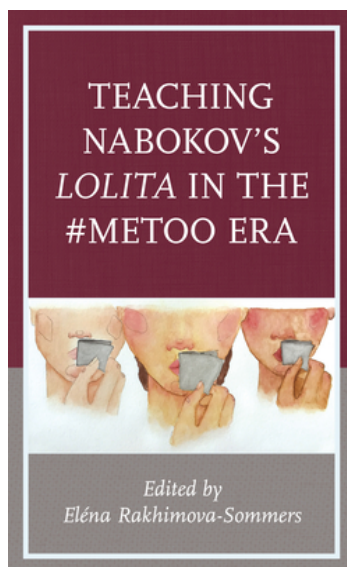***Teaching Nabokov's* Lolita *in the #MeToo Era.*** Edited by Elena Rakhimova-Sommers. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2021. ISBN 978-1-7936-2838-1. Introduction. Index. 198 pp.

The #MeToo movement and other circumstances have fundamentally changed how most, if not, all faculty think about teaching *Lolita* in the classroom and how students read the novel – if they are even willing to read the novel. As someone who has taught the novel in a variety of courses at multiple institutions over the past twenty years, I have always encountered some resistance to reading and discussing the novel. The nature of that resistance has changed and intensified. A refrain in *Teaching Nabokov's Lolita in the #MeToo Era* (Lexington Books, 2021), edited by Eléna Rakhimova-Sommers, is change, as Lisa Ryoko Wakamiya acknowledges near the beginning of their essay: "My approach to teaching the novel has changed. I have changed, as have my students and the climate in which they encounter the novel" (151).

But some things have not changed. Of course, the text on *Lolita*'s pages has not. Many arguments for why the work is valuable have not. Questions about how to teach the novel have always been part of discussions about Nabokov's best known work, as an earlier volume acknowledges, the 2008 publication edited by Zoran Kuzmanovich and Galya Diment, *Approaches to Teaching Lolita* (MLA). Several contributors to Kuzmanovich's and Diment's volume contribute to this one: Ryoko Wakamiya, Marilyn Edelstein, Eric Naiman, and Julian Connoly. As

someone who contributed to that same publication, I was eager to read this new work, because I have struggled with not just how but even whether to teach the novel.

Although the volume is divided into two parts, *Asking the Question: Why Teach* Lolita*?* and *Offering Suggestions: How to Teach* Lolita, the sheer number of essays (two in the first; eight in the second) suggest emphasis on the latter section. Of course, separating the two questions is impossible, which the volume's opening essay by Edelstein acknowledges in its title, "(How) Should a Feminist Teach *Lolita* in the Wake of #MeToo?" (11-30). How we teach the novel is an argument for why we teach the novel. If this is the case, then Frances McDonnell Capossela's "Reading *Lolita* as a Teenage Girl," offers clear evidence that faculty should continue to do so. McDonnell Capossella, a former undergraduate student of fellow contributor, Ann Dwyer, offers a nuanced, attentive treatment of the novel that demonstrates the impact continuing to discuss the novel in undergraduate classes can have on our understanding. McDonnell Capossela acknowledges Dwyer's influence: "The great success of my Nabokov class was Professor Anne Dwyer's guidance in firstly helping us understand the multiple layers of meaning across which Nabokov's novels operate, and secondly encouraging and assisting us in doing intensive studies of the work" (172-73).

McDonnell Capossela recounts their initial reading of the novel as a fifteen-year-old, reflects on their experiences in Dwyer's class, and most importantly offers a reading of the novel that centers Lolita's voice—literally: "I followed her language, and her gaze within the novel. This work convinced me that Lolita takes linguistic and imagistic control of the novel… The conclusion of my work was, to me, clear: Nabokov buries the evidence of Lolita's agency, but once excavated, it is undeniable" (172). Charles Byrd's "Dolores Haze: Author" shares similar interests. Byrd notes that their piece "has suggested possible echoes of Dolores' letters in Humbert's writing, but Dolores's speech is such a wellspring of wisecracks that it, too, deserves comprehensive analysis as an influence on Humbert's stylistics" (121). The essay begins by acknowledging how things have changed for teachers of the novel. Byrd notes that they have spent more than thirty years teaching the novel, working with students to "analyze virtually every nook and cranny of Humbert's extravagant rhetoric" (109), but that observing Dr. Christine Blasey Ford's testimony during the Brett Kavanaugh Supreme Court Judicial Nomination "left [them] more than embarrassed to be teaching an at times light-hearted trivializing fantasy of sexual victimization"

(109). Much of the essay focuses on both Lolita's words and writing as a means of recognizing Dolores as "an emotionally intelligent, fellow survivor of sex crimes suggested by the #MeToo movement" (121). Byrd, like McDonnell Capossela, offers a means of discussing the novel in ways that take seriously the concerns of the #MeToo Movement.

