



# The Unreal Life of Sergey Nabokov

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## **The Unreal Life of Sergey Nabokov** Paul Russell

In his novel based on the extraordinary life of the gay brother of Vladimir Nabokov, Paul Russell re-creates the rich and changing world in which Sergey, his family and friends lived; from wealth and position in pre-revolutionary Russia, to the halls of Cambridge University, and the Parisian salon of Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas. But it is the honesty and vulnerability of Sergey, our young gay narrator, that hook the reader: his stuttering childhood in the shadow of his brilliant brother, his opium-fueled evenings with his sometime lover Cocteau, his troubled love life on the margins of the Ballets Russes and its legendary cast, and his isolation in war torn Berlin where he will ultimately be arrested, sent to a camp and die in 1945. A meticulously researched novel, in which you will meet an extraordinary cast of characters including Picasso, Diaghilev, Stravinsky, Magnus Hirschfield ("Tante Magnesia"), Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, Cocteau, and of course the master himself, Vladimir Nabokov, this is ultimately the story of a beautiful and vulnerable homosexual boy growing into an enlightened and courageous man.

## **The Unreal Life of Sergey Nabokov Details**

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# From Reader Review The Unreal Life of Sergey Nabokov for online ebook

## KatieMc says

It's Russian, it's sad. It's the portrayal of a completely marginalized and mostly forgotten life of Sergey Nabokov, cut tragically short in a Nazi concentration camp. Yet, thanks to the author's research and imagination, something beautiful emerges. At an early age, Seryosha keenly understands himself, and even when it costs him the affection and respect of his father (and later brother) he can't and doesn't hide who he is. In all the tragedy, there is beauty, friendship, love and even gay culture.

What can you say about someone, who well into adulthood finds god and the church and recalls the excitement of confirmation like this:

And thus the happy day arrived—the happiest of my entire life. I woke at dawn eager as a schoolboy; all day I was good for nothing, so focused was my soul on the evening ahead. When night finally fell I put on my most exquisite makeup, wore my opera cloak, and took along my fanciest walking stick. I was, after all, going to be received into the House of the Lord.

All I can say, is Lady Gaga wrote this one for Sergey Nabokov

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## Nick Pageant says

First, this is an "imagined" autobiography. I wasn't sure at first if I even wanted to read it because of this fact, but, given the author's faultless reputation for research, I gave it a go. I am so glad that I did.

Sergey Nabokov was the younger gay brother of THE Nabokov. They were Russian aristocrats back when that meant something. The book starts with the brothers living comfortably as nobles in Russia and finishes decades later in a Nazi concentration camp.

I can't recommend this book highly enough. It is not pleasant to read about some of the horrors our gay fathers have endured, but I find it necessary and fulfilling. I hope everyone gives this one a go.

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## A says

What if Nabokov's brother were a gay Forrest Gump -- a naive, incurious bystander at many of the last century's great (and not so great) moments of cultural upheaval in Europe: the Bolshevik revolution, the roaring 20s in Paris, the rise of the Nazis, Nabokov's own skyrocketing popularity as a writer, etc. etc. etc.?

An intriguing and ambitious premise, to be sure, but this book doesn't quite deliver. Russell is delightful when he's describing the small, queer moments of clueless little Seryosha's life. There are countless hilarious, fantastically written, and often quite moving setpieces covering everything from crashing imperial balls in drag to buttfucking your high school bully, from going on a booze cruise with Diaghilev to finding a gay bar in the bombed-out ruins of WWII-era Berlin. As wonderfully, the frothy, queeny tone feels so much more of

a piece with this jazzy era than Hemingway's tight-lipped, overly macho chronicle of the same moment in time in *The Sun Also Rises* (a clear reference of Russell's, though tellingly, Hemingway is pretty much the only boldface name Sergey does not encounter in his long sojourn in postwar Gay Paree).

