

KATHRYN DAVIS AND ALEX ANDRIESSE

A CONVERSATION WITH KATHRYN DAVIS

ALEX ANDRIESSE: There are a number of memorable dachshunds in the literature of the last century or so. Ottimo Massimo in Calvino's *The Baron in the Trees* probably has the biggest role. But they make cameo appearances in the work of Cheever, Stein, Delillo, Updike. And of course they're everywhere in Nabokov. So far, they've played a part in a pair of your novels, *Hell* and *Duplex*. Is there something peculiarly literary about the breed?

KATHRYN DAVIS: In the beginning was the dachshund. His name was Noodle. He was a red short-haired dachshund, my first real pet. I was five years old and I'd had goldfish (Potato and Carrot) and a parakeet (Cupcake) but nothing warm that licked my face and squirmed in my arms and expressed urine from a small, visible penis. At some point my father observed that all my pets had been named for food.

I don't remember having any choice about breed. The choice of a red short-haired dachshund was based on my mother's opinion that she wouldn't need to spend time vacuuming up fur; she also thought dachshunds were intelligent. My father wanted a basset hound, but they were too big and they drooled, suggesting stupidity.

After Noodle there was Hansel (named by my sister); after Hansel there was Sam (named by my father). Nothing so elegant as the Nabokov family's Box One and Box Two, though I remember feeling—despite its being conferred by my mother's aversion to housekeeping—exalted kinship the first time I discovered them.

AA: Dachshunds aside, at least for the moment, would it be fair to say Nabokov has been important to you? Do you remember when you first read his work?

KD: I was just thinking while cooking coq au vin about how crucial Nabokov had been to my development as a writer. Thinking about how lately I'd lost touch with that fact, the way I lost touch with Julia Child's recipe for coq au vin, both Nabokov and Julia Child being, each in their own realm, the first inkling I had of great, as-yet-unknown-to-me literary and culinary possibility. It used to be I'd make coq au vin when I wanted to impress a boy. I always used to name Nabokov first, when asked about my literary influences. I can't remember when I first read *Lolita*, only that it wasn't in high school. In high school I was still making oatmeal cookies when I wanted to impress someone, and for some reason the writers my English teachers were pressing me to read didn't include him.

AA: Your fiction, like Nabokov's, is filled with lists. Here, to pull a culinary example from *Hell*, is the inventory of Joy Harbison's pantry: "Staffordshire teapots, tinned copper saucepans, cross toasters, mustard pots, pewter candlesticks, fine-meshed sieves, bottled plums, beeswax candles, chafing dishes, Dutch ovens, tortoise-shaped tureens, castellated pudding basins, Venetian blown-glass tumblers, brass weights, measuring cups, knives." Is a sense of the infinite—or the apparently infinite—of interest to you?

KD: What terrifies me, attracts me. My original attraction to the infinite appeared around the same time as my interest in the eternal, both of them inescapable aspects of the fact of having been born. The phrase forever and ever, amen, meant that when you died and went to heaven you would be there forever and ever, your tenure in heaven without end, an idea that seemed good at first until you really thought about it, that there could be such a thing as an existence *without end*, *EVER*, at which point it became horrible. Infinite space didn't pose the same problem, whereas an infinity of things—there's a reason *Hell* is filled with lists. The boxes of cookies my father brought home from the German bakery every Christmas—*pfeffernüse*, *springerle*, *zimmesterne*—were stored atop the refrigerator to prevent anyone from eating them except when

we had company. At night I would sneak into the kitchen, pull over a chair, and climb up. If you took down a box of cookies, you had to eat all the cookies in the box. This wasn't a function of appetite; it had more to do with a feeling that in the end there should be NOTHING LEFT, that to have too many things was the same as eternity, the infinite proliferation of markers on a timeline or the infinite regression of boxes in *The Third Policeman*. At some point I turned my twin terrors into a study of cosmology. I've always felt more like an inhabitant of the universe than of the world.

AA: From the infinite to the particular. You have used the neighborhood in Philadelphia where you grew up as a setting in *Hell, Duplex*, and now (or so I gather from the chapter in the *Fairy Tale Review*) in *The Silk Road*. What's drawn you to return to Germantown Avenue and environs?

KD: I don't consider myself a person given to nostalgia, to the elegiac mode. Why, then, this wish to return to Woodale Road? I suppose it's the same impulse that drives me to reread the books I read for the first time when my psyche was still quivering, barely out of the oven. Heathcliff and Cathy, a love story! There's a pleasure that is partly voyeuristic, partly clinical, to be derived from examining the ten-year-old girl who wept at the thought of a lovesick ghost trying to break her way through a windowpane out on the wild moors, while at the same time feeling the great swoop of time that's brought me to where I am now, appalled by the obscenity of that haunting. The return to Woodale Road is a way of looking at what I was in the light of what I am now. I'm saying "what" instead of "who" since the thing I want to look at doesn't feel exactly human, more like a ghost.

