Lost in the funhouse

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19 November 2013

Like Joyce's Ulysses, Nabokov's Lolita was once smuggled through customs in suitcases. Tim Groenland tells the unlikely story of how Nabokov's classic ever came to be published in the first place and then go on to become a commercial success.

It should be, and probably has been, told to a psychoanalyst, and it has been elaborated into a novel which contains some wonderful writing, but it is overwhelmingly nauseating, even to an enlightened Freudian. To the public, it will be revolting. It will not sell, and it will do immeasurable harm to a growing reputation [...] It is a totally perverse performance all around [...] I am most disturbed at the thought that the writer has asked that this be published. I can see no possible cause could be served by its publication now. I recommend that it be buried under a stone for a thousand years.

As rejections go, this one – from an early reader of Lolita for an unidentified publisher – is fairly emphatic. It’s not clear whether the verdict was ever shown to Vladimir Nabokov, but the combination of scorn and disgust here might have been expected to provoke second thoughts in any writer. Luckily for us, Nabokov was not just any writer and by the mid-1950s, when he was carefully trying to usher Lolita into print, he was not a fragile first-time novelist but a respected academic at Cornell University and a seasoned literary campaigner with an impressive repertoire of fiction, criticism and translation to his name. The production of Lolita, published 55 years ago in the United States, was a long and sometimes tortuous one requiring all the reserves of literary credit the writer had built up since fleeing with his family from France in 1940.

The novel’s composition was equally protracted. The idea of a man who marries a dying woman as a means to obtain the young daughter he lusts after had first appeared in an unpublished short story from 1939; it was the early 1950s before Nabokov took up the plot again in earnest, taking notes on the same index cards he used for research on his lovingly-collected butterflies. He struggled with the work, and at one point, according to his later statements to interviewers (separating Nabokov’s self-mythologizing from fact is a tricky business), his wife, Véra, had to prevent him from burning his pile of cards in frustration. His biographer Brian Boyd describes how, during one of the many cross-
country summer trips Nabokov and his wife took in their battered car in search of new lepidopterological specimens, the novelist would escape the draughts and noise emanating from the thin-walled motel rooms in places like Dolores, Colorado by retiring to the back seat of his car, where he would scribble plot notes on batches of cards.

Over the following months, Nabokov juggled his research for the novel – reading gun catalogues, newspaper reports of sex crimes, Girl Scout manuals – with his lecturing load at Cornell, and to a friend he wrote the plaintive lament of the modern fiction writer: “I am sick of teaching, I am sick of teaching, I am sick of teaching.” The novel would develop in sporadic bursts over the subsequent years, a pattern imposed not only by Nabokov’s academic duties but by the huge amount of work he had taken on; he was also composing poetry, planning his next novel, Pnin, translating Pushkin into English and his own English-language novels into Russian, as well as finding the time to drive thousands of miles to chase butterflies in Arizona. However, in the winter of 1953 Lolita entered the home stretch: Nabokov spent sixteen-hour days poring over the typescript (while the indefatigable Véra marked his exam papers) and before long the novel was finally complete.

*Lolita’s* form and plot – a long confessional monologue by Humbert Humbert, a killer, abductor and rapist (the accuracy of this last term is still argued over by critics) describing his crimes in detail – made it not only *risqué* but, as the reader above noted, potentially ruinous to anyone involved in its production. Nabokov seems to have been well aware of this, and to have expected little in the way of commercial success from the novel. He knew that *The New Yorker*, which had published extracts from several of his works (and to which he was obliged to show it first) would never touch it, and he was not only prepared to accept a relatively low royalty rate for any edition but even hoped to publish the book anonymously (an idea he gave up when advised that it was unlikely to work). Boyd describes how, when leaving Cornell for his 1954 summer holidays, he locked the typescripts in a box, hid the key in another locked box, and then locked the office itself. All of the major publishers and several friends who initially viewed it kept their distance: Simon and Schuster’s editors described the book as “sheer pornography” while even sympathetic friends at New Directions felt that it was too big a gamble. Nabokov was soon searching abroad for a publisher, and the book ended up in the hands of the Olympia Press.