Often while reading this I felt that Russell agreed with me, and wanted nothing more than to write a swift, bitchy, gossipy little tale about this juicy gay epoch and call it a night. But for some reason he felt the need to aim higher, and ended up not only completely missing the mark but writing a lesser novel as a result. Listen, a sense of grand historical scope and an extended discursus on the rise of the proletariat are wonderful, but feel a little out of place in a novel that also devotes a not insignificant word count to describing the joy of getting high on opium with Cocteau and a gaggle of ballerina rentboys in a bathhouse.

So why 3 stars? I should add that the lone exception to what the punditocracy would term this novel's "bad optics" would be the focus on the titular character's brother. Like most overeducated people, I love Nabokov and have read nearly all his work. (Since you asked, *Bend Sinister* is my favorite, but this edition of *Lolita* is my favorite cover design of all time. OF ALL TIME!!!; followed closely by the rejected version of this cover.) But this novel does an amazing job of calling my love for that brilliant prose stylist into question, casting a rivalry- and homophobia-infused pall over his writing in such a way that I was forced to admit that what I valued as erudition, omniscience, and technical prowess could just as easily be interpreted as pretension, calculating aloofness, and manipulation borne out of insecurity. It was not at all a pleasant experience -- the only people who are encouraged to hate Nabokov are recovering pedophiles -- but for that sleight of hand kill-your-idols alone, I forgive any homosexual cognitive dissonance on Russell's part. And I acknowledge, too, that perhaps I am asking too much when I demand that Russell topple and humanize the totality of political and social history up to 1945 as cannily and easily as he toppled Nabokov himself.

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### **Kate O'Hanlon says**

There's a remoteness that pervades this novel. The ballet, inter-war Europe and most especially our protagonist, Sergey Nabokov, remain always at a distance. Maybe this is intentional, this is afterall a story of two lost worlds, pre-Revolutionary Russia which the Nabokov family fled when Sergey and Vladimir were in their late teens, and the grand capitals of Europe about to be changed forever by the second world war. "You are all a lost generation," Gertrude Stein said to Ernest Hemingway of the American ex-pat writers, but the same can equally be said of the Russian émigrés. Russell takes us at a glacial pace to the end we know it coming, and has the gall the to rush us through the happy years. Throughout the parties and the trysts and the ballets there hangs always a sense of loss and of longing. (memo to self: read some happy books for godssakes)

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### **Sofia says**

**On the edge, a boy on the edge, a man on the edge.** Skirting on the outskirts of his family and their life, living in the shadows. Making a life elsewhere, loyal, brave, quiet, shy, lonely Sergei, but with such a great love and willingness to forgive, to see the best in those around him. Just another human being, struggling with life and standing up when it's time to be counted.

With more than a nudge to *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, Nabokov's novel about two brothers, Russell writes *The Unreal Life of Sergei Nabokov* and debunks 'real'. Are you unreal because you are not famous like your brother, not straight like your brother, not published like your brother. Well to me Seryosha is as real as famous Vladimir. I've never read Nabokov. The image I get of him from this book and from further bio info I've read has not made me anxious to know him. I have to bow to Seryosha's advice and try to meet his brother through his work as probably his writing is better than meeting him in person. In the meantime I'm more than glad I met Seryosha, he is real to me, he was not the 'hey look at me' kind of guy, but I see him.

Thank you Irchik for taking me with you for this one.

