

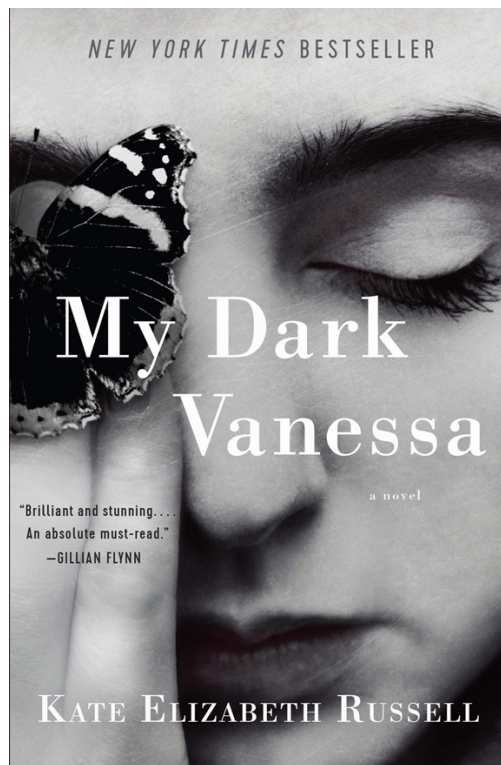
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REVIEW ESSAY

*My Dark Vanessa*

by Kate Elizabeth Russell

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*My Dark Vanessa*, by Kate Elizabeth Russell. New York: William Morrow, 2020. ISBN 978-0062941503. 368 pp.

A good deal of critical ink has been spilled recently concerning whether and how we should read (and/or teach) Nabokov's *Lolita* in the context of an era in which many women are sharing their stories of abuse at the hands of powerful men. Some have opined that in such a time, *Lolita* is out of step and would be unpublishable today. Others have sprung to Nabokov's defense, noting that Humbert Humbert's silencing of Dolores Haze, and his attempts to cajole us into sharing his point of view, constitute a trap. As readers, we must, as the current times likewise require, engage our own critical and moral sensibilities in order to counter the distortions of the dominant male narrator.

To this lively discussion we can now add Kate Elizabeth Russell's Nabokov-inflected debut novel, *My Dark Vanessa*, a work that manages all at once to reconstitute not only the plot of *Lolita* but also the experience and implications of reading, and misreading, that book. *My Dark Vanessa* is told from the perspective of Vanessa Wye, who at 15 years of age is lured by her forty-two-year-old high school English teacher, Jacob Strane, into a sexual relationship that lasts, off and on, for more than a decade. When a subsequent student comes forward on social media with her own story of abuse, Vanessa is forced to reconsider whether the story of her relationship with Strane was simply a tragic love story (as she had thought) or something much worse. As readers, we know that it is indeed something much worse, but Vanessa finds it difficult, if not impossible, to give up her preferred narrative of the relationship without also giving up much of her own identity.

Of particular interest to Nabokovians are the novel's many references, both explicit and implicit, to *Lolita* and, in a few instances, to other works by Nabokov. I will trace these allusions here before making a case that *My Dark Vanessa* draws from Nabokov not only its references and subject matter but also its notion of the moral implications of being a bad reader.

## Title and Names

It is perhaps surprising that a book which draws so much from *Lolita* takes its cover image (a girl's face with one eye covered by a *Vanessa atalanta* butterfly), main title, and main character name from *Pale Fire*. The title, of course, is drawn directly from John Shade's poem, where he calls his wife, Sybil, "My dark Vanessa, crimson-barred, my blest / My Admirable butterfly." These lines are directly pointed to by Strane after he gives Vanessa a copy of *Pale Fire* (124). Prior to this interaction, Strane has traced Vanessa's name to Swift's *Cadenus and Vanessa*, with its implications of teacher-student infatuation. He has likewise opined that Vanessa, who has red hair, "likes dark things" (46). Vanessa is able to put the references (dark, crimson) together, as Strane intends, to see herself as the Red Admirable (*Vanessa atalanta*) butterfly mentioned in Shade's poem. That Vanessa's last name is Wye, a direct echo of *Pale Fire*'s primary setting (New Wye), escapes mention but surely would not have escaped Vanessa's notice. Strane seems, very much like Humbert Humbert, to be trying to engineer fate, to make his relationship with Vanessa appear beyond his control and responsibility. After presenting Vanessa with Swift's poem, he says the poem made him "start thinking about fate" (87). And when he points out the passage in Shade's poem, he says, "Look, it seems to reference you" (124). In some ways, Strane is cleverer than Humbert, who wants his readers to see the hand of "McFate," but does not, as far as we know, impress that sense of fatedness on Dolores herself. Strane, on the other hand, clearly wants to make Vanessa think that their relationship is fated and therefore beyond his control or agency.

While Vanessa Wye's name is clearly drawn from Nabokov, Strane's name may have a slight, albeit speculative, connection as well. *Strane* means "country" in Russian, and Nabokov's 1923 translation of *The Adventures of Alice in Wonderland*, by Lewis Carroll (a suspected pedophile), was titled *Prikliucheniia Alisy v Strane Chudes*.