AA: There's a wonderful paragraph in *Hell* about the rare association between adolescent girlhood and "great literature," in the course of which the narrator asks: "Mightn't we permit a single summer in the lives of two bored girls to represent an essential stage in the history of the universe?" You have made adolescent girls' consciousness of the world central to your own fiction—from

your first novel, *Labrador*, on to *The Thin Place* and *Versailles*, where Marie Antoinette begins as almost the quintessential “bored girl.” Has this been a deliberate project on your part, to write from the perspective (or at least in sympathy with the perspective) of what I guess we now call young adults? Or, if that is too stupid a question, what are some of the things these adolescent ghosts allow you to notice or write about in your fiction?

KD: I suppose I love to think any seemingly inconsequential moment in the history of our tenure on this strange planet (and really, science-fiction-eers, could there be a planet stranger than the one we’re living on?) might prove consequential. Plus adolescence is a transitional state and I’m increasingly drawn to writing about states of pure transition. If I write about girls it’s because I once was a girl and I will never stop wanting to understand what it means/meant to have been one. A girl in transition. A girl whose life could prove conduit to *everything*.

AA: How important is a sense of surprise to you as a writer?

KD: A sense of surprise is crucial to me as a writer and as a person. I never poked around in closets before Christmas or my birthday. I can’t imagine what would make someone read the last page of a book before reading the other pages first. When I write, I write without an outline—I don’t want to know where I’m headed, my various destinations, though I like knowing they’re there awaiting discovery, and I want my readers, having voyaged with me through often fog-shrouded and disorienting passages of transition, to find themselves as surprised as I am upon arrival.

AA: What about the point of departure? How do novels tend to begin for you? With an image, a theme, a buzz in head?

KD: Usually the first thing I have is a place. The place might not turn out to play a part in the finished book; sometimes it’s the feeling generated by being



in a place that gets me going. This connects directly with the way I write: the thing that draws me to my desk is the chance to be in a place that isn't the place where I otherwise live my life. It doesn't matter whether that place is, essentially, desirable, like the gardens of Versailles, say, or perilous, like the dollhouse in *Hell*—what draws me is the *otherness* of the place and the way I get to explore it to my heart's content.

The thing about beginning with place, though, is that whether you want it to or not it ends up involving space, which in turn involves immersion in time. When I wanted to return to the stretch of le Chemin de Saint-Jacques I'd spent two weeks walking on, the next thing I knew I found myself on a stretch of sidewalk outside Saint Roch Elementary School in St. Louis. The possibility that these two places might, in fact, be *one* place, and that the saint might be working his miracle cure on victims of the plague in both places as well as right now and in the fourteenth century is what led me to write *The Silk Road*.

AA: I'd imagine the other thing about beginning with place is the inexhaustibility of it. There's practically no end to what you can know, let alone what you can imagine, about any given stretch of the world. As you make your way through the writing of a novel, what do you read? Do you do research? (You must!) Do you pick up books that have moved you in the past?

KD: Let's begin with there being no end to what I can imagine. That's where everything begins for me, and why our culture's recent obsession with cultural appropriation—the idea that *any* subject might be forbidden to me or to any writer—drives me crazy. Of course whatever it is, the subject (a little Chinese girl who cuts her feet off rather than having them bound, say) has to be the one thing you want to write about more than anything. It has to be planted so deep inside you, in the place where desire and creation meet, that it's as if there's no way of recognizing the difference between you and that little girl. Or of what it was like to live during the Tang Dynasty. Each of my books has been haunted by other writers, other books, *The Silk Road* most notably



by *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. My sensibility as an artist is (thank God) a Frankenstein monster of parts.

Nabokov said somewhere (I think in *Strong Opinions*, though I can't seem to locate the passage) that it's possible to set a work of fiction anywhere in the world without having been there, as long as you know (and here I'm approximating) the angle of sun hitting the trees in the late afternoon. When I wrote *The Girl Who Trod on a Loaf* I hadn't been to Denmark, though I felt certain I *knew* Denmark—or at the very least the Denmark I was writing about—from my childhood obsession with Hans Christian Andersen and my adult obsession with Isak Dinesen. Ultimately I made a trip to Jutland to make sure I hadn't made any terrible mistakes, and it turned out I hadn't, though I was interested to see how inordinately clean everything was, people on their hands and knees scrubbing the sidewalks outside their houses.

When I was starting to write *Versailles*, I knew I had a lot to learn. I also knew I didn't want to write a book that sounded research-driven. I decided to read two biographies straight through, and as I read them, I surrounded myself with other books: more biographies, architectural treatises, history and philosophy books, prayer books, fairy tales, cookbooks. Piles and piles of books. You fall in love with your subject; you transfer your love to the books. It's almost as if they generate heat, standing there in their tall piles around your desk. I would write, and I would dip in and out of my books. I wasn't allowed to take notes. This was one of my most important rules, but also hardest to enforce. I was allowed to write smallish notes to myself on little scraps of paper and put them in a file box meant for index cards. I figured that way I'd only include information that had truly lodged itself in my imagination and would thus avoid the "over-researched" problem, though of course it would often happen that I'd be writing a chapter—about Louis's problems with his penis, for example—and I'd realize that I'd forgotten the name of Antoinette and Louis's doctor, and have to go rummaging through my books till I found it. A real historian, watching me at work, would have gone out of his or her mind.