<http://www.snarke.com/2009/11/real-li...>

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### **Rick says**

I have to admit that I'm kind of a Paul Russell junkie. I love his style of writing and his characters are so fascinating I wish I could sit down with them over a couple cups of tea and find out how they're doing these days. Unfortunately, they're fictional characters. Well, until now. This historical novel is a fascinating glimpse at a younger brother of Vladimir Nabokov and covers the years from just before the rise of the Soviets in Russia to the just before the fall of the Nazis in Germany. while the majority of the novel takes place in Paris and St. Petersburg there are chapters in England, Austria and Germany as well. Sergey led an interesting life and had opportunities to meet a lot of fascinating people ... Or so the story goes. The problem here, and it's a minor one, is that this really is fiction. Well, not exactly. Maybe we should call it extrapolation? Russell has conjured this tale from fragments and notations, clues and innuendoes from long, and probably exhausting, research. I'm sure there is more to embellishment here than fact, but that doesn't take away a single line of precious prose from this remarkable novel. So, yeah, Sergey Nabokov may be the first Russell protagonist that I could have actually sit down over some tea with for that conversation, but that real Sergey was probably nothing like the Sergey in this book. That doesn't make me love this story any less. So why exactly did I put off reading this book for a couple years when I usually devour a new *Paul Russell* book as soon as I get it? I have no idea. And in the end it doesn't matter. This is a wonderful story. How much is true? Who cares. What's a better question: How much should be true? All of it. Every precious word.

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### **Laurie says**

Most people who like to read know who Vladimir Nabokov was. Until this book, almost no one had heard of Sergey Nabokov. Sergey was Vladimir's brother, younger by only 11 months. Throughout childhood the stuttering Sergey stood in the shadow of his charismatic brother, largely ignored by parents that had two children too close together. He was gay, something that his famous brother was not happy with. Born in Russia in 1900, his early life was one of comfortable wealth but uncomfortable emotions. All too soon, the Russian Revolution scattered his family and destroyed the wealth, leaving Sergey with only his talent for languages to fall back on. He eked out a bare living by giving language lessons and doing translations. Despite his poverty, his life was rich in artistic acquaintances- Cocteau, Diaghilev, Stein, Toklas, poets and dancers and composers were among his friends and lovers. Eventually, he died in a Nazi concentration camp,

having committed the two crimes of being gay and speaking out against the Nazi régime.

This book is a novel, not a biography although it is very well researched. Sergey speaks to us in first person, alternating between telling us of his youth and the tense days that build up to his arrest by the Nazis. He comes across as an appealing man, one who craves the love of his family and a stable relationship. While possessing no great talents himself, he loved the avant garde art that was current in Europe at the time, giving up food to be able to attend shows. The book is a marvelous look at the art crowd, with all its foibles and flamboyance. Sergey's search for happiness, which eludes him for so many years before finally being rewarded, is all the more poignant for knowing that it will end all too soon.

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### **Brandon Shire says**

Not for the titillation crowd. Very well written, but imagined, look into the life of young gay Russian of means in a time when that still meant something.

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### **K.M. Soehnlein says**

Who knew? Vladimir Nabokov had a gay brother, Sergey, just 11 months younger, who stayed behind in Europe when Nabokov came to America, had a longterm love affair with another man, and then met a terrible fate at the hands of the Nazis. Russell's imagining of Sergey's short life is a remarkable act of literary excavation—by turns whimsical and gripping, magical and sobering.

The novel unfolds leisurely in pre-Revolutionary Russia, then moves to Paris and Berlin in the decadent decades between the two World Wars. Narrated by Sergey in the form of a memoir hastily written in 1943 as British bombs dropped on the continent, the novel is filled with unforgettable characterization, a gentle ironic tone and endless delicious anecdotes. There's Diaghilev pining over straight dancers in his Ballets Russe; Gertrude and Alice sucking up attention from the gay men they surround themselves with; Mrs. Cole Porter at a dinner party hoping someone will help her husband write more complex music...

In the midst of it all is Sergey—a dandy with a debilitating stammer, unloved brother of his ever-more-famous sibling—whom Russell portrays as both a queer forefather—acquainted with Magnus Hirschfeld and Jean Cocteau—and a figure doomed to history, unable to hide his true self and paying the price for it.

Highly accomplished, highly entertaining, highly recommended.

