

**Barbara McLeod**

*LOLITA'S 'STRAY CANARY':  
A 'SECRET HANDSHAKE'?*

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*In Memoriam of Carl Proffer*

I was fortunate to participate in a small, symposium-style course on Nabokov from Carl Proffer in the 1970s at the University of Michigan. Proffer's love for the esoteric wordplay and puzzles was infectious and has stayed with me for decades. The "Rupicolous Readers" (my book group located on the rocky coast of Maine on Mount Desert Island) recently chose to read *Lolita* and I was to lead the discussion. To prepare, I looked at many reviews, articles, and annotations. With the luxury of a third re-reading I allowed myself to pause over the very specific, if abstruse, reference in the text quoted below. This excerpt is from the beginning of *Lolita* when Humbert is describing his first love, Annabel, in Part 1, number 4, at the end of the second paragraph:

I also know that the shock of Annabel's death consolidated the frustration of that nightmare summer, made of it a permanent obstacle to any further romance throughout the cold years of my youth. The spiritual and the physical had been blended in us with a perfection that must remain incomprehensible to the matter-of-fact, crude, standard-brained youngsters of

today. Long after her death I felt her thoughts floating through mine. Long before we met we had had the same dreams. We compared notes. We found strange affinities. *The same June of the same year (1919) a stray canary had fluttered into her house and mine, in two widely separated countries.* Oh, Lolita, had you loved me thus! [emphasis added]

How had this feathered flutterer accomplished such a remarkable feat? I believe a magazine, delivered to both Humbert and Annabel, is one way a canary could “flutter into her house and mine, in two widely separated countries.” With the ease of searching out obscure references afforded by the internet, I searched for such a magazine.

I found *The Lyceum Magazine for the Lyceum and Chatauqua* (est. 1890). The June 1919 issue has on its front page an article called “But Where is the Canary?” This is a fable about a cat who convinces its owner to put the family canary on the floor so that the cat and canary could “fraternize,” “make common interest” and “uplift each other.” An apt presaging of Humbert’s sly manipulation of Mrs. Haze to gain access to daughter Doloris.

**The Lyceum**  
MAGAZINE  
for the Lyceum and Chatauqua Est. 1890

## But Where is the Canary?

**O**NCE upon a time there was a Cat and a Canary that lived in a certain home. The Canary had its little cage up in the window, high out of reach, and sang to delight the household every day. The Cat slept on the rug down on the floor and amused the family in the daytime, while it stayed out in hilarious company all night and fought other cats on the back fence. The Canary was supported by the family. The Cat rustled for itself, relying upon its claws for sustenance as it preyed upon the mice. The family loved both Canary and Cat.

While the Canary was singing in the sunshine, the Cat would often watch it enviously. It would climb up on the Cupboard to get near the Canary.

“Why don’t you put the Canary-cage down on the floor with me?” the Cat would ask the family. “We are both working for the same family, and should understand each other better. We should fraternize and make common interest. We should work together and play together.”

And some of the family began to think the same way, so much so that they began to put some of the Kittens in the cage to make the Canary accustomed to them and to acquire showmanship, also because they argued that the Canary was not sufficiently interesting in the cage without the Kittens.

But the Canary earnestly pleaded with the family not to put it down on the floor with the Cat. “It will be the end of me,” said the Canary. “And when these Kittens grow a little, you’ll have to take them out of my cage if you want to preserve me.”

“Me-Yow! Yow! Yow!” laughed the Cat. “The Canary is too high-brow. It feels above me. That isn’t the right spirit. It isn’t christian. How are you going to save me, and keep me from running around of nights and fighting, if you don’t make the Canary come down with me?”

“But we are different natures. We cannot work together nor play together. I shall die if put down on the floor with the cat.” So pleaded the Canary.

“Hear that!” hissed the Cat. “The old yellow bird has too long had a monopoly up there in the window singing. It can’t sing as well as I can, can’t entertain you as well, isn’t as practical. The Canary is a bigoted Pharisee. Are you going to stand for that? Put the Canary down with me and let us exemplify the christian brotherhood it sings about and uplift each other.”

