

# The Nation.

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Agee left the manuscript unfinished at his death, it doesn't need anything else; the emotional arc has more or less been completed. The novel was published posthumously in 1957, two years after he died, and won the Pulitzer Prize the following year. The book testified to Agee's successful digging-out of his narcissistic gulch and gaining an objective shifting perspective on a half-dozen protagonists. Perhaps the experience he had writing Hollywood screenplays (*The Night of the Hunter* and *The African Queen*) had strengthened his sense of structure, even as it made him less resistant to satisfying a bourgeois audience with accessible, vivid storytelling and fully developed characters.

Michael Sragow, the series editor, has done an excellent job selecting the texts and, in his biographical notes, keeping straight all of Agee's similar-named wives, Via, Alma and Mia. He has omitted Agee's poems (no great loss) and his other screenplays (then again, Agee was a much better novelist than a screenwriter). I may have wanted to see some correspondence, especially a few letters to Father Flye and Robert Fitzgerald, but I think we have enough to go by here. The totality suggests a hard-working, self-destructive writer with flashes of greatness and equal expressions of bluff and artist, whose poignant legacy deserves our continued and sympathetic, if unromantic, scrutiny. ■

## Succès de Scandale

LILA AZAM ZANGANEH

### **LOLITA: 50th Anniversary Edition.**

By Vladimir Nabokov. Vintage. 317 pp. \$13.95.

### **THE TWO LOLITAS.**

By Michael Maar. Translated by Perry Anderson. Verso. 107 pp. \$23.

She was once a russet girl-child "smelling of orchards in nymphetland." Today she's a social and linguistic cliché: "Lolita. n. [after title character in Nabokov's novel *Lolita*] a pubescent girl who is sexually precocious," as *Webster's* coyly informs us. From the obsession with Lindsay Lohan and the Olsen twins in laddie magazines like *Maxim* to the teen temptress who comes on to Bill Murray in Jim Jarmusch's recent film *Broken Flowers*, Lolitas have become a ubiquitous—even banal—feature of American culture. And they come, of course, in endless colors and contours.

But whatever happened to that nymphet who catapulted Nabokov into literary history? By a curious twist of fate, 50-year-old Lolita seems decidedly less consumable than her mainstream siblings, and she continues to foment considerable angst and trouble. To read *Lolita*, after all, is to enter the mind of a man irresistibly drawn to little girls, or "nymphets," as he prefers to call them. At the beginning of the novel, Humbert Humbert, sitting on a park bench, stares at a cluster of "perfect little beauties": "Ah, leave me alone in my pubescent park, in my mossy garden. Let

them play around me forever. Never grow up." Sunk deep in the fancies of his netherworld, Humbert lures the reader into his damp thicket of words. American readers in particular have long felt guilty about loving *Lolita*, and they have searched in vain for its moral lessons.

Nabokov was 56 years old when *Lolita* was published in September 1955, two years after he had completed the manuscript. He knew that she would be his "time bomb." Three little syllables that rocked the literary establishment. As soon as Jason Epstein, then a young editor at Doubleday, read the manuscript, he declared that Nabokov had written *Swann's Way* as though he were James Joyce. Epstein, however, promptly turned down the manuscript, citing its "outlandish perverseness." According to Nabokov's biographer, Brian Boyd, four other American publishers followed suit in the course of 1954. They feared a scandal, obscenity trials, even prison. And Nabokov sarcastically outlined his own account of *Lolita's* misadventures in his magnificent 1956 afterword, "On a Book Entitled *Lolita*": "The four American publishers, W, X, Y, Z, who in turn were offered the

typescript and had their readers glance at it, were shocked by *Lolita* to a degree...not expected." Publisher Z remarked that if he printed the book, both the writer and he would go to jail. Nabokov wasn't surprised, since he knew his tale of an affair between a middle-aged man and a barely pubescent girl explored one of the three "utterly taboo" themes in American publishing. (The two others were "A Negro-White marriage which is a complete and glorious success resulting in lots of children and grandchildren; and the total atheist who lives a happy and useful life, and dies in his sleep at the age of 106.")

