to a cube—ended up playing a crucial role in the way my narrator, Paul, and his wife, Lexy, meet. A carnival mask I'd bought on a trip to Venice, which hung above my desk as I wrote, provided me with the idea to make Lexy a mask-maker. An ad for a telephone psychic, glimpsed when I was supposed to be writing but wasn't, made me wonder what might happen if Paul were watching a similar ad and hap-

pened to hear Lexy's voice asking for help. While I was writing the book, I had a dream which featured the sentence: "I remember my wife in white"; the line went on to play an important role in the novel. When I interviewed a mask-maker as part of my research, she mentioned that she had recently been asked to make a mask of a dead woman; this led to a subplot in which Lexy begins to fashion death masks. Even the pace of my writing was dictated by external circumstances; the impending birth of my son (another thing I can thank Wesleyan for, in an indirect way) provided me with a compelling deadline. He was born the morning after I completed the last item on my list of revisions.

It's a little embarrassing to admit all this, as if I didn't actually do any creative work but merely cobbled together a novel out of objects I just happened to have in my home (and, in the last instance, inside my actual body). But I think that these examples underline the haphazard, highly idiosyncratic, nature of inspiration: Some people find it in a field of flowers or a city skyline or the face of a stranger riding a bus. Apparently, I find it in TV commercials and in a device designed on the premise that eggs are the wrong shape. I'm starting to think about writing my next novel, and I'm wondering what circumstances will conspire to help me find ideas this time around. I guess I'd better start going to more yard sales. 

Carolyn Parkhurst lives in Washington, D.C., with her husband, Evan Rosser '92, and their son. She received an MFA in creative writing from American University.



"Aren't we, all of us, the products of all the books we've read, all the conversations we've had, all the cities we've touched down in?"

JUST PUBLISHED

Fall 2003 Books and DVDs

Our seasonal roundup of noteworthy books and DVDs by Wesleyan alumni, faculty members, and parents.

NONFICTION:

GENE BUNNELL '66, *Making Places Special: Stories of Real Places Made Better by Planning* (Planners Press, 2002)

PAUL FLORSHEIM '83, EDITOR, *Adolescent Romantic Relations and Sexual Behavior* (Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2003)

JOSEPH COLLINS, STEFANO DEZEREGA, AND ZAHARA HECKSCHER '86, *How to Live Your Dream of Volunteering Overseas* (Penguin, 2002)

MICHAEL LUCEY '82, *The Misfit of the Family: Balzac and the Social Forms of Sexuality* (Duke University Press, 2003)

MARCY L. NORTH '86, *The Anonymous Renaissance: Cultures of Discretion in Tudor-Stuart England* (The University of Chicago Press, 2003)

TED OVIATT, MAT '57, *Troubled Troublemakers: The Harm They Do and the Help They Need* (Xlibris Corporation, 2003)

SUE PEABODY '83 AND TYLER STOVALL, EDITORS, *The Color of Liberty: Histories of Race in France* (Duke University Press, 2003)

ABIGAIL C. SAGUY '92, *What is Sexual Harassment? From Capitol Hill to the Sorbonne* (University of California Press, 2003)

BETSY WITTEMANN MALS '92, *Weekending in New England* (Countryman Press, 2003)

FICTION AND POETRY:

RACHEL BASCH '80, *The Passion of Reverend Nash* (Norton, 2003)

WILHELM BUSCH, ANDY GAUS '68, TRANSLATOR, *Max and Moritz and Other Bad-Boy Stories and Tricks* (James A. Rock and Company, 2003)

JENNIFER N. FINK '88, *Burn* (Suspect Thoughts, 2003)

TATIANA SHCHERBINA AND JAMES KATES '67, TRANSLATOR, *The Score of the Game* (Zephyr Press, 2003)

OF NOTE:

CLAUDE CLAYTON SMITH '66, WITH ALEXANDER VASCHENKO OF MOSCOW UNIVERSITY, COEDITED AND TRANSLATED *The Way of Kinship: An Anthology of Native Siberian Literature*, which appeared in *North Dakota Quarterly* (Summer 2002).

NEW FROM WESLEYAN PRESS

HEATHER MCHUGH, *Eyeshot*

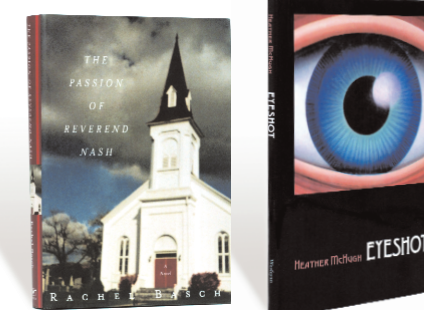
This brooding, visionary poetry collection takes aim at the big questions of love and death. The poems suggest that such immensities balance on the smallest details and that a range of human blindness is inescapable.

