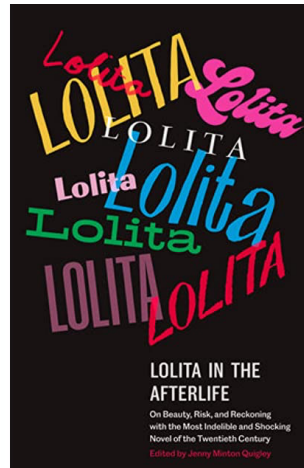


*Lolita in the Afterlife: On Beauty, Risk, and Reckoning with the Most Indelible and Shocking Novel of the Twentieth Century.* Edited by Jenny Minton Quigley. New York: Vintage, 2021. ISBN 978-1-9848-9883-8. Introduction. 413 pp.



As I write this review, my students are working on papers about *Lolita*. One came to me last week with a tentative thesis statement: “What Humbert feels for Dolores is not love, but obsession.” I asked her to take a step back. What do those words mean? Does every reader have the same definition of “love”? Is “love” always separable from “obsession”? What do we learn about the novel by drawing such a sharp line between the two, and what about the text empowers or prompts or tempts us to do so? How can you possibly address that distinction in a five-page paper? How can you ever write an essay about *Lolita*? But the central questions my student was asking, I think, were shared by many of the essays in *Lolita in the Afterlife*: can we judge this novel? and if so, by what criteria? And how is that judgment determined by our own predispositions, or the intellectual and legal surroundings in which we find ourselves?

The thirty-one essays in this book (counting the introduction by the editor, Jenny Minton Quigley) give a spectrum of answers to these questions. They are very much, and very self-consciously, of their moment: many of the writers mention the year in which they are writing (mostly 2019, and a few in 2020), and more reference the #MeToo movement. This temporal placement implies more than just the local concerns of the writers or the logistical question about what kind of controversy *Lolita* will cause next. Context changes our readings—as Virginia Woolf says, it is impossible for us to feel about Clytemnestra as the ancient Greeks did. The work of art

doesn't stay still or stand alone, because language grows and changes, and we grow and change. With time, patience, and a dictionary, we can work out what a text must have once meant, but it may not mean just the same thing any more. Some readers in the 1960s sincerely defended Humbert, because, Humbert reports, "it was she who seduced me"; my students are shocked that anyone ever fell for Humbert's victim-blaming. And to a wide audience of popular music, fashion, scandal, and film, the word "Lolita" has grown to mean something quite different from Nabokov's vulnerable, gum-snapping twelve-year-old Dolores.

Any book's reception tells us something about its audience, but *Lolita's* reception tells us more than most. *Lolita* can be a Rorschach test for opinions about not just sex, rape, childhood, gender, censorship, and freedom of speech—what we might call the focused ethical concerns raised by the novel's subject matter—but also about the purpose of art and the nature of empathy—broader questions about the novel's themes. Does sympathizing with someone have to mean agreeing with them? Does laughing with them? Can we retain our ability to criticize when we also—even unwillingly—have fellow-feeling with the object of our criticism? The discomfort we feel when we read *Lolita* (and the word "we" is doing a lot of work in this sentence) arises in part from the difficulty of those questions, which is to say that we cannot regard them as settled, within or beyond the novel.

The reactions to the novel chronicled in *Lolita in the Afterlife* vary, but many are concerned with the book's effect on its readers: not so much whether *Lolita* will encourage a new generation of Humberts, but whether it will guide young girls into thinking of themselves as Lolitas. What *that* means, of course, depends on what you think about Dolores herself.

*Lolita in the Afterlife* consists mostly of personal essays. The authors are more frequently novelists or writers of creative nonfiction than scholars (although there is a great contribution by Stacy Schiff on Véra's role in the novel's publication and reception). The overall tone of the book is one of memoir, although there are also reports on the use of the word "Lolita" in different pop cultural realms. The essayists' experiences vary significantly, and the variety of responses this collection contains is instructive. Many of these essays ask us to think about the empathic relationship between reader and text; in aggregate, they give us the material to do so, as they provide a cross section of possible responses to the novel.

