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Novelist Paul Russell Imagines the Life of Vladimir Nabokov's Forgotten, Gay Brother

In *THE UNREAL LIFE OF SERGEY NABOKOV: A Novel*, Paul Russell re-creates the extraordinary life of the gay brother of Vladimir Nabokov, Sergey, and the rich and changing world in which he, 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.

The novel opens in November 1943, as the RAF have begun their devastating air raids over Berlin. Certain that the Gestapo will soon come to arrest him, he begins feverishly to write an account of his life. Beginning with his boyhood in Czarist Russia, Sergey chronicles an opulent upbringing swept away by the tsunami of revolution. He details his vexed relations with his beloved but distant (and doomed) father, his eccentric Uncle Ruka, his handsome and brutal schoolmate Oleg, and his adored and dismissive older brother Vladimir. He recreates the confusions and exhilarations of discovering his homosexuality in a time and place where such love is forbidden.

After fleeing Russia, Sergey resumes his education at Cambridge, where he falls in love not only with various Englishmen but with all things English. During the 1920s he immerses himself in Bohemian Paris, befriending the likes of Jean Cocteau, Serge Diaghilev and Gertrude Stein while

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plumbing the depths of opium addiction. We follow his turbulent love affairs. Eventual salvation comes in the unlikely form of an Austrian who lives in a fairy-tale castle in the Alps, but this idyll is short-lived as war once again threatens Europe.

Through it all runs Sergey's passionate relationship with his difficult, perplexing, brilliant brother Vladimir, who is on his way to becoming one of the greatest writers of the Twentieth Century. 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 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.

This meticulously researched novel is ultimately the story of a beautiful and vulnerable homosexual boy growing into an enlightened and courageous man.

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About the Author

Paul Russell is the author of six novels, including *Sea of Tranquillity*, *The Coming Storm* (winner of the 2000 Ferro-Grumley Award and finalist for the 2000 Lambda Literary Award) and *War Against the Animals* (finalist for the 2003 Lambda Literary Award) as well as a work of nonfiction, *The Gay 100*. His poems, short stories and essays have been widely published. He is a recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts Creative Writing Fellowship. He has taught at Vassar College and the University of Exeter.

The Unreal Life of Sergey Nabokov: A Novel

by Paul Russell

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