

Lolita (Penguin Classics)

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Humbert Humbert is a middle-aged, fastidious college professor. He also likes little girls. And none more so than Lolita, who he'll do anything to possess. Is he in love or insane? A silver-tongued poet or a pervert? A tortured soul or a monster?! Or is he all of these?

Despite its lascivious reputation, the pleasures of *Lolita* are as much intellectual as erogenous. It is a love story with the power to raise both chuckles and eyebrows. Humbert Humbert is a European intellectual adrift in America, haunted by memories of a lost adolescent love. When he meets his ideal nymphet in the shape of 12-year-old Dolores Haze, he constructs an elaborate plot to seduce her, but first he must get rid of her mother. In spite of his diabolical wit, reality proves to be more slippery than Humbert's feverish fantasies, and Lolita refuses to conform to his image of the perfect lover.

Playfully perverse in form as well as content, riddled with puns and literary allusions, Nabokov's 1955 novel is a hymn to the Russian-born author's delight in his adopted language. Indeed, readers who want to probe all of its allusive nooks and crannies will need to consult the annotated edition. *Lolita* is undoubtedly, brazenly erotic, but the eroticism springs less from the "frail honey-hued shoulders ... the silky supple bare back" of little Lo than it does from the wantonly gorgeous prose that Humbert uses to recount his forbidden passion:

<blockquote> She was musical and apple-sweet ... Lola the bobby-soxer, devouring her immemorial fruit, singing through its juice ... and every movement she made, every shuffle and ripple, helped me to conceal and to improve the secret system of tactile correspondence between beast and beauty--between my gagged, bursting beast and the beauty of her dimpled body in its innocent cotton frock. </blockquote> Much has been made of *Lolita* as metaphor, perhaps because the love affair at its heart is so troubling. Humbert represents the formal, educated Old World of Europe, while Lolita is America: ripening, beautiful, but not too bright and a little vulgar. Nabokov delights in exploring the intercourse between these cultures, and the passages where Humbert describes the suburbs and strip malls and motels of postwar America are filled with both attraction and repulsion, "those restaurants where the holy spirit of Hunca Dines had descended upon the cute paper napkins and cottage-cheese-crested salads." Yet however tempting the novel's symbolism may be, its chief delight--and power--lies in the character of Humbert Humbert. He, at least as he tells it, is no seedy skulker, no twisted destroyer of innocence. Instead, Nabokov's celebrated mouthpiece is erudite and witty, even at his most depraved. Humbert can't help it--linguistic jouissance is as important to him as the satisfaction of his arrested libido. --Simon Leake

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