The essays often work in conversation—sometimes deliberately so as when one references the other. But sometimes the best conversations are the most unexpected, such as how Dwyer's version of a lecture she gave to her students (33-37), embedded in "Why I Teach Lolita," can be read in light of Ryoko Wakamiya's discussion of apologia, including Nabokov's own unconventional example in his Afterword (158-161). Because I was familiar with Dwyer's 2018 piece in *Inside Higher Ed*, I was eager to read their contribution here. Dwyer's approach— including an "abridged and redacted version" of their lecture to students in 2018—works awkwardly, because the "lecture" here is similar to Dwyer's well-known May 14, 2018 piece for *Inside Higher Ed*. But the differences make me curious about what exactly the students heard or read in Dwyer's class. For example, in the *IHE* piece, the subsection "Does Language Trump All Else" includes three sentences; in this volume, the subsection includes seven sentences. Perhaps Dwyer's contribution in this volume is the lecture as originally submitted to *IHE*, which then edited it for the purposes of publication, but if this is the case, some acknowledgment of that would be helpful. For me, the most useful elements of the essay appear in the final two sections. Rather than reading another longer version of Dwyer's lecture, I would have appreciated reading more reflection on the impact of the lecture given to students as well as responses to the 2018 publication.

Dwyer suggests that "when the question of sexual assault becomes the absolute forefront of classroom conversation, many other aspects of Nabokov's immensely rich text receive scond billing or go by completely unnoticed," that "important conversations about the possibilities and limitations of aesthetic and ethical reading cannot occur" (38). Eric Naiman's essay in the volume offers a potential counterpoint to this, offering ways of centering discussion of the novel and Nabokov's work as a whole around the concepts of consent and close reading (128-138). I much appreciated Naiman's retort to highly respected scholar, Maurice Couturier's comments in *Le Monde* after the publication did not list *Lolita* as one of "the 100 novels which have enthused the critics of the paper since 1944." Naiman challenges Couturier's assertion that the paper has "fallen

victim to the 'MeToo' syndrome" by asserting, "Deploying such terms as part of a defense of *Lolita* may serve to confirm the unfortunate suspicion that aesthetic pleasure in general—not to mention admiration for Nabokov in particular—tends to be incompatible with compassion for real-world suffering" (140). That "unfortunate suspicion" is one I have heard from resistant readers of Nabokov's novel; Naiman offers an important critique: potentially Couturier's remarks do more harm than good in their defense of the novel.

A much welcome aspect of the collection are Vergara's and Zhulina's essays that offer new or reimagined approaches to teaching the book. Looking at Nabokov's novel as an example of a "captivity tale" (57) alongside other more "obvious" choices offers a refreshing and invigorating way to consider the novel, while still acknowledging the challenges of reading the novel today. In fact, as Vergara notes, "I wanted to highlight how its status as an atypical work about captivity allows us to understand Dolores' plight better and lends itself to productive, #MeToo-inspired discussions on topics including guilt and power relations--perennial themes in prison literature" (59). Although other scholars have looked at adaptations of Nabokov's novel for film and stage, Zhulina's essay speaks to the present moment in generative ways. The 2017 #MeToo movement forced theatre and performance studies departments to reconsider curricula and pedagogies (73). Rather than shying away from a controversial text such as *Lolita*, Zhulina asserts "teaching *Lolita* alongside its afterlives on the stage and screen is a productive way to explore questions concerning consent, misogyny, sexual violence as well as the process of adapting and reinterpreting problematic texts from the past" (73). Reviewing the challenges of adapting the novel, Zhulina asserts that "works that feature only echoes of or allusions to Nabokov's novel" have achieved more success (82). After discussing Paula Vogel's *How I Learned to Drive* (1997) and David Harrower's *Blackbird* (2005) as well as other more recent plays by women, Zhulina writes, "Putting texts that celebrate young girls' perseverance, not only their traumas, in dialogue with Nabokov's *Lolita* can lead to productive conversations in the classroom about what kind of stories of girlhood our culture perpetuates" (85). Like Zhulina, Connolly's "Three *Lolitas*: The Evolution of a Cultural Icon in Fiction and Film" attends to the film adaptations of Nabokov's novel, but offers a far more conventional approach to teaching the novel than other essays in the collection do. Connolly begins by considering how Nabokov attempted to shape readers' response to his work and then focuses on Kubrick's and Lyne's cinematic efforts. The questions and issues raised

by the #MeToo Movement feel less important to Connolly when reading Nabokov's novel than they are to other contributors.

Taken together, the essays offer a thoughtful and needed response to the questions I have heard as a teacher of Nabokov's *Lolita*, while reminding me that teaching and discussing the novel is even more important to do today—something several contributors recognize. Zhulina writes that "the cultural shift of #METoo at once makes Nabokov's novel an urgent read and calls for a rethinking of how to contextualize it" (74). Rakhimova-Sommers writes, "In my experience, students have responded to the novel with a greater sense of urgency in the #MeToo era than they ever have before. As they continue to assess *Lolita* as a groundbreaking textbook on predatory rhetoric (and its dismantling), they stand as the novel's staunchest supporters *precisely* because of its subject matter and cultural relevance" (48). Although I wish I shared Rakhimova-Sommers' optimism about students being the novel's "staunchest supporters," the contributions to this volume, particularly those that repeatedly foreground student voices, as Rakhimova-Sommers does, make me far more optimistic about the novel's future in the classroom.

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