AA: On a not unrelated subject, I think . . . One of the defining features of your recent work has been your use of an omniscient narrator (a narrator who, at least in the case of *The Thin Place*, you've suggested is more or less you). There's an idea among some academic readers that "the novel" progressed away from omniscience and toward more and more subjective narrations. But part of what's marvelous about *Duplex* and *The Thin Place* is how clearly subjective your all-knowing narrators are. What for you is the allure of omniscience, so called?

KD: We were assigned *Vanity Fair* in senior English class. I loved Thackeray's omniscient narrator, the way he said of Miss Jemima Pinkerton: "It is probable that we shall not hear of her again from this moment to the end of time, and that when the great filigree iron gates are once closed on her, she and her awful sister will never issue therefrom into this little world of history." I loved the sense of boundless possibility inherent in that narrator's voice. I think boundlessness is what I crave more than anything from what I read and what I write. Though of course it's not possible—at least not here on earth. That sad truth is what drives the engine of *Duplex*: the tension between Janice's know-it-all presumption and the omniscient narrator's understanding that what Janice presumes to know is not possible.

Conventional wisdom has it that we lost our faith in omniscient narrators around the same time we lost our faith in God. For my own part, I've been attracted to omniscience from as far back as I can remember, both as a fiercely pious little girl praying in church and as a very wide-awake little girl being read to at bedtime. "Look you, now we're going to begin. When we are at the end of the story we shall know more than we do now, for he was a bad goblin. He was one of the very worst, for he was a demon." This is how "The Snow Queen" begins, the narrator's highly subjective omniscience so thrilling to me that I copied it in my first novel ("Listen, we are going to begin. When I am at the end of my story you will know more than you do now, for she was young and inhospitable to the facts about her life . . .")

It occurs to me it's precisely that—the particular use an author makes of an omniscient narrator—that is the element I've stolen most often for my own writing. Flaubert's astonishingly intimate, free-floating omniscience in "A Simple Heart" was, more than anything, what made me want to write *The Thin Place*. Of course it's the *sound* of that omniscient voice that I fell in love with, the way it swoops effortlessly from character (Félicité) to character (Madame Aubain) and thence to the townspeople ("His name was Loulou. His body was green, his wingtips pink, his poll blue, his breast golden. Unfortunately he had the tiresome habit of chewing his perch, pulling out his feathers, scattering his droppings, upsetting the water in his birdbath; Madame Aubain found him a nuisance, and gave him to Félicité for good. Félicité began training him; soon he could repeat: 'Nice boy! Your servant, Sir! Hail Mary!' He was placed beside the door, and a number of people were surprised that he did not answer to the name of Jacquot, since all parrots are called Jacquot.")

AA: You say you were a fiercely pious little girl. There is certainly, if not piety, then a very keen interest in the existence of another world—a world other than the material one we all seem to have agreed to live in. Is this an at all religious interest? I know le Chemin de Saint-Jacques is at the center—or is one of what I take to be several possible centers—of the new book, *The Silk Road* . . .

KD: When I was a girl there was something theatrical about my piety. I had a blue blanket I'd drape atop my head before entering my bedroom closet, dropping to my knees and closing the door behind me. I wasn't praying; I was being the Virgin Mary, getting ready to live the life that would leave everyone struck dumb in amazement. I admit I entertained the same thought about the books I was writing then (*The Silver Sledge*, *The Magic Mirror*, *The Magic Rocking Horse*, etc. etc.) In both cases my preoccupation—aside from personal amazingness—was with Mystery, the unseen, the animating spirit, a conviction I hold to this day that there's more to this world than meets the eye.

I liked going to church. I liked the language of church ("gifts and creatures



of bread and wine”) that sounded like it meant something but was hard to understand. I liked the rituals, the musty smell of the kneeling pads and the hymnals, the dim light, the stone walls, the great exhalations of the organ. Church was beautiful and terrible, as was the idea of deity. I liked the feeling of being in a place where anything could happen—it was like getting to fall down the rabbit hole Sunday after Sunday.

I felt the same way, walking the Chemin. To walk on the trail was to walk on a line. The line might go up or it might go down or it might bend right or it might bend left. It might even shoot me off in a different direction momentarily, into a boulangerie smelling of yeast and Gauloises, or a moist, ill-lit chapel smelling of melted beeswax. After a while I would come upon a wayside cross practically invisible under all the blue plastic rosaries heaped upon it by the pilgrims who got there before me. The rosaries were the ones the bishop in the cathedral at Le Puy distributed to everyone who came to be blessed by him before starting out. The rain had always just stopped but water still dripped off an overhanging tree onto the cross and the rosaries, making the blue plastic beads glisten like precious stones.



Here I was. Here I was on this single, small point. But still I was walking on a line that went on forever, carrying inside me an infinitude of space.