## Direct References to Lolita

*Lolita* is very much a plot element throughout the novel and direct references abound (too many to list all of them here). Strane gives Vanessa a copy of *Lolita* as a means of grooming her (72), and Vanessa, a naive girl and reader both, is flattered to think that "[h]e is Humbert, and I

am Dolores” (74). Responding to Strane’s comments about girls in their teenage years, Vanessa thinks, “He’s like Humbert Humbert, assigning mythical significance to certain ages” (138). When she encounters a reference to *Lolita* in a magazine article about the singer Fiona Apple, Vanessa notes, “If I tug on any string hard enough, *Lolita* will emerge from the unraveling” (192-3). Before a sexual encounter with Strane she thinks of, then repeats, Humbert’s line from his last meeting with Dolores in Coalmont: “I’ll die if you touch me” (242, 249). In college, Vanessa is again entangled in a relationship with an English teacher, Henry Plough, with whom she discusses *Lolita* and mistakes a memory from her own past for a plot detail in *Lolita* (289-91). Even Russell’s author note and dedication touch on the novel. In the note, Russell says that she worked into the novel her own “very complicated feelings toward *Lolita*” and the book is dedicated to “the real life Dolores Hazes and Vanessa Wyes, whose stories have not yet been heard, believed, or understood” (Front Matter).

### **Indirect References**

While the novel is shot through with direct references to *Lolita*, other more subtle echoes of the novel can also be heard. Some of these echoes, for instance, restructure scenes and relationships from the original novel. As in *Lolita*, there is a sexual scene featuring a couch/davenport early on in the novel. In *Lolita*, Humbert and Dolores are touching (her legs on his lap) but Humbert’s orgasm is hidden, or remote. Very early in Russell’s book, Vanessa and Strane have phone sex, where Strane recounts a sexual encounter from years ago that took place on the couch in his office. In this case, then, the characters are themselves remote, but the sexual pleasure is shared (7-8). The davenport tableau is again called forth in a scene where Vanessa lies on a couch, her legs draped across Strane’s lap while he reads from a stack of student papers, much like Humbert reading his newspaper. In this same scene, Strane threatens that if they are found out, Vanessa will be taken by “the state” and put in “some foster home” (119), just as Humbert warns Dolores that she, if she tells, will “become the ward of the Department of Public Welfare” (*Annotated Lolita* 151). Before having sexual intercourse for the first time, Strane presents Vanessa with a pair of new pajamas (95), just as Humbert gives Dolores a pair of “too tight” pajamas before their first night together at The Enchanted Hunters (128).

The shadows of particular character traits and attitudes also appear. Vanessa imagines three copies of herself fitting inside of Strane's brain, heart, and veins (5), while Strane tells Vanessa at one point that he would eat her "if he could" (123). Both of these images bring to mind Humbert's desire to "apply voracious lips" to Dolores's heart, liver, lungs, and kidneys (*AnLo* 165). Vanessa's distaste for teenage boys and "their dandruff and acne" (5) is akin to Humbert's repulsion when confronted with mature women whose breasts are like "pumpkins or pears" (*AnLo* 18). When Vanessa is working at a hotel, she has an unsettling interaction with a lascivious guest in room 342, the same room number that Humbert and Dolores inhabit at *The Enchanted Hunters*. And in his final conversation with Vanessa, Strane pleads with Vanessa to "know that I loved you. Even if I was a monster, I did love you" (186), words that directly channel Humbert's thoughts in the Coalmont scene: "I loved you. I was a pentapod monster, but I loved you" (*AnLo* 284).

### **Power Reversals**

Though much of the power dynamic between Strane and Vanessa will seem familiar to readers of *Lolita*, there are differences that may complicate Vanessa's ability to fully escape Strane's clutches, as Dolores did Humbert's. Humbert's tactic is to keep tight control over Dolores's movements and activities, all while constructing in his own mind the mythic nymphet he calls Lolita. But Dolores never becomes Lolita in her own mind, and she shows very little real affection for Humbert beyond her initial infatuation. Strane, however, is a more contemporary and perhaps more cunning abuser because he hides his abuse behind a veil of perceived consent and helplessness. When he touches Vanessa, he always asks her first if she minds. He tells her she can stop at any time. "He was careful with me," Vanessa naively thinks. "He tried so hard to be good" (5). Repeatedly Strane emphasizes that Vanessa has all the agency in their relationship, that she could ruin him at any time—a view that Vanessa embraces as a new and powerful aspect of her identity. Strane shows her Plath's poem, "Lady Lazarus," and Vanessa understands the implication: "He made me see myself as he did, a girl with the power to rise with red hair and eat him like air" (5). While Humbert may have harbored a vision of Lolita as demonically powerful, Dolores is always "unconscious herself of her fantastic power" (17). Vanessa, on the other hand, is "made" to perceive herself as the powerful one, even to the point of becoming the devourer.

After a discussion of *Lolita* with her college professor, Henry Plough, Vanessa writes, “At one point, he said the word ‘nymphet,’ and hearing that word made me want to tear him open and eat him” (291).