This Parisian imprint was run by the enterprising Maurice Girodias, whose opportunistic and indiscriminating editorial policy involved publishing experimental and occasionally salacious literary works (Miller’s *Tropic of Cancer*, Burroughs’s *Naked Lunch*, Donleavy’s *The Ginger Man*) alongside less ambitious “dirty books” with titles like *Until She Screams*, *The Sexual Life of Robinson Crusoe* and *There’s a Whip in My Valise*. Nabokov knew little of Girodias’s business (he could not foresee the later dispute that would arise due to the publisher’s equally cavalier attitude to copyright procedures and royalty payments) and was eager to publish provided readers could be made to understand the book’s literary status: “You and I know that *Lolita* is a serious book with a serious purpose. I hope the public will accept it as such. A *succès de scandale* would distress me.”

The first months of *Lolita’s* early reception were in fact relatively quiet: the first spark of significant public attention was its selection as one of Graham Greene’s books of the year
- despite it being available only in France – in the Christmas 1955 edition of The Sunday Times. Nabokov’s fears would soon prove to be well-founded, though: the editor of the Sunday Express expressed the view that “without doubt it is the filthiest book I have ever read” and a controversy was born. Attempts to publish the book in the Anglophone market gathered pace, and the reaction among publishers was similarly polarized. Copies of the novel (many of which had, like early editions of Ulysses, been smuggled through customs in the bottom of suitcases) began to circulate among British and American editors and while many recognized its merits, the opinions of those who mattered tended to be unfavourable. Most agreed with Viking Press’s Simon Covici that anyone who took it on would risk a jail sentence.

When a publisher was eventually found, the promotional strategy for the novel revolved around the possibility of court action (not to mention Nabokov’s anxieties about a possible threat to his continued employment at Cornell). Jason Epstein of Doubleday proposed a carefully stage-managed publication process by which the novel would be gradually rendered respectable through critical approval and carefully selected extracts; the only way to avoid ruining its chances, he thought, was by surrounding the book “with academic praise and high critical authority, letting her peep out of the pages of the Anchor Review until eventually, little by little, the country gets used to her”. The Review was a literary journal connected to Doubleday, and its 1957 issue printed a number of long excerpts along with an introductory critical essay by a literary scholar and a defensive afterword by Nabokov himself. The strategy would prove to be a winning one, and it was later copied by George Weidenfeld when the book was on its way to publication in Britain as he encouraged eminent literary figures like VS Pritchett, Stephen Spender and Iris Murdoch to write to The Times, invoking Ulysses and Madame Bovary in their defence of literature and of the novel’s right to exist.

It is worth remembering that the novel needed its defenders. In France, l’Affaire Lolita exploded in 1956 as the French ministry of the interior – spurred by the British home office’s alarm at the thought of British tourists bringing dirty books home from their holidays – banned it, prompting legal action from Girodias and a press debate about artistic freedom. Problems also persisted behind the scenes: the book would, in fact, eventually be published by Putnam’s in the US as Girodias’s excessive royalty demands caused Doubleday to withdraw from negotiations. Meanwhile, Australian federal police were raiding the Sydney Nation in search of the copy of the book from which the paper had published an extract. Nigel Nicolson, (one half of the UK publishing firm whose publication of Lolita would make its name) would soon lose his seat as Conservative MP for Bournemouth, partly as a result of the furore surrounding the book. Véra, however, seemed less worried about the potential for scandal than her husband and was perhaps more aware of the potential benefits, noting that the novel was creating “a lovely row in the French press”.