WORTH WATCHING ON DVD

Lost in La Mancha (IFC Films)



This engrossing documentary, directed by Keith Fulton and Louis Pepe and edited by Jacob Bricca '93 (currently a visiting professor of film studies), chronicles the mishaps of visionary filmmaker Terry Gilliam (*Brazil*, *12 Monkeys*), as he struggles to make a film he has prepared for 10 years, based on the classic story of



Don Quixote. Popular movie actor Johnny Depp has been cast to play Sancho Panza. But when the film begins shooting in Spain, it soon becomes clear that the production is doomed. F-16 fighter planes fly overhead, destroying shots, and a horrendous hailstorm does even more damage. Meanwhile, a seasoned French actor hired to play Quixote starts having health problems. The documentary contains wonderful interviews with director Gilliam and manages to turn the story of a disastrous creative project into a very entertaining film.

Charlotte Sometimes (Visionbox Pictures)

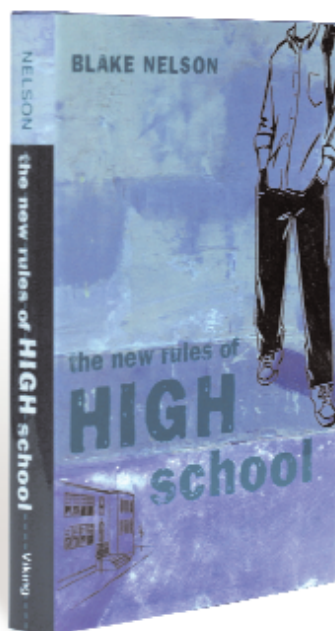


This smart and sensual first feature, written and directed by Eric Byler '94, concentrates on character development rather than momentous events as it explores the relationships of four young Asian Americans living in Los Angeles's bohemian Silver Lake district. Byler, who shot the film on video with a budget of \$20,000, creates a mysterious world; his characters often hide what they feel and keep the viewer guessing.—*David Low*

BLAKE NELSON '84

The New Rules of High School (Viking, 2003)

Seventeen-year-old overachiever Max Caldwell appears to have it all—straight A's, a position as editor-in-chief at the school newspaper, and the perfect girlfriend, Cindy. He plans to apply to top colleges in the Northeast, far from his Portland, Ore., home. But when he breaks up with his girlfriend for reasons he doesn't comprehend, he starts to question what his life has been all about. Nelson succeeds in capturing the confusion and humor of teenage life, and his colorful characters range from nerds to jocks to punks without falling into clichés. Though it addresses a young adult audience, this novel should appeal to parents of teenagers as well, or to those who want to remember what it's like to be young and clueless.—*David Low*

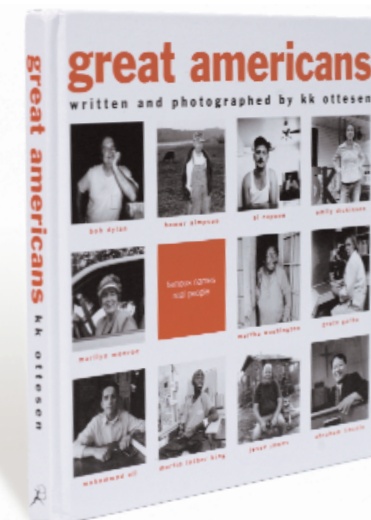


KK (KARIN) OTTESEN '94

Great Americans (Bloomsbury, 2003)

For her inspiring book, Ottesen traveled around the United States to document a random cross-section of life across the country. In each of the 50 states, she interviewed and took black-and-white photographs of individuals who happen to share a name with an American icon. Ottesen talked with Muhammad Ali, a freshman and aspiring neuroscientist at the University of Minnesota; Betty Ford, an Arkansas elementary school teacher; Robert E. Lee, a Montana rancher; Marilyn Monroe, a retired politician in Iowa; and many more. These fascinating non-celebrities talk openly about their lives, sharing their daily routines, struggles, and dreams—and their thoughts about what it means to be an American. Once you start

reading their heartfelt stories alongside their luminous portraits, you'll find it hard to put the book down.—*DL*



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