

50 Years on, 'Lolita' Still Has Power to Unnerve

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Vladimir Nabokov's "Lolita," that disquieting story about a suave and silver-tongued European émigré who seduces a 12-year-old American girl, was published 50 years ago this month, and Vintage is celebrating with a special anniversary edition. "Lolita" is unlike most controversial books in that its edge has not dulled over time. Where "Ulysses" and "Lady Chatterley's Lover," say, now seem familiar and inoffensive, almost quaint, Nabokov's masterpiece is, if anything, more disturbing than it used to be.

Scrupulousness might have argued for waiting a few years to memorialize it, since the book did not come out in this country until 1958. Nabokov finished it in December 1953, and according to his biography by Brian Boyd, sent it to five American publishers: Viking; Simon & Schuster; New Directions; Farrar, Straus; and Doubleday. None would touch it, and neither would The New Yorker, with whom Nabokov had a first-reading agreement. Katharine White, Nabokov's editor at the magazine and a friend, told him that "Lolita" made her "thoroughly miserable." Pascal Covici, his editor at Viking, said that anyone who published it risked being fined or jailed.

So the anniversary we are really celebrating is that of the Paris edition, a green-jacketed book that came out under the grimy imprint of the Olympia Press, which had cornered a lucrative niche by publishing books that ran into censorship trouble elsewhere, including titles by Henry Miller and Jean Genet. They gave the press a certain literary cachet, though most of the titles were along the lines of "Until She Screams" and "There's a Whip in My Valise."

Nabokov initially planned to publish "Lolita" pseudonymously, though he left a telltale fingerprint: mention of a character named Vivian Darkbloom, an anagram of Vladimir Nabokov. But James Laughlin, the publisher of New Directions, argued that the book's style was so distinctive that no one would stay fooled, and when Maurice Girodias, Olympia's publisher, urged the author to use his own name, Nabokov gave in.

Humbert Humbert, the narrator of "Lolita," claimed to have turned out the manuscript in just 56 days, and the book reads that way -- the hot, urgent, at times lyrical outpourings of a man blurting out a simultaneous confession and self-justification. The task took Nabokov considerably longer, and in 1950, "beset with technical difficulties and doubts," he even started to burn the manuscript in a backyard incinerator, from which it was saved by his wife, Vera. The "first little throb" of inspiration for "Lolita," Nabokov later wrote, came in Paris in late 1939 or early 1940, and he wrote a short story, never published, about a man who marries a dying woman to get access to her young daughter, whom he tries to seduce in a hotel room before throwing himself under a train.

The breakthrough idea of turning the story from third person to first occurred in the mid-40's, and it gave the novel its most distinctive feature, Humbert's impassioned voice: "Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul. Lo-lee-ta: the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three, on the teeth. Lo. Lee. Ta."

Nabokov wrote much of the book in circumstances not unlike those encountered by Humbert and Lolita during their year of driving more or less aimlessly around all 48 continental states: during summer vacations in the early 50's, that is, when he, Vera and their son, Dmitri, piled into the family's aging Oldsmobile and drove west so that Nabokov could pursue his other great passion: collecting butterflies.

The family stayed, like Hum and Lo, in motor courts and tourist cabins with walls so thin they could hear the flush of the next-door toilet or the exertions of honeymooning couples. For quiet in the evenings Nabokov would often repair to the back seat of the Olds, where he wrote "Lolita" on index cards. The novel is, among other things, an unashamed mash note to America, Nabokov's adoptive country, and as he wrote later, a record of his bittersweet love affair with the American language. While working on the book, he read movie magazines, scribbled jukebox song titles and rode buses to eavesdrop on snatches of teenage conversation.

Like many controversial books, "Lolita" proved that nothing helps sales more than a whiff of scandal. The novel received an unexpected boost when Graham Greene, writing in *The Sunday Times* of London, named it one of the three best books of 1955, and John Gordon, the editor of *The Sunday Express*, responded with a diatribe, saying, "Without doubt it is the filthiest book I have ever read."

After the book was finally published in the United States by Walter Minton, a young editor at G.P. Putnam's Sons, who had apparently heard about it from a girlfriend, a showgirl in the Latin Quarter, it shot to the top of the best-seller lists, where it stayed neck and neck with Pasternak's "Doctor Zhivago" for six months. Sales of "Lolita" were spurred, no doubt, by heavy-breathing readers who were disappointed to discover that the racy bits were mostly confined to the first 140 pages.

But "Lolita" is more than just a dirty book; it's an upsetting one. And it disturbs us more than ever because pedophilia has moved from the murky, seldom-visited basement of our collective consciousness to the forefront of our moral awareness. We know now that it happens more often than anyone imagined, and with far worse consequences.

And we're also clearer now about the dynamic that turns even consensual sex into criminality. It's true that Lolita makes the first overt move, but no one in his right mind would write any longer, as Robertson Davies did when defending "Lolita" in 1959, that the book's theme is "not the corruption of an innocent child by a cunning adult, but the exploitation of a weak adult by a corrupt child."

Nabokov never pretended that Humbert was anything but a monster. To a *Paris Review* interviewer who suggested that what went on between Humbert and Lolita wasn't much different from, say, the relationships between middle-aged movie moguls and young starlets, Nabokov responded sharply: "Humbert was fond of 'little girls' -- not simply 'young girls.' Nymphets are girl-children, not starlets and 'sex kittens.'"

And yet Humbert is also a brilliant monster, a touching one, even lovable at times. As Lionel Trilling wrote, "Humbert is perfectly willing to say he is a monster; we find ourselves less and less eager to agree with him." This is part of Humbert's strategy: he wants to win us over. And he is in the end a moral monster. In the novel's great last scene, he recalls looking down from a mountaintop and listening to the sound of children playing below. He realizes that "the hopelessly poignant thing was not Lolita's absence from my side, but the absence of her voice from that concord." His great crime, he now understands, is not so much debauching Lolita as depriving her of her childhood, her place in that laughing concord.

We need to remember, though, that it has taken him the entire novel to get to this point, and that elsewhere, in the high-spirited beginning especially, with its fond and precise evocation of lovely Lo, her smell, her chestnut hair, her downy back and honey-hued shoulders, her figure-eight-shaped vaccination scar, Humbert is getting off all over again.

Worse, he takes us with him. It may not be quite true, as Trilling said, that "we have come virtually to condone the violation," but we keep reading, as if under a spell. "Lolita" is a study in seduction of many sorts, not least the seduction of art, which turns out to have no morality at all.

Correction: September 30, 2005, Friday An article in *The Arts* on Saturday about the 50th anniversary of "Lolita" referred incompletely to Walter Minton, who arranged its publication in the United States. He was not merely a young editor at G.P. Putnam's Sons; he was its president.

Correction: October 8, 2005, Saturday An article in *The Arts* on Sept. 24 about the 50th anniversary of "Lolita" included an erroneous reference, based on an afterword by Vladimir Nabokov, to a precursor version from 1939. Although Nabokov said he had destroyed the manuscript, a copy survived and the work was in fact published, in translation from the Russian, in 1986. The article also misstated the means of the protagonist's death; he dies under a truck, not a train.