

Lolita at 50 — what it taught us about art and morality



JOHN YEWELL

Fifty years ago this week the first copies of a two-volume paperback novel in a plain green cover began appearing in French bookstores. The English-language book had to be published abroad because the author had been advised that if he tried to do so in America, where he lived and the book is set, the obscenity laws would surely have landed both him and his publisher in jail.

The author was an obscure refugee from both Bolshevism and Nazism named Vladimir Nabokov. The novel was *Lolita*. When the book did find its way to America, people called *Lolita* pornographic. Most only knew its basic plot, a middle-aged man's obsession with a 12-year-old girl — and they didn't like it. Vigilance in the laudable goal of protecting children from predatory adults obscured the difference between pornography and art — and with it Nabokov's credentials as a literary colossus.

It hardly mattered that Nabokov viewed his own creation, the depraved character of Humbert Humbert, as a "vain and cruel wretch." Most of Nabokov's characters are lost or demoted in some fashion, but that isn't the point. What he steadfastly resisted was the urge to ascribe moral conclusions to works of art, because doing so was the surest way to poison the well of rigorously honest creation.

"It is not my sense of the immorality of the Humbert Humbert-Lolita relationship that is strong," Nabokov told an interviewer, "it is Humbert's sense. He cares, I do not."

When Nabokov once said that he didn't "give a damn for public morals, in America or elsewhere," he was not proclaiming his own immorality. He was insisting on the necessity of the artist rising above the fray. The goal, in his words, of "aesthetic bliss" was otherwise unattainable.

He himself objected to pornography not because it was obscene, but because it was trite.

Great art doesn't seek mere satisfaction, it doesn't settle for veneer. The truths it lays bare may be dark or suffused with

light, but they are always a revelation.

The revelation that led to *Lolita* was not of some prurient desire on the part of the author to bed pre-pubescent girls — Nabokov himself seemed old-fashioned about such matters — but rather was inspired by a newspaper article he read in Paris before the war about an ape that had been coaxed by scientists to make a charcoal drawing. The ape's choice of subjects? The bars of his own cage.

And that's what *Lolita* is about: Humbert Humbert, the wretch, describing in the calculating terms of the practiced madman the prison of his unspeakable desires, and the methodical, maniacal strides he takes in pacing his cage — all told in luxurious, even-mannered prose.

In a world overrun by "goshlost," a Russian word meaning "self-satisfied inferiority" and one of Nabokov's favorites, *Lolita*'s complex imagery, expressed in dazzling, magical language, stands out.

Today Nabokov would have no trouble publishing his book in this country, although it's less certain it would be recognized as the work of genius it is. The obscenity laws may be gone, but their absence has opened the floodgates to so much lawdripping that one wishes banality laws had taken their place.

In raising the bar on pornography — thanks, if that's the right word, to the Internet and cable — we have also given rise to a new generation of

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Philistines and sexual hypocrites. Ask any big-city hotel manager, who will tell you that instead of a Nabokovian yawm over this avalanche of usage of pay-per-view porn channels spikes whenever a religious convention is in town.

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month the FBI anti-obscenity agents for a new anti-obscenity squad, and it took about a nano-second for FBI wags to weigh in. "Honestly, most of the guys would have to recuse themselves," said one agent, according to the *Washington Post*.

The real societal test is not whether we fight an unwinnable war against the technologically superior forces of modern pornography, which Nabokov called the "copulation of clichés." What matters is whether we are fostering our highest forms of expression, not our lowest, and whether we understand how art's refuge, not its relapse, can confer a kind of immortality on its creations.

John Yewell is the city editor for the Free Lance in Hollister, Calif., where this column first appeared. He previously wrote columns for The Salt Lake Tribune.

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