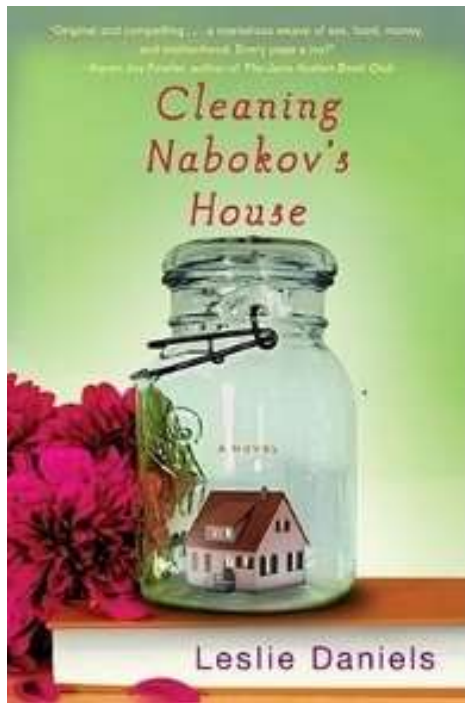


Allison's Book Corner July 2020

Cleaning Nabokov's House by Leslie Daniels (Touchstone, 2011)



Did you ever choose a book expecting one thing and then begin reading, and keep reading, and the story turns into something else completely? Well, that is exactly what happened to me with this book. This is a debut novel published a few years ago that has been whispered about in reading circles ever since.

I kept hearing about this unique story, set in a fictional upstate town, that somehow brings together things I like: a love of books, some baseball, a famous author, some romance.

I finally got around to reading *Cleaning Nabokov's House* during the covid-19 lockdown. First, I was drawn in by the title.

As Americans, we mostly know Vladimir Nabokov for writing the scandalous novel *Lolita*. I thought it would be very interesting to read about a woman living where he once lived. This is indeed a fictional account, but if you read any biography on Nabokov, you discover that he did live in Ithaca, NY for several years while teaching at Cornell University. Surprise! Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg was a student of his -- but I digress.

Our author has reimagined Ithaca as an oddly-named town where everyone just slumps around under the weight of grey weather and the burdens of life. Unfortunately, our main character Barb has found herself here because of her bitter divorce, and now her children live in this town named Onkwedo. She has also lost custody of her children, and not due to drug or alcohol abuse. But the ex person (the wonderful name she calls her ex-husband) found a way to turn one little mistake she made into a custody battle with his expensive attorney. Guess who did not have an

attorney? Long story short, Barb finds a rent-to-own house and discovers a lost manuscript, perhaps written by Nabokov, written on index cards (this was his writing method) stuffed behind a drawer. Alas, it is determined to be inauthentic. (Maybe not too believable that the genius Nabokov would write about Babe Ruth and women.)

Here is where the tale takes a turn that even I never guessed. Barb refuses to give up on the manuscript. She notices that the women in town seem repressed and depressed. They need makeovers, but her mind does not go to the usual place. Instead, she finds another old house, fixes it up, and turns it into a cathouse for women. **Yes, you read it correctly. A “cathouse” for women.** My mouth dropped open while reading. Somehow, Daniels makes this seem very believable. Local hunky male college students need the money, and the women come calling and paying. It is no coincidence that when Daniels wrote this book, the very popular television show *Cathouse: The Series* was airing on HBO. If you ever saw an episode (and I have), Daniels has created the same atmosphere with female clients. For those who are faint of heart, there are no sex scenes in this book (unnecessary: we all know what goes on in a cathouse.)

You have to take my word for it that this whole plot works. It works because our main character is very endearing and every reader can see him- or herself somewhere in this story.

Put yourself into the story. Allow it to happen. Maybe you are divorced and can relate to the bitter situation (my hand is raised high), maybe you lost custody of your children and fought to get them back, maybe you are just going through the paces of life here in Warwick and need to do something exciting. I am not suggesting a cathouse visit, but you see where I am going with this. Barb is also very funny and very real. She has to go into New York City and see lawyers about the manuscript. In Barb's words, "Going back to NYC once you have stopped living there is like visiting an old lover who has found someone new." She takes off her comfortable old lady shoes and changes into her interview heels at Port Authority. How many times I have done that very same thing. Just thinking about it makes me smile.

Her children are very sweet young kids who wonder why their mother cannot live with them. Somewhere between manuscript and cathouse, Barb finds the nerve to fight for them and for her rightful place in their lives.

I can honestly tell you I have not given away the entire story. There is a lot to sink your teeth into. A lovely read about someone who rediscovers herself in -- dare I say it -- middle age and realizes that life is not over. As my mother often says, as long as you wake up in the morning, you have a chance. A chance at *what* is for you, dear reader, to discover. This book might just be the kick in the backside that you need.