We can see this apparent reversal of dominance again in the context of another passage from *Lolita* that is quoted by Vanessa: Humbert’s retrospective view of Dolores as “the small ghost of somebody I had just killed” (201). While the ghost in Humbert’s image is diminished and powerless, Vanessa conjures herself as a more active spirit, proud of “the power my ghost has wielded” over Strane. “I haunted him,” she says, satisfied (247). But Vanessa, the reader knows, is fooling herself. By seeming to cede all agency to Vanessa, Strane is securing her loyalty and her sense of responsibility towards him. If she were to admit to being Strane’s victim, she would risk destroying not only Strane but also much of her own identity. In a scene that echoes the Coalmont scene in *Lolita*, a twenty-five-year-old Vanessa encounters Strane on the street, leading a group of teenage girls on a class trip. Vanessa worries because, though she wants Strane to see her, she is “too ashamed of my own face, its fine lines and signs of age.” Later, Strane calls her: “Did I see you?” he asks. “Or was it a ghost?” (356). But rather than this scene marking the end of their relationship, the relationship is instead rekindled. Strane begins calling more and more, and Vanessa reassumes her perceived role as the one in control of the relationship, as the ghost that haunts him.

### **The Perils of Misreading**

Among the most interesting dynamics at play in Russell’s novel is the notion that reading books and reading reality require the same set of tools and techniques, so that the bad reader may also be a bad judge of reality. Vanessa reads *Lolita* as the “story of a seemingly ordinary girl who is really a deadly demon in disguise and the man who loves her” (74). She’s got it wrong, of course. Dolores really is an ordinary girl, and the deadly demon that Humbert loves exists chiefly in his own mind. But Vanessa falls prey to Humbert’s version of the narrative and is loath to give it up. Even after one of her college professors declares her interpretation of *Lolita* “a terrible misreading on your part,” Vanessa clings to her original sense. This narrative of misreading is exactly mirrored by the events in Vanessa’s own life, as if the misreading itself has grown teeth and claws. Vanessa

misinterprets her relationship with Strane, thinking of it in terms not so different from those used by early, errant admirers of *Lolita*: “I say what he and I had was the kind of thing great love stories are made of” (312). Lionel Trilling said much the same of Nabokov’s book in 1958. Later, when she is accused of misunderstanding her own circumstances, Vanessa struggles to revise her original narrative. In a breakthrough session with her therapist, she says, “I can’t lose the thing I’ve held onto for so long... I just really need it to be a love story” (318).

Nabokov constructed *Lolita* in such a way that bad readers — readers who don’t know how to pay attention to details, or who too willingly superimpose their own generalized biases over the specificities of the text at hand — end up complicit in Humbert’s depredations. For Nabokov, how one reads is a moral act with moral implications that may extend beyond the page. As an adult, Vanessa prides herself on being a good Nabokovian reader. She chafes, for instance, at the general flattening of words like “abuse,” “trauma,” and “victim,” where a pat on the knee and rape are described using the same term. But Vanessa’s reasonable desire for distinction is really just another way for her to evade her own misreading of her past. Until she can see the past for what it really was, she will continue to be a bad reader, not only of *Lolita* but of her own life.

Readers may fairly question whether or not Russell leans too heavily on Nabokov’s work. Is the book enhanced or diminished by the association? I think it’s the former, and I’ll offer one more non-*Lolita* allusion to illustrate my point. Near the end of Nabokov’s *Pnin*, the title character, who has suffered one devastating loss after another, washes the dishes after a party. Among the dishes in the sink is a beautiful aquamarine punchbowl, a treasured gift from his son, Victor. Pnin carefully “grope[s] under the bubbles,” removing items one by one, but he accidentally drops a nutcracker into the sink and hears the breaking of glass. He assumes, along with the reader, that the punchbowl has cracked. Heartsick, he reaches beneath the foam and finds instead a broken goblet. “The beautiful bowl was intact” (*Pnin* 173). This event marks a change of fortunes for Pnin, who then manages to escape what seemed a dire, inevitable fate. In *My Dark Vanessa*, Russell has written a matching scene, wherein Vanessa’s mother, while washing the dishes, confronts Vanessa over the lies Vanessa has told in order to hide her relationship with Strane. In the course of the fraught discussion, her mother breaks a plate, the shards falling into the sink. After her mother leaves the kitchen, Vanessa approaches the sink and “grope[s] blindly for pieces of broken plate, not caring if I slice myself open. I leave the shards lined up on the counter, dripping

water and soap suds” (218). Later, she will hear her mother dump the shards into the trash. As in *Pnin*, the scene is freighted with emotions related to the bonds between parent and child. In both scenes, the protagonists “grope” beneath the soapy surface to retrieve what has been broken. But where *Pnin*’s bowl emerges unscathed, Vanessa’s plate is already shattered. Though she “lines up” the broken pieces, the plate is beyond repair. It’s a sobering moment, particularly when we see it in the context of Nabokov’s passage. That’s true for the larger novel, as well. Russell has written a stark, unnerving story that stands on its own two feet, even as it gains complexity and depth from its Nabokovian associations.

