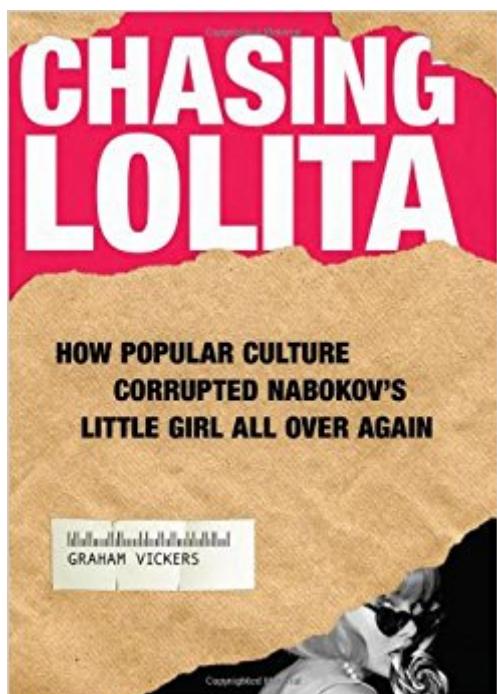


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# Chasing Lolita: How Popular Culture Corrupted Nabokov's Little Girl All Over Again



## Synopsis

In the summer of 1958, a twelve-year-old girl took the world by storm. *Lolita* was published in the United States. This child, so fresh and alive, yet so pitiable in her abuse at the hands of the novel's narrator, engendered outrage and sympathy alike, and has continued to do so ever since. Yet *Lolita*'s image in the broader public consciousness has changed. No longer a little girl