It fell to a French editor, Maurice Girodias, the director of Olympia Press, to first publish *Lolita* in its original language—the English that the Russian-born writer had all but re-invented. In spite of a prestigious catalogue, Olympia Press was likely best known for rather sulfurous works, such as Henry Miller's *Plexus*, the Marquis de Sade's *The Bedroom Philosophers* and Georges Bataille's *A Tale of Satisfied Desire*, as well as what Nabokov would later term "the obscene novelettes which Mr. Girodias was hiring hacks to confect with his assistance." Thus, perhaps the first half of *Lolita*—the more erotically evocative—had led Girodias to hope for a certain success among aficionados of so-called "licentious" literature. As the eminent Nabokov scholar Alfred Appel Jr. recently reminisced, he "first discovered the novel in 1956...in a little book stand on the Left Bank, caught between *Until She Screams* and *The Sexual Life of Robinson Crusoe*."

Nabokov, who was unaware of Olympia Press's soft-core pedigree, would later claim he had been grossly misled, in a short text titled "*Lolita* and Mr. Girodias," published posthumously in *The Evergreen Review*, in 1998. Girodias, he complained, "wanted *Lolita* not only because it was well written but because (as Mme. Ergaz informed me on May 13, 1955) 'he thought that it might lead to a change in social attitudes toward the kind of love described in it.' It was a pious although obviously ridiculous thought but high-minded platitudes are often mouthed by enthusiastic businessmen and nobody bothers to disenchant them."

As it turned out, *Lolita's* tribulations were only beginning. The novel had hardly been published when a police officer representing a French league of virtue called *La brigade mondaine* ("The socialite brigade") paid a visit to Girodias. He requested that the publisher hand over a number of titles—among them *Lolita*, which would soon be banned

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by the very country that had welcomed its first printing.

John de St. Jorre narrates the nymphet's awkward first steps in his 1996 book *Venus Bound: The Erotic Voyage of the Olympia Press and Its Writers*: "*Lolita*, now banned in its English edition, was in the process of being translated quite legally into French for France's most venerable publishing house. And since *Lolita* could be legally brought into the United States once it was smuggled out of France, France was proving itself more pudibund than the Anglo-Saxon countries. Most absurd from a legal point of view was that the ministerial decree against Olympia's books could only invoke a law restricting subversive political publications." Girodias, of course, sought justice through endless trials and legal procedures that Nabokov testily coined "lolitigation"; the writer was more partial to poetic justice, and as far as he was concerned, his artistry was in no need of legal advocacy. *Lolita* was "a book that differed so utterly in vocabulary, structure, and purpose (or rather absence of purpose) from [Girodias's] other much simpler commercial ventures, such as *Debby's Bidet* or *Tender Thighs*," that it could defend itself on its own.

In 1958 the French ban on *Lolita* was lifted. After General de Gaulle came to power, however, Olympia's edition was suppressed yet again, even though by that time Gallimard had already published the novel in a French translation. And in one of the oddest turns in publishing history, the English version was definitively released only a year later from the grips of the French government's ban.

Meanwhile, in 1958, after countless hesitations in the United States, Putnam decided to publish *Lolita*. Contrary to expectations, there were no obscenity trials and the book was never banned, although numerous libraries piously refrained from acquiring it. But as the *parfum de scandale* spread throughout the country, *Lolita* climbed to the top of American best-seller lists and stayed there for more than six months. Nabokov would despise what he considered Girodias's vulgar salesmanship for the rest of his days, but he was well aware that Olympia's unstinting advocacy had won him admission to the international literary club, not to mention a substantial amount of money—enough, together with all other *Lolita* proceeds, for him to quit teaching at Cornell and move back to Europe, where he settled in Montreux, Switzerland, and lived until his death in 1977. "I have pondered the painful question

whether I would have agreed so cheerfully to his publishing *Lolita* had I been aware in May, 1955, of what formed the supple backbone of his production. Alas, I probably would, though less cheerfully," Nabokov later admitted, rather graciously.