So the family put the Canary-cage down on the floor with the Cat. Now the cage is empty. There is no Canary music in the house. The Cat sleeps contentedly on the rug as usual. Last night down in the alley, the Cat said to Tabby from across the street, “Gee, Tab, but I put one over on the family and had a square meal of that yellow bird that has been in my way so long. Try it over in your house!”

NOTICE TO READERS  
When you find  
any error in this  
issue, please  
write to the  
Editor, The  
Lyceum Magazine,  
100 N. 1st St.,  
Chatauqua, N.Y.  
12015

The *Lyceum Magazine* was digitized through Google's ambitious enterprise to capture, in its Google library, all things ever printed.<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, the edition Google digitized is from the University of Michigan library. Professor Proffer was so close! I remember Proffer saying that if you found a reference like this, Nabokov might really intend you to find something nearby. I'll readily admit I haven't read this whole magazine to find out if that is true in this case. I also wonder why Nabokov (or Humbert) would have been interested in the "Chataqua Movement" of which this magazine is an artifact. A brief exploration of this question reveals that the Chautauqua was kind of a vaudeville for culture, started in upstate New York in the 1870s, giving rural parts of America access to lecturers on many and diverse topics of the day. *Lolita* was written during five of the years when the Nabokovs lived in upstate New York during the school term while he taught at Cornell (1948-59), so it is possible he encountered the magazine and the Chataqua concept while working there.

The Chataqua Movement waned in the 1920s with the advent of motion pictures. Teddy Roosevelt is widely quoted as saying that Chautauqua is "the most American thing in America." A great summary is found in the 1994 article, "Chataquas: The Most American Thing in America," by Paul Worboys.<sup>2</sup> *Lolita* can be seen, among other things, as a paean to America, or as Nabokov called it in his 1956 "On a Book Called Lolita," his "invention" of America. Maybe the nonchalant reference to *The Lyceum* magazine is pointing the reader to one of the things he admired about America — the Chataqua Movement. Whether Nabokov showed any other awareness of the Chataqua Movement is yet to be discovered by another inquisitive reader.

Robert Roper in *Nabokov in America* (Bloomsbury, 2015) spoke of a feeling of "complicitness" to be found in Nabokov: "Nabokov was an intimate writer. His reticences, his formal estrangements, his denial of interest in any reality beyond the text all need to be measured against that. Maximum closeness: not the closeness of ostentatious empathy but the closeness of one mind addressing another in the most thrilling terms. He speaks into the ear, sometimes dripping a little poison. He contrives to have a reader identify intimately with a protagonist or

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<sup>1</sup> The link to the full 1919 issue of the magazine:

[https://books.google.com/books?id=XWnlAAAAMAAJ&pg=PA3&lpg=PA3&dq=the+lyceum+magazine+But+where+is+the+canary&source=bl&ots=SW8vW0EeUf&sig=dkVfEFlyhE-UIwk-jXEg0\\_PJ-bE&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjUuuz1kuDYAhUFVK0KHQ1XCGAQ6AEIKTAA#v=onepage&q=the%20lyceum%20magazine%20But%20where%20is%20the%20canary&f=false](https://books.google.com/books?id=XWnlAAAAMAAJ&pg=PA3&lpg=PA3&dq=the+lyceum+magazine+But+where+is+the+canary&source=bl&ots=SW8vW0EeUf&sig=dkVfEFlyhE-UIwk-jXEg0_PJ-bE&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjUuuz1kuDYAhUFVK0KHQ1XCGAQ6AEIKTAA#v=onepage&q=the%20lyceum%20magazine%20But%20where%20is%20the%20canary&f=false)

<sup>2</sup> See: [http://www.crookedlakereview.com/articles/67\\_100/78sept1994/78worboys.html](http://www.crookedlakereview.com/articles/67_100/78sept1994/78worboys.html)

narrator, but even that is not enough; the reader receives *secret handshakes* from the author himself, behind a narrator's back."<sup>3</sup>

I think this *recherché* reference in *Lolita* to *The Lyceum* magazine is one of those "secret handshakes." Learning about these references in Nabokov's work uncovered by scholars is always a delight. I never thought I might be the first to decipher one and experience this direct connection made between the reader and the author; I can almost glimpse him winking at me. If Nabokov winked. Electric! I wish I could share it with Professor Proffer.



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<sup>3</sup> Roper, *Nabokov in America*, p. 254. Italics added.