

explain the fact that it fell to a modernist art-for-art's-sake stylist to capture the essence of that ambiguous period, the American 1950s, which otherwise seems to fall out of the grand narrative of our recent history?

Nabokov truly seized the moment by an accident of history. This high-cultural manufacturer of abstract, unlikely plots suddenly invented one that fell into place in a U.S. gradually dismantling its sexual taboos and liberating one former perversion after another. As this moral subversion continued and became generalized, the love for nymphets gradually lost its transgressive edge. Its moment of scandal had been essential, not only for the book's unlikely commercial success but for its art as well, in which the representation of hitherto unmentionable desires offered a writer the supreme challenge of formulating the new before its domestication settled down into more conventional four-letter format. Maybe today, when religious, reactionary moralizing has returned with a vengeance, *Lolita* will again have something to offer a hysterical media obsessed with pedophilia in the day-care center or the church choir or on death row.

Unlike those of his American counter-cultural contemporaries, Nabokov's sex story was strengthened by its insertion into an allegorical framework, in which the cultured, melancholy European exile unexpectedly identifies his heart's desire in the American bobby-soxer, a new social phenomenon of the 1950s, and in which U.S. mass culture and consumption reach an apotheosis of inarticulacy and inauthenticity. Yet it is a masterstroke, and Humbert's unappeasable obsession solves the problem of the Old World's fascination with the New in ways that scarcely

glorify the latter at the same time that its irresistible youth and vitality are suitably acknowledged ("a land of desire," said Hegel, "for all those weary of the historical lumber room of old Europe").

Nabokov's Americans (like Hitchcock's) are delicious caricatures in a journey whose episodic form (unified only by the paranoid fantasy of the malicious Quilty, a bad American double of the persecuted narrator) offers an inimitable pretext for the minting of his incomparable sentences. This trajectory ("whose sole raison d'être...was to keep my companion in passable humor from kiss to kiss"), in its interminable circuit back and forth across the continent, supremely achieves a cognitive map of the U.S. in all its flora and fauna. This aesthetic equivalent of the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956 thus turns out to be a prophetic anticipation of postmodernity, with its primacy of space over time. Nabokov has jumped to the top of the literary canon in Russia today; let's make sure *Lolita* remains an American classic as well.

#### PAUL THEROUX, AUTHOR OF *BLINDING LIGHT*

The quaint thing is that 50 years ago some books were regarded as so shocking and dangerous they had to be suppressed, and some writers were regarded as outlaws. Living in that paranoid and puritan world, many of us conceived the ambition to be writers. I did not read *Lolita* then; Henry Miller was my hero, and *Tropic of Cancer*, which was also banned, was the book I admired most, for its gusto and rebelliousness.

*Lolita* was notorious, a wicked book—people ranted about it—but when I first got around to reading it in high school I found it precious and overwritten. I still think it is a bit too pleased with

itself, dense with the Nabokovian smugness present in all his work. Yet this novel stands up to many rereadings. It is still funny; it is true to a specific era in American life. The first half of the novel, the middle-aged Humbert's stalking and seduction of a 12-year-old girl, is brilliant (she turns 13 long after he has nailed her); the second half is a plotty and sprawling pseudo-mystery and also a great road trip.

At the time, the novel was defended on artistic grounds, which is a euphemistic crock because its appeal is unambiguously sexual. The novel has, to use a Nabokov image, a gonadal glow. The lechery is so convincing, it is impossible to imagine that Nabokov did not harbor the desire to fondle small ("feline," "bud-breasted") girls. Never mind the hyperbolic copulation in the hotel. Look at Chapter 13, *Lolita*'s four-page lap dance ending with Humbert exulting, "I crushed out against her left buttock the last throb of the longest ecstasy man or monster had ever known."

#### BRIAN BOYD

#### NABOKOV SCHOLAR AND BIOGRAPHER

*Lolita* and I had a difficult start to our relationship. I was 13, almost her age. I hid her under my pillow so my puritanical and unbookish parents would not know who I had in my bed. But our time together proved humiliating, frustrating, detumefying: *Lolita* was too old and too knowing for me. By 16, however, I was ready for *Pale Fire*, and I have owed many of my deepest literary thrills ever since to Nabokov, *Lolita* included. Yet while I think I have come to understand most of his finest books—*Pale Fire*, *Ada*, *The Gift*, *The Defense* and *Speak, Memory*—I am baffled still, although now also entranced, by his most famous novel.

Although *Lolita* still slips from my grasp, the world found it accessible and immediate enough to change Nabokov's fortunes and the whole face of late 20th century literature. The novel shocked and still shocks because its subject, its characters, its angle, its attitude—the portrait of an artist as a middle-aged pervert—allowed all the eloquence anyone could want. But all of Nabokov's work shocks. He does not accept old ways of seeing and saying. He challenges and refreshes every convention yet never experiments for experiment's sake. He invents absorbing characters and situations, then embeds them in unprecedented structures and storytelling strategies that nevertheless seem to arise naturally out of the facts of the fiction. Unlike some high modernists, he pays as much attention to readers as to characters—and he makes them creative readers. He hides extra dimensions of discovery behind a surface that immediately appeals, even if in *Lolita* it also appalls. And he dives deep. In Humbert, Nabokov shows consciousness, the