From the time it was first published, *Lolita* has produced visceral reactions, provoked in large part by Humbert's beguiling voice. "Reader! *Bruder!*" he exclaims, obliquely alluding to Baudelaire's *Flowers of Evil* ("*Mon semblable, mon frère!*") while tugging mischievously at the reader's complicity. In the mid-1950s, however, moral repulsion was a far more common response than literary rapture. The obsessions of Humbert Humbert, "an artist and a madman, a creature of infinite melancholy," were an unabashed affront to the Victorian sensibilities of the book's first readers. They are the ones Nabokov addresses, not without a tinge of bitterness, in his 1956 afterword, where he reminds us that "obscenity must be mated with banality" and that a work of fiction exists, in his eyes, "only insofar as it affords me what I shall bluntly call aesthetic bliss, that is a sense of being somehow, somewhere, connected with other states of being where art (curiosity, tenderness, kindness, ecstasy) is the norm."

The truth is that when *Lolita* first appeared, few appreciated its artistic qualities, and the novel might well have vanished into oblivion had it not been for a sudden *cri de coeur* in a British newspaper. A little more than two months after the Parisian publication, in December 1955, Graham Greene selected *Lolita* as one of the three best novels of the year in the London *Sunday Times*. The critic John Gordon immediately replied in the *Sunday Express* that *Lolita* was the filthiest book he had ever read. The English public was scandalized by the devouring—and diabolically poetic—passion of the "pentapod monster" for his 12-year-old girl-child. Meanwhile, dozens of volumes were smuggled to the United States. Nabokov, for his part, almost inadvertently became the arch- iconoclast in what the French scholar Pascale Casanova has called the "World Republic of Letters." "Had not Graham Greene and John Gordon clashed in London in such providential fashion, *Lolita*—especially its second volume which repelled so-called 'amateurs'—might have ended in the common grave of Traveller's Favorites or whatever Olympia's little green books were called," Nabokov noted in his essay "*Lolita* and Mr. Girodias."

A staggering act of linguistic wizardry, *Lolita* was Nabokov's twelfth book but

only his third novel in English, following *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (New Directions, 1941) and *Bend Sinister* (Henry Holt, 1947). As Humbert said of Lolita herself, "Did she have a precursor? She did, indeed she did." In 1939 Nabokov had composed a novella in Russian about a man who marries a little girl's mother merely to lay his hand on the girl. The book was not published in Russian until 1989 (it was translated into English in 1996), but the sketch was there in Nabokov's imagination, and it would quietly grow "the claws and wings of a novel," as Nabokov wrote in his afterword. German critic and scholar Michael Maar claims in his book *The Two Lolitas* that the story already existed in the form of a short story published in 1916 by Heinz von Eschwege, who wrote under the pseudonym Heinz von Lichberg. Maar stops short of accusing Nabokov of plagiarism, instead suggesting three possibilities: coincidence, actual inspiration and "cryptoamnesia," whereby the "previous" text might have lingered in Nabokov's mind as a distant and muffled memory.

According to Nabokov's only son and best translator, Dmitri, the latter two are virtually impossible because Nabokov could hardly read in German. In any event, the resemblances between the works are negligible, especially at the level of language, where the novel's genius is concentrated. And in writing *Lolita*, Nabokov, who was teaching Russian literature at Cornell, did a prodigious amount of original research. On carefully organized index cards, he jotted down thousands of details regarding breast development, Tampax, acne, jukebox tunes and adolescent lingo. "He would do things like travel on the buses around Ithaca and record phrases, in a little notebook, from young girls that he heard coming back from school," writes Brian Boyd in his massive 1991 biography, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years*. But mostly Nabokov toiled away on his novel during summer trips he took with his wife, Véra, and Dmitri in the Great American West. He devoted the daylight hours to butterfly hunting, one of his abiding passions. On rainy afternoons or at night, to exorcise insomnia or during cross-country rides in his beloved Oldsmobile, he composed his novel in longhand, on those same immaculate index cards. The places the Nabokovs visited are the towns Humbert and "Lo" pass through on their epic journey: Telluride, Colorado; Afton, Wyoming; Portal, Arizona; Ashland, Oregon...