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### **Lena♥Ribka says**

**This photograph taken of the family when it was in Yalta in 1917 seems to be the only photograph of Sergey Nabokov...**

Only in 1966, when he and Véra were living comfortably in their adopted Switzerland—*Lolita* having propelled him to wealth and worldwide fame—did Nabokov briefly address the subject of his dead brother. The third version of his celebrated autobiography *Speak, Memory* contains two pages absent from the earlier editions. “For various reasons,” he writes, “I find it inordinately hard to speak about my other brother. He is a mere shadow in the background of my richest and most detailed recollections. “After enumerating their many differences, his perplexities and discoveries regarding Sergey’s character, his various instances of regrettable behavior toward him, Nabokov concludes, with eloquent abjection, “It is one of those lives that hopelessly claim a belated something—compassion, understanding, no matter what—which the mere recognition of such a want can neither replace nor redeem.”

**The most real UNREAL BIOGRAPHY of the unknown brother of one of the most significant writers of the 20th century.**

It is difficult to find a book worm who has never heard the name of Vladimir Nabokov or unfamiliar to the novel *Lolita*, but hardly a lot of readers know about Sergey Nabokov, the second son in the family after Vladimir Nabokov, born 11 months after his famous brother and with a very different fate ahead of him. Sergei, as opposed to Vladimir, grew shy, awkward boy, suffering from poor eyesight and strong stuttering. And Sergey was gay. He was deeply kind and highly sensitive, and therefore an easy butt for teasing sports and mobbing.

It was an unspoken family secret. After his brother outed him at the age of 15, things were never the same for him within the family-although the family reacted to this fact, relatively quiet. Maybe exactly the homosexuality of Sergey was the reason of the difficult relationship between two brothers – meanwhile, it is well known that Vladimir Nabokov had a fixed distaste for homosexuality.

**I can't recommend this book highly enough.** It is for sure one of the best books I've read not only this year.

The author did a great job, doing research and putting together those few facts and informations about Sergey Nabokov that were left – *mostly they were just footnotes in a familiy chronicals and very little have been preserved* -and creating an unforgettable great novel about a difficult and horrible period of history, about the family that fled Russia and never came back and lost its motherland forever, about two brothers that were bothe brilliant and talented, both rich and handsome and though had totally different fates - one enjoyed a literary international fame and praise, the other(view spoiler)

Written in the form of of a memoir from Sergey's POV this book ends when someone rings the doorbell. Even knowing WHO was there I didn't cry reading the last sentence, maybe because of the narrator- Sergey has never sounded depressing and helpless. He was smart, gentle, witty, optimistic and very kind person. But I cried reading the Afterword. And I'm crying now, writing my review. So...be prepared.

The Unreal Life of Sergey Nabokov is a literary jewel, full of unforgettable characters, historical events, gentle irony and incredibly beautiful mind of Sergey, **the unknown brother of one of the most important writers of the 20th century.**

READ IT.

It is your contribution that the name of Sergey Nabokov won't get lost without a trace in the archives of history...

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## **Irina says**

This is an understated jewel. So powerfully written, it took my breath away and left me ruined for my future books.

It's been years since I read in Russian, and this was undoubtedly a perfect choice to remind myself how rich and beautiful the language is when used by a skilful writer. Brilliant translation that brought me that much closer to the characters and - just like them - to the homeland I left behind.

I am grateful to the author for building this novel in such a way that the happiest part of it, the culmination, comes almost last. It has lifted my spirits so much that in the end I felt a bittersweet peace. (view spoiler)

I have so many thoughts - one overtaking the other - about Serezha's 'cruel' childhood, his never ending rivalry with the most-beloved-later-famous brother, his heart wrenching longing for affection or at least approval by his parents/brother/uncle/friends or anybody for that matter. A lone wolf (or rather lamb), surrounding himself with people yet always being alone.

And, to include my random thought my reading friend Sofia advised I write here too - while reading this novel, I was also thinking how all the famous people wear masks that they let their fans see and how incorrect their personalities remain in our memories. And how all those affected negatively by their celebrity siblings/relatives/friends die with their stories untold. To live in others' shadow all our life is a nightmare to me. But I admired Serezha - for his kindness, intelligence, and many other qualities, but mainly - for his courage to remain who he is and not the person everyone wanted him to be.