Lolita contains, to a greater degree than most novels, a built-in awareness of the problems inherent in its own interpretation. The narrative is surrounded by several framing devices, the first a foreword from the novel’s ostensible editor, a vaguely ludicrous individual identifying himself as “John Ray, Jr., PhD” who purports to transmit Humbert’s story. J.R. Jr, a psychologist, dispenses questionable facts and platitudes and admits Humbert’s “moral leprosy”, while defending the narrative as “a great work of art”. In addition, we have Nabokov’s own commentary “On a Book Entitled Lolita”, originally
written for the Anchor Review, which subsequently became an afterword to the book we read today. It is a strange, impressive and sometimes contradictory piece of work, seeming to swat away any foolish anxieties and misconceptions the reader may have with an arrogant wave of the hand as Nabokov defends the aesthetic function of fiction and declares morality to be irrelevant in art: “no writer in a free country should be expected to bother about the exact demarcation between the sensuous and the sensual”. He claims that the novel is “fantastic and personal” and argues that “it is childish to study a work of fiction in order to gain information […] about the author”, but still makes sure to put some distance between himself and the narrator, assuring the reader that “there are many things” in which he disagrees with Humbert.

This pseudo-critical apparatus and defensive, distancing posturing cannot simply be put down to the prudery of an earlier time. Humbert Humbert is one of the trickiest narrators in all of literature, and the reader who opens the first chapter of Lolita will immediately be faced with his complicated wordplay:

> 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. She was Lo, plain Lo, in the morning, standing four feet ten in one sock. She was Lola in slacks. She was Dolly at school. She was Dolores on the dotted line. But in my arms she was always Lolita.

The magnificent opening passage contains the book’s technique in microcosm: the masterful prose style, with its elegant variations and irresistible alliterative lilt; the contrast between lyrical sensuousness and precise detail; the skilful implication of the reader in the story’s telling (try reading this passage without saying the name yourself); and the stealthy way in which disturbing, creepy hints (loins? four foot ten? school?) are threaded throughout the perfectly crafted sentences.

Not the least of the tricky questions facing the reader is this: what type of book is Lolita exactly? Is it a “poignant personal study”, as J.R. Jr promises us? We are teased at the outset with the prospect of a neat Freudian unresolved-childhood-issue case study as Humbert reminisces over his unconsummated love for a doomed childhood sweetheart (the origin, he claims, of his obsession with “nymphets”). Humbert refers to the narrative as his “sinister memoir”, and the book begins with pseudo-autobiographical reminiscences about his French childhood, but the odd glimpses of dark humour strike a different tone: “My very photogenic mother died in a freak accident (picnic, lightning) when I was three.” Boyd observes that the book is structured as an inverted detective story: Humbert confesses to being a murderer in the opening pages – “you can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style” – and the suspense of the plot consists in identifying his victim.

Is the novel perhaps a satire on bourgeois American values, as we might begin to suspect during the comic fish-out-of-water situation that develops when reserved European Humbert unexpectedly finds himself lodging with a suburban New England mother and her prepubescent daughter? Much of the first third of the book is a very dark and very nasty joke at the expense of Dolores, Lolita’s mother, the unsuspecting and hopelessly aspirational Charlotte, described as “the rather ridiculous, though rather handsome Mrs.
Haze, with her blind faith in the wisdom of her church and book club” (words which also hint at Nabokov’s contempt for bad or lazy readers). Indeed Charlotte fails utterly to “read” Humbert’s designs and soon we find him suffering his way through a sham marriage, contemplating murder in the midst of home improvements and dinner parties while the real object of his lust is away at summer camp (it is Humbert’s great success as a narrator that he portrays himself as a helpless victim “on the rack of joy” and manages to make his dilemma amusing and even sympathetic). Another freak accident – Charlotte runs in front of a car after reading Humbert’s shocking diary entries, an early sign of the powerful relationship between words and action that Nabokov would soon explore further in Pale Fire – leaves the narrator’s new wife dead and the road to realization of his evil designs free of obstacles.