Once Nabokov had finished his manu-

script in early 1954, he hid it in a drawer, scribbling notes to remind himself where he had concealed the time bomb. He planned at first to use a pseudonym in order to protect the good name of his employer, Cornell University. On one occasion, Véra, the most ardent of *Lolita*'s defenders, had to rescue the unfinished manuscript from the flames of the garden incinerator, where Nabokov was about to toss it. When *Lolita* finally came out in America, under Nabokov's own name, it was nothing short of a mad dream come true. But to Nabokov's initial disappointment, the American press was unimpressed as the English and French. Edmund Wilson found it repugnant. (He later became a close friend of Nabokov and helped him publish stories in *The New Yorker*.) And there appeared in the *New York Times* this now notorious statement by Orville Prescott: "*Lolita*, then, is undeniably news in the world of books. Unfortunately, it is bad news. There are two equally serious reasons why it isn't worth any adult reader's attention. The first is that it is dull, dull, dull, in a pretentious, florid and archly fatuous fashion. The second is that it is repulsive."

Prescott seemed as baffled by Humbert Humbert's conniving use of language and lore as he was by his abuse of Lolita and the law. To Nabokov's relief, however, a handful of more astute readers, notably Dorothy Parker and William Styron, wrote rave reviews. And *Lolita* became the first novel since *Gone With the Wind* to sell more than 100,000 copies in a mere twenty-one days. Stanley Kubrick scrambled to acquire the movie rights. And *Lolita* was off, onto her wayward cinematic adventures.

Fifty years later, Nabokov's novel has sold 50 million copies worldwide. And Vintage Books has already exhausted the 50,000 copies of its fiftieth-anniversary edition, printed this fall. A young woman's pale pink mouth is advertised as the most provocative cover in *Lolita*'s American history, although in comparison with its flamboyant prose it is painfully banal. Clearly, *Lolita* still unhinges and rattles—and that may well be an understatement. To many American readers, *Lolita* is more disturbing than ever. Writing in the *Boston Globe*, for instance, Leland de la Durantaye, a Nabokov scholar at Harvard, dwells on the writer's supposed abhorrence of his protagonist, who acts with "callousness and coldness." Numerous articles, both in the mainstream press and in academic journals, have obsessed over Humbert's pedophilia, taking solace in the morally

redemptive qualities of Nabokov's art.

But Nabokov had alertly warned: "Lolita has no moral in tow." If anything, *Lolita's* linguistic trysts and poetical twists mark the genesis of a unique language, peculiar to Vladimir Nabokov, a language perhaps best defined in terms of texture. Nabokov does not merely write, he weaves his words together, revealing intricate and supremely original designs. "What make is the magic carpet?" Humbert asks in a poem he calls his "maniac's masterpiece." In the foreword to the 1966 version of his memoir, *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov admits

that in looking for a title for *Lolita*, he toyed with *The Anthemion*—the name of a honeysuckle ornament made of elaborate interlacements and expanding clusters. It would be a precious subtitle for *Lolita*. For what we are left with, in the end, are Humbert's incandescent and treacherous words, which breathe insane life—moralists beware—into one of the few great love stories of twentieth-century literature. "I am thinking of aurochs and angels, the secret of durable pigments, prophetic sonnets, the refuge of art. And this is the only immortality you and I may share, my Lolita." ■