I can talk and discuss this endlessly as really great books tend to influence us so, but I'll just say this - I feel privileged to have read Sergey Nabokov's story. HE's become my real hero (unlike his brother). (view spoiler) And I cannot possibly recommend it highly enough.

And to my supporting, understanding, hand-holding friend Sofia - this was quite a journey, wasn't it? I'm so glad I've had you to talk to every step of the way. This would've been a very lonely experience without you. Thank you!

And Lenka - I don't know how you stumbled upon this book, but thank you for discovering and recommending it to us!

\*\*\*5 stars\*\*\* Of course!

P.S.: *This is my raw review. Which means I finished the book at 1 AM and wrote this straight after.*



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## Gerhard says

The only other Russell novel I've read is 'Sea of Tranquility', one of my all-time best books. I was intrigued by his latest, an imaginative recounting of the largely unknown, undocumented life of Vladimir Nabokov's 'lost' gay brother. The scholarship is impeccable, but I struggled to get a handle on this. There's a panoply of historical personages appearing as 'real' characters, and swathes of history the reader is expected to be familiar with. Russell's account of pre-War Berlin is certainly not on a par with Christopher Isherwood. I suppose the biggest problem for me is that Sergey is a largely unlikeable, unsympathetic character (among a coterie of unlikeable, self-absorbed characters.) Clearly Russell is somewhat infatuated with him -- which means he places him on a pedestal throughout. This serves to distance the character from the reader. I also did not like the ending, with Sergey's ultimate fate only revealed in the 'Afterword'. Russell should have seen it through to the end. And ... where's the sex!? After the white-hot heat of Sea of Tranquility, I was disappointed that everything in this book kind of happens off the page, as it were. A bit more intimacy between the sheets would have made this much more heartfelt and warm-blooded.

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## Bandit says

I'm not quite sure how to review this fictional autobiography of the slightly (by 11 months) younger gay brother of Vladimir Nabokov. As a biography one can't help but judge the book by its subject and as such Sergey Nabokov was not an overtly likeable one. It's very much the case of a not particularly interesting (and overwhelmingly clichéd) person living a particularly interesting life during a particularly interesting time. And by overwhelmingly clichéd I mean a young boy who adores his pederast leaning uncle turning into a young promiscuous man living a uniquely vapid, shallow and superficial type of life and using rich men for money until he actually managed to fall in love with one of them, which presumably makes living off of him more moral. Despite upper class upbringing and an excellent education, he fails to make something of himself, develops an opium habit and spends his time resenting his infinitely more talented brother. To better show his character one only has to read the paragraph where Sergey discusses his initial fascination with Hitler due to the Nazis' stylish black and white posters and their utilization of young men in uniforms. Eventually his indiscretion leads him to a tragic end. His brother, of course, becomes a world renown novelist. Yet, despite my thoughts on the titular character, as a historical fiction, this was quite excellent, well written book that vividly brought to life the first four turbulent decades of Europe's last century from original perspectives and shedding some light on the homosexual community of the time. Shelved under gay fiction, this might easily be marginalized as such and such alone, yet it really shines in its historical aspect the most. Nabokov is presented here in a notably shabby fashion. Presumably it's all a matter of perspective.

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## Grady says

### A Very Real Unreal Biography/Novel

Paul Russell has a very special gift. He is able to enter the timeframe of his characters' lives in such a way that he makes the reader able to feel like a traveling companion rather than an observer from a distance. THE UNREAL LIFE OF SERGEY NABOKOV is rich in the use of language that sets a period of history, using colloquialisms and other-country means of addressing friends, family, and loved ones, and describing an

historical tenor that all that happens to seems so very natural, so unstilted, so refreshingly informative.