Humbert now finds himself as his stepdaughter’s sole guardian, and takes full advantage. After bringing her from camp to a hotel, another convenient twist of fate saves him from having to take responsibility for his plans. He insists that “it was she who seduced me” and in another uncomfortable inversion, portrays his child victim as his corruptor: “Sensitive gentlewomen of the jury, I was not even her first lover.” The following portion of the book takes the form of a depraved road trip, as Humbert spends his days in “guilty locomotion” and enjoys his newfound power in a series of motels. The couple’s relationship oscillates between one of co-conspirators – Bonnie and Clyde on the run from the law – and one of terrorist and hostage. Their “extensive travels all over the States” could be read as a dark reflection of the classic American road narrative and their “wild journey” – a sinister counterpoint to Kerouac’s On the Road, written and published more or less contemporaneously with Lolita. Humbert’s grip on reality seems to loosen here as his prose stretches into rhapsodic reveries and ecstatically aestheticized paeans to the “quick-silverish water and harsh green corn”, the “mysterious outlines of table-like hills, and then red bluffs ink-blotted with junipers, and then a mountain range, dun grading into blue, and blue into dream.”

Humbert, showing a creepily fastidious concern for his captive’s “formal education”, eventually decides to settle in a small college town where Lolita can return to school. There is more queasy domestic comedy here as Humbert plays the dual roles of jealous lover and disapproving dad struggling to prevent his increasingly assertive “daughter” from going on dates and taking part in the school play. Soon they decide to hit the road again, and this is where the plot really thickens; the novel mutates into an extended paranoid chase scene as obsessive, gun-toting Humbert, whose lust has by now deepened into an obsessive and doomed urge for control (Martin Amis described the novel as “a study in tyranny”), starts to become aware of a mysterious presence trailing, tracking and perhaps even pre-empting his movements. We sense that we may be leaving the expected confines of the realist novel here, and several questions begin to present themselves. Who is the enigmatic playwright Quilty, and why does he seem to have an almost supernatural status in the plot? Is Lolita making a break for her own freedom, or is this all the work of Quilty, who may be even more malign and depraved than Humbert? What do we make of the metafictional hints dotted here and there, and why does our narrator feel that he is a character in “the ingenious play staged for me by Quilty”? And why is Quilty in league with the enigmatically (and anagrammatically) named Vivian Darkbloom? As the mirror imagery multiplies and Lolita’s world fractures, we realise we have wandered into the centre of the funhouse.
Nabokov would later profess total contempt for Humbert and name Lolita as one of the characters he most admired in his own work. Not all readers have arrived at the same interpretation, though, and many of the book’s early readers assumed that the narrator and author were interchangeable. Nabokov’s French agent reported, disturbingly, that Girodias “finds the book not only admirable from the literary point of view, but he thinks that it might lead to a change in social attitudes toward the kind of love described in *Lolita*, provided of course that it has this authenticity, this burning and irrepressible ardour”. Nadezhda Mandelstam (writer and wife of Russian poet Osip) told a critic that in her mind “there was no doubt that the man who wrote *Lolita* could not have done so unless he had in his soul those same disgraceful feelings for little girls”. These may seem like simplistic readings that break one of the basic tenets of criticism, namely the recognition of the division between author and fictional narrator (Was Anthony Burgess a closet sociopath? Is it fair to suspect Bret Easton Ellis of plotting serial murder?); however, the novel itself makes this division difficult, and many critics have found themselves under Humbert’s spell.

Humbert is considered to be one of the great examples of the unreliable narrator in literature. The real problem for interpretation, however, lies in the fact that while he may be unreliable – not to mention criminal, reprehensible and possibly insane – he is the only narrator we’ve got. He tells the story from start to finish (even when we begin to question his control of it); more confusingly, he is also charming, funny and entertaining. It is hard not to enjoy his blatant, playful invention of names, supposedly altered for legal purposes (Harold D. Doublename, Miss Opposite); the cruel humour in the choice of words in “the man having a lavish epileptic fit on the ground in Russian Gulch State Park”; and the subtlety in vivid observations such as “Mrs. Haze gently touched the silver on both sides of her plate, as if touching piano keys”. Humbert’s obsession is so lovingly detailed, so suffused with authorial craft, that the reader can’t help taking pleasure in his world: while the means by which he achieves his moments of bliss are repellent, his depiction of that bliss is so poetic (“I dissolved in the sun, with my book for fig-leaf, as her auburn ringlets fell all over her skinned knee, and the shadow of leaves I shared pulsated and melted on her radiant limb”) that we are carried unwillingly along with him. As Lionel Trilling noted, our recognition of the fact that Humbert’s joy is doomed helps him to play on our sympathies, making the novel – at one level – a story of unrequited and impossible love. Humbert runs up against one of the last taboos left (not to mention the natural time limit imposed by his obsession with “nymphets”), and our understanding that an inevitable comeuppance is on the way lends an air of twisted romance to his passion.

