

goblet concept – and, unlike your average coffee table paperweight, the book actually reads well.

The front cover also provides a portal into the primary discourse inherent in the book: the identity crisis mentioned above. Sulki and Min quote an excerpt from a letter Nabokov sent to his American publisher, G. P. Putnam's Sons (just prior to *Lolita*'s publication in the States), outlining his desire for the novel's cover design: "I want pure colors, melting clouds, accurately drawn details, a sunburst above a receding road with the light reflected in furrows and ruts, after rain. And no girls". Many American authors have used the great expanse of their mother nation as a bedrock metaphor for the seemingly infinite possibilities it provides. For Nabokov's European deviant, Humbert Humbert, *Lolita is the New World* in all its sensual glory, albeit sampled through a chinked and distorted lens. Nevertheless, the pastoral scene painted by the author resonates with the aforementioned preoccupation of American art and literature.¹ *Lolita*, after all, is a book about experiencing America and the author's vision for the cover is simply a "non-Freudian and non-juvenile" (155) portrait of the girl protagonist.

This picturesque idyll presented a problem for the publisher, however. As the art director of Vintage and Anchor books John Gall quite boldly points out, Nabokov's landscape would have been a "yawner as a cover" (23).² It could describe any novel and a book like *Lolita* almost cries out for a design approach reliant on symbolism. In 2005, Gall oversaw Vintage International's repackaging of *Lolita*. The image for the 50th anniversary edition of the book depicts a pair of fawning lips. They were originally intended to be set on the vertical, suggesting another part of the female anatomy, but this was soon changed after the publisher received criticism for their use in promotional material. Now forever set on the horizontal, these same lips suggest nothing more than a quiet promise of fellatio (rather than a straightforward intercourse). The point is, of course, that this is all a trap leaving members of the public to project their own limited understanding of what the novel is about onto the suggestive image. They implicate themselves in a perverse crime, first by looking at the cover and then by experiencing *Lolita* through the eyes of H.H. The book's status as a modern classic may bring the readers some solace but unfortunately they will find no redemption at its conclusion.

Gall's jacket design succeeds in opening the door for a conversation about the male gaze and its leering dominance over everything that sells. It is no surprise, then, that the cover relies too heavily on symbolism and entraps the male gaze in order to sell itself. Furthermore, it

1 Nabokov's vision for the cover is likely to have originated from his looking at paintings by Peter Hurd and Grant Wood, both of whom are notable artists from the Regionalist school. In fact, they are highly recommended to *Lolita* by Humbert Humbert in his vain attempt to "refine" her tastes.

2 This is precisely why it was ignored by Putnam's, who favoured something more austere.

undermines the more delicate and fragile passages of the book, conveniently forgetting that for all her nymphomaniacal attributes, Lolita was a child victim of psychological and sexual abuse. Gall's cover may be less boring, but is it a more accurate depiction of Lolita than Nabokov's verdant portrait?³

Lolita – The Story of a Cover Girl attempts to unpack all the details sandwiched between the two extremes mentioned above. The idea for the project originated from Dieter E. Zimmer's online gallery, *Covering Lolita* (see: <http://www.dezimmer.net/Covering%20Lolita/LoCov.html>). At the time of writing, the German academic's collection boasted a little over two hundred individual interpretations for the cover of Nabokov's infamous "golem-like creation" (17), displaying content from forty different countries in its sixty-year publishing history. The online gallery "engendered a competition of conceptual *Lolita* covers" (21), the best of which contribute to the crux of the monograph.

These new designs are not restricted by editorial boards or marketing conventions in the publishing industry. As a result, they tend to range in style and quality, with each commissioned designer free to interpret the novel as they wish. Reflecting on the submitted covers, Alice Twemlow identifies four groups into which the jackets can be categorized: 1) Illustrated objects that may or may not appear in the novel, but which are nevertheless used as sexual metaphors; 2) Attempts to carry across H.H.'s perverse obsession; 3) Moods prevalent in the book, such as beauty, comedy and foreboding; 4) Echoes of the linguistic rhythms and textures endemic to Nabokov's prose.

It would be foolish to pick favorites, but it is safe to say that the most successful designs are the ones which satisfy to unnerve in their apparent simplicity. Sam Weber's sweating man, for example, invites revulsion, but only because he is so beautifully rendered. Keira Alexandra's typographical take on innuendo is smart and refreshing, while Jamie Keenan toys with Freudian conjecture by positioning viewers relaxed on their back, so that they may contemplate a dank motel ceiling. There are many more, of course, and the joy lies in the looking.

In order to provide an antithetical paradigm to Western ways of seeing, Yuri Leving shares his thoughts and research on *Lolita*'s publishing history in the post-Soviet bloc. Nabokov did not translate *Lolita* into Russian until 1967, and even then it was only made available to the émigré market. The novel remained banned in the Soviet Union until 1989, when it was pirated by many different publishers, this practice having been stopped only

3 In his essay, Peter Mendelsund admits that "softly lit Lolitas" (29) cheapen and deconstruct the novel's central metaphor, but also highlights the fact that book designers are only partly responsible for the final image. There are marketing departments, editorial boards, agents, authors and publishers' wishes to contend with.

recently. This certainly explains the vast diversity of designs for Russian-language editions of *Lolita*, but it also highlights how grossly the book had been misunderstood. The Feniks (2000) and TF-Progress (1998) editions are deliberately provocative, placing sexually available girls on their covers, with the latter verging on the pornographic. Along with the commissioned covers, Leving's article is probably the highlight of the monograph. It reveals to the Western eye the strange and wonderful world of Russian book design. Many of the accompanying illustrations are scans from Leving's own personal collection. There are plenty of kitsch graphics, errant typefaces and tactless Photoshop gymnastics: hours of unadulterated fun.

Other articles of note are Barbara Bloom's reflections on the importance of books in her own artwork; Paul Maliszewski's overview of Nabokov's relationship with the book as a unified conceptual product; and the Women's Design + Research Unit's colourful analysis of the "different authorial approaches" (53) to *Lolita*'s depiction, taken from data unearthed at the Stanley Kubrick Archive. The remaining contributors do not detract from the whole and on completion one gets a sense that not only is *Lolita* a perfect case study for launching an investigation into the evolution of book design and the publishing industry's understanding of and approach to the content they sell, but also serves as a challenging project for design students everywhere. Nabokov's original is a beautiful work, loaded with rich imagery and onerous content. It has amassed a vast legacy of adaptations, revisions and visual interpretations. Some of them try to seduce us, others wish to win our respect, but all of them, in turn, attempt to trick us into thinking that we know who *Lolita* is, when in fact, nobody has actually asked her.

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