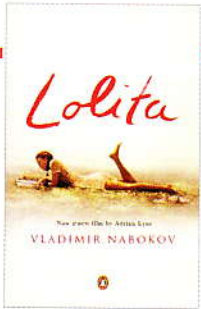


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MARY GAITSKILL

"When I read this book I was happy." The legendary short-story writer and novelist opines on the chemical magic of *Lolita*

By Kate Rockwood



Mary Gaitskill emerged onto the literary scene in 1988 with her darkly erotic short-story collection *Bad Behavior*. Herself a teenage runaway who sold flowers on the streets of San Francisco before working as a stripper in Toronto, she now lives with her husband in bucolic upstate New York. Those readers who worried married life in the countryside would mute Gaitskill's fascination with psychosexual themes, a consistent undercurrent in her oeuvre of work, breathed a collective sigh of relief with the 2005 release of her latest novel, *Veronica*, winner of the National Book Award.

What novel does this writer, once dubbed the "princess of darkness," find herself pining for? Gaitskill responds to our questionnaire with plenty of candid passion, spirited thought, and a bit of guff.

The book I choose is: *Lolita* by Vladimir Nabokov.

In one sentence, this book is about: You can't say what any great book is about in one sentence. However, if I could take a verbal snapshot, this sentence might be the negative: *Lolita* is a bridge between ecstatic dream and broken reality; it is an enchanted bridge beset by mirages and trolls; as the narrator crosses, it bursts into flames behind him; in the end it falls into an abyss.

I chose this title because: it is one of the first books that I recognized on a core level.

When I first read it I was: a 23-year-old college student, generally very unhappy, lonely, barely able to talk to anyone. When I read this book I was happy.

I've read it: five times.

My favorite part is: All of the parts of this book are great. That is actually true, and I don't think there is any other book I would say that about. However, different parts strike me each time I read it. The last time I was surprised to notice, for the first time, a paragraph about Lolita's mother, the dead, despised 30-ish Charlotte Haze (and Valeria, Humbert's loathsome — that is to say adult — ex-wife). It comes toward the end of the book, when the desperate Lolita has run off with a more glamorous pedophile and left Humbert in a state of emotional hallucination:

"Singularly enough I seldom if ever dreamed of Lolita as I remember her — as I saw her constantly and obsessively in my conscious mind during my daymares and insomnias. More precisely: she did haunt my sleep but she appeared there in strange and ludicrous disguises as Valeria or Charlotte, or a cross between them. That complex ghost would come to me, shedding shift after shift, in an atmosphere of great melancholy and disgust, and would recline in dull invitation on some narrow board or hard settee, with flesh ajar like the rubber valve of a soccer ball's bladder. I would find myself, dentures fractured or hopelessly mislaid, in horrible *chambers garnies* where I would be entertained at tedious vivisection parties that generally ended with Charlotte or Valeria weeping in my bleeding arms and being tenderly kissed by my brotherly lips in a dream disor-

der of auctioneered Viennese bric-a-brac, pity, impotence and the brown wigs of tragic old women who had just been gassed."

I did not notice this section for the first four times I read the book, partly because *Lolita* is so rich with beauty that gruesome beauty like this is easy to miss, and partly because I was at first so taken with the story of the little girl that I missed the mother. In this section — modest for being so dramatically unannounced — Humbert starts to become conscious that he is a murderer in spirit if not in fact. He also starts to become conscious of the erotic link between the ideal "love" of Lolita and the loathing of her mother — who is loathed in part because she desires Humbert while Lolita is sexually repelled by him. Having read almost all of Nabokov's work, I am struck by the repetition of a theme: a romantic protagonist in a tense crossbeam of two females, one who loves him, another who is sexually and celestially indifferent.

In the early books there is no age difference between the two; as the books progress the indifferent beauty becomes younger and younger. In *Lolita*, the dynamic becomes increasingly anguished and erotic, and the despised, desiring mother becomes both clearly and mysteriously a necessary part of the fantasy's taut and tortured structure.

After reading it, this book made me: better understand the meta-humor mixed with tragedy that happens around us all the time, but in pieces; in the book it appeared before me all at once, like a juggler with a thousand balls in the air.

Music to listen to when reading this: "In Every Dream Home A Heart-Ache" by Roxy Music. Anything by the Tijuana Brass, Britney Spears, or Strauss. What kind of question is this anyway? You shouldn't listen to any music while reading anything but a comic book — though each of the musics I mention have a uniquely perverse quality that complements *Lolita* as far as I'm concerned.

You should read this book when: you feel like it.

Mary Gaitskill had a lot to say about Lolita — more than what we could fit here. Read the unabridged version of this questionnaire at venuszine.com.