Humbert condemns himself before we can, describing himself as a “monster”, a “brute” and an “ape”, constantly professing his depravity and brutality in an effort to pre-empt judgement. He wheedles his way towards our sympathy, asking again and again for our understanding, using every rhetorical trick to get us on his side: “Please, reader: no matter your exasperation with the tenderhearted, morbidly sensitive, infinitely circumspect hero of my book, do not skip these essential pages! Imagine me; I shall not exist if you do not imagine me ...” He presents himself as a cultured aesthete in the grip of passions too refined for ordinary mortals (alluding to Keats, Dante and Virgil among many others) and enlists literature itself as his defence witness: “the gentle and dreamy regions through which I crept were the patrimonies of poets – not crime’s prowling ground”. He admits the presence of alterations and evasions at key points in his narrative, which makes it hard for critics even to agree on whether he can be trusted:
Craig Raine contends, in disagreement with Boyd and others, that Humbert “is not an unreliable narrator and his distortions, when they occur, are acknowledged”. Humbert argues that “fate” has dictated events and that he was helpless to control them (“I am nature’s faithful hound”) and as the bizarre events and coincidences multiply in the unfolding of the increasingly cryptic plot (the identical room numbers, the odd verbal echoes and mirroring of characters), it becomes dangerously easy to agree with him.

*Lolita*’s relentless refusal to settle on a clear moral tone in relation to its subject matter makes it hard to pin down; critic Benjamin Widiss argues that it refuses to allow the reader to comfortably make the distinction between author and narrator and, ultimately, to “feel safe in enjoying the book”. Early reaction seems to have focused on the novel’s right to depict sex, without always stopping to worry about the specifics of the plot; Michael Wood points out that the way in which the novel’s title has entered our language – its definition in most dictionaries is “a sexually precocious young girl” – shows, when applied to the novel, an inherent sympathy with Humbert’s point of view rather than that of his victim. This not only hints at the rather schizophrenic nature of the modern view of child sexuality, but suggests that an entire culture may be guilty of misreading Nabokov’s book.

*Lolita*, of course, would go on to sell tens of millions of copies, and in a far shorter space of time than *Ulysses*. Popular tastes had become a little more receptive to modernist fiction over the preceding decades and the victory for Allen Ginsberg’s “Howl” in its 1957 trial for obscenity surely did Nabokov’s cause no harm in legal or cultural terms. In the US, outrage was sporadic and local, and failed to prevent widespread cultural acceptance. An LA city official complained about the book’s presence in a public library (causing an inevitable sales spike) and the Texas town of Lolita considered changing its name; meanwhile, though, Nabokov was receiving invitations to lecture at universities, his students were asking him to sign copies of the book as Christmas gifts for their parents, and TV hosts and comedians were making the book and its title character a household name (Groucho Marx: “I’ve put off reading *Lolita* for six years, till she’s 18.”). Nabokov finally achieved widespread commercial success for his writing, with the sale of movie rights (to Stanley Kubrick) and paperback rights for a hefty sum; as Stacy Schiff notes, one of the great ironies of *Lolita*’s success was that it allowed the author to resign from the teaching job he had been so afraid of losing in the event of any scandal. His reaction to the news that his book was becoming a bestseller was typically self-confident and dismissive: the book, he noted in a letter to his sister, was an “unbelievable success – but all this ought to have happened thirty years ago”.