The more famous of the two Nabokov Brothers - Vladimir Vladimirovich Nabokov (1899 - 1977), writer of 'Lolita' and many other brilliant and controversial novels and poems, even making it to the cover of TIME magazine - far outshone his younger brother Sergey. Of note, at the age of 16, Vladimir discovered the diary of his enigmatic 15-year-old brother lying open on a desk. The professions of gay love he found within its pages scandalized Vladimir. He promptly shared the contents with his tutor, who in turn handed it over to the Nabokovs' politician father. The diary contains details of what Vladimir called "a retroactive clarification of certain oddities of behavior on [Sergey's] part"; here Nabokov's homophobia is caught "on the edge of the remark." This bit of filial relationship in part explains the course of this fascinating novel. The brothers were at the extremes of sexual preference. While the erudite Vladimir moved from the family of wealth and opulence in Tsarist Russia into the world of multilingual literature, setting off first to England (where he and his brother studied at Cambridge) and then for America after escaping the Bolshevik Revolution, Sergey fled to Berlin where he embraced the gay life, coming to grips with his occult feelings and finding fleeting love. But that is not the sole course of the book or of Sergey's life. Russell's novel is framed as a series of diary entries, an entirely appropriate manner of relating this story as both brother's were inveterate diarists. 'While verging on cliché, this framing device allows for an intriguing parallel narrative: Sergey, while working for the Nazi Ministry of Propaganda, attempts to dodge the Gestapo after uttering a subversive statement against the Reich. These passages are intercut with scenes from his past: a privileged Russian childhood, study at Cambridge, an opium-soaked friendship with Jean Cocteau, the world of Diaghilev's Ballet Russes, and Gertrude Stein's salon at 27 Rue de Fleurus.'

While Sergey's story is somewhat less well defined than his brother's, Russell does manage to use a style of language that is endearing and allows the read to feel the presence of this stammering, vulnerable, needy, yet proud young Russian as he becomes intimate with the intelligentsia of the day. He is part of the lives of Diaghilev, Misia Sert, Jean Cocteau, Nijinsky by default, Picasso, Chanel, Alice B. Toklas and Gertrude Stein among many others. But for all the seeming braggadocio of our narrator we are left with a young gay man searching for love and for place in a world basically unkind and unaccepting. This is a love story by a brilliant writer: Paul Russell is a professor at Vassar and has written several brilliant books including 'The Coming Storm', 'War Against the Animals', 'The Gay 100: the most influential gay men, lesbians, GLBTs', etc. Hi ability to infuse his books with rich flavor and penetrating insights while at the same time consistently entertaining the reader makes him one of the brightest writers before the public today. Highly Recommended.

Grady Harp

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### **Gavin Stephenson-Jackman says**

Well I've finally been able to finish reading The Unreal Life of Sergey Nabokov. Between finishing other library books, work, buying a new house, and preparing to move for the first time in nearly 15 years, it has been difficult to find the time to actually sit down and read. I've actually had to borrow this title three times before actually finishing it. Don't misunderstand me here, I quite enjoyed the novel.

Sergey grows up in a very difficult time starting in Tsarist Russia prior to the beginning of WWI. Growing up different Sergey had some definite advantages. He came from a fairly well to do family and as such enjoyed many privileges and advantages. His family was well aware of those of us who are different as there were other family members who also were different and their 'deviance' was tolerated in public even if it

was ridiculed in private.

Forced from Russia during the period of the communist revolution the family exists in a number of different locations where Sergey reaches adulthood. After his father's demise the family pulls apart and Sergey strikes out on his own meeting some of the most prominent people of the 20s and 30s. With the onset of the depression leading into WWII Sergey finds himself in German controlled Austria with his partner and later back in Berlin translating for the Nazi regime. Not one to be cowed into secrecy about who he is or what he believes he finds himself to be under observation for his less than supportive attitudes.

The novel offers an insight into a very different world that we know today, a world of privilege and the downfall into exile and poverty, as well as offering insights into the world where being honest and open about who you truly are could cost you everything, including life itself.

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