The book stages an ongoing debate over whether *Lolita* helps or harms its readers, particularly its readers who are young girls. (Full disclosure: like many of the women represented in this book, I made my first attempt to read *Lolita* when I was about thirteen years old. I put the book down in revulsion a few chapters in and didn't return to it until I was in my twenties.) Susan Choi, in "Badge of Honor," argues that *Lolita* "celebrates and beautifies" sexism in a way that prompts young girls to accept their own abuse (68); she finds the book "not just morally hazardous but psychically deforming" (66). Bindu Bansinath, by contrast, in her harrowing essay "How *Lolita* Freed Me From My Own Humbert," narrates precisely that: she writes that reading the novel as a young teenager helped her develop the emotional strength and the logistical plan to report years of sexual abuse by an uncle whose behavior closely resembles Humbert's. If we want to pick a side between these two essays, we might argue that sexist culture will probably continue even if we suppress the novel, whereas Bansinath's experience demonstrates that the book can be directly helpful to vulnerable girls—but that response misses the real value of *Lolita in the Afterlife* as a whole, which is to present a broad range of contemporary reactions to the novel's very real ambiguities.

Several essays are concerned with the way films and pop culture recondition Dolores as almost-legal, citing the sixteen- and seventeen-year-old "Lolita"s of MTV videos, or mentioning Amy Fisher, the "Long Island Lolita." Here, too, it seems worth examining how much of the problem—the sexual exploitation of teenage girls—is a response to Nabokov's novel, and how much is already baked into the culture that novel addresses. Without taking the precedents Humbert cites as justification for his actions, it seems important to our understanding of the book that he has so much company. Claire Dederer's essay, which argues that Humbert is "not so singular after all," does a nice job of addressing how alarmingly ordinary Humbert turns out to be (347).

A few essays seem to address straw men, most of them wearing #MeToo t-shirts. Several essayists express concern that *Lolita* won't be taught any more "in the new academic world of trigger warnings and safe spaces" (160). But a trigger warning isn't a way of saying "steer clear"; it's a way of saying "brace yourself." When I teach *Lolita*, I always warn students on the first day of class what exactly they are signing up for. So far, no student appears to have dropped my class in response to that warning. They have, however, felt freer to express their own complex responses

to the text as a result. A trigger warning doesn't mean you don't want them to read; it means that if what they're reading is emotionally difficult for them, you are prepared to support them as they grapple with it. Considerations of *Lolita* don't all have to be *Approaches to Teaching* volumes, but if we're going to lament the difficulty of teaching the novel, it would be instructive to talk to more people who are doing it, as Minton Quigley does in her introduction (which tells the story of how her father, the editor Walter Minton, acquired the book for Putnam's). For what it's worth, when I asked my students this semester, "should I keep teaching this book?" they all—even the ones most disgusted with Humbert, even the ones with the best-burnished feminist credentials—emphatically said "yes."

The book's final essay, Mary Gaitskill's "I Cannot Get Out Said the Starling," distills what many of these essays are attempting: a fusion of memoir with sensitive reading, placed in a contemporary moment. She appreciates the book not just as a work of abstract aesthetics but as an expression of sympathy—with Humbert, with Dolores, with all the monsters and all their victims who fill the world, with the all-too-common experience of childhood sexual abuse—while also reading *Lolita* as an exploration of the urge to stop time, to preserve our selves and our beloveds. Into this discussion she weaves (briefly but hauntingly) her own childhood experience of abuse and the sympathy she felt for her abuser. We do not need to choose sides, Gaitskill suggests—whether those sides are Humbert or Dolores, Humbert or Quilty, characters or Nabokov; rather, we can and should sympathize with everyone (abuser, abused, creator) because the "mystery" of the work of fiction is its capacity to show us the "mystery" within each other and thus within ourselves (385).

*Lolita in the Afterlife* dramatizes how weird and blurry the line between fiction and reality is. Humbert is almost a living person in these essays; Dolores is, too. Their presence is partly a result of moving essays like Cheryl Strayed's, a letter from an adult Dolores to Strayed's advice columnist persona "Dear Sugar," but also because the anger, identification, love, and helplessness these writers express toward the characters ramifies into real-world actions. The resulting sense that the novel has *consequences* is partly a testament to the vividness of Nabokov's novel, but also a prompt to rethink our own critical assertions about what "fiction" means, and an impetus to re-examine Nabokov's "special reality" of art.

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