*Lolita* would return in popular culture over the coming decades, sometimes in strange guises. Kubrick’s heavily censored (and very loose) film adaptation had a mixed reception; Edward Albee’s 1982 Broadway adaptation flopped badly (as had, less surprisingly, a mystifying 1971 attempt to turn the story into a musical), highlighting the difficulty of translating Nabokov’s famous prose into another medium. The novel remains widely read and influential – its traces can be found, for example, in John Banville’s *The Book of Evidence*, as Eoghan Smith noted in the previous number of this series of re-readings – and places high in almost any list of great twentieth-century novels you will find. Its subject matter, though, continues to present a problem for modern readers.

While the dirty bits of *Ulysses*, for example, now seem relatively tame in our own moral
climate – descriptions of sex, masturbation and desire on the page are no longer argued over – Lolita can still shock. The idea of teenagers as sexual beings is perhaps less surprising than it was in the 1950s and the right of artists to depict disturbing and taboo activities is now rarely challenged, but the presence of a narrator who gleefully describes sexual encounters with a twelve-year-old girl, using only the most thinly-veiled figurative language (“every movement she made, every shuffle and ripple, helped me to conceal and to improve the secret system of tactile correspondence between beast and beauty – between my gagged, bursting beast and the beauty of her dimpled body in its innocent cotton frock”) is still unsettling. Humbert describes how any passer-by would, by peering in his window, “obtain a free glimpse of things that the most jaded voyeur would have paid a small fortune to watch”, an observation that makes us uncomfortably aware of the implications of following his story.

Our heightened twenty-first-century awareness of the pervasive and destructive nature of child abuse also makes its representation, if anything, more of a taboo. As recently as 1997, Adrian Lyne’s film adaptation (with Jeremy Irons and Melanie Griffith) had trouble finding an American distributor despite its relative tameness. The idea of an artist reading studies of the physical development of schoolgirls and conducting interviews with his friends’ daughters in order to write a novel such as this one seems more problematic in our hyper-vigilant times, and the recent cases of Pete Townsend (cautioned by police in 2003 after they accepted his explanation that he accessed child pornography for research purposes) and Will Self (who wrote angrily in August of this year about his experience of being stopped by police while walking in Yorkshire with his son) suggest that this might, strangely, be more dangerous territory for artists today than in the comparatively innocent 1950s.

Critics agree that Lolita still demands to be read, but don’t quite reach a consensus on how exactly to read it. An entire book (Approaches to Teaching Vladimir Nabokov’s Lolita) has been published with the stated aim of providing classroom strategies (the blurb notes that the novel’s “particular mix of narrative strategies, ornate allusive prose, and troublesome subject matter complicates its presentation to students”). Critic Peter Rabinowitz describes a recent debate during which he found himself defending the novel from the charge that it uses a high-art modernist veneer to excuse pornographic pleasures, making it “an elaborate display of smoke and mirrors aimed at tricking intellectuals into defending smut”, an excuse for illicit fantasy as well as a joke on Nabokov’s most devoted readers. Widiss defines the novel as “an endless hall of mirrors” and a “deliberate provocation”; even the afterword, he argues, is a “full-blown literary performance, as complex and convoluted as the novel it accompanies”, and the difficulty of identifying the author’s own position is precisely the point.

"Faced with a Nabokov novel,” Zadie Smith writes, “it’s impossible to rid yourself of the feeling that you’ve been set a problem, as a chess master sets a problem in a newspaper.” Certainly, while Humbert asks the reader “not to mock me and my mental daze”, the suspicion is that the power dynamic in his tale is a little different. A Nabokov reader, perusing an intricate surface of sculpted prose, literary allusions and intertextual links, is apt to feel in a similar position to Humbert’s hapless neighbour:

In my chess sessions with Gaston, I saw the board as a square pool of limpid water with rare shells and stratagems rosily visible upon the smooth tessellated
bottom, which to my confused adversary was all ooze and squid-cloud.

*Lolita*, as much as any other work in modern literature, illustrates the pleasures and the stakes involved in agreeing to play the game.

**Selection of works cited**


**Published 19 November 2013**

Original in **English**
First published in *Dublin Review of Books*, 4 November 2013
Downloaded from eurozine.com (https://www.eurozine.com/lost-in-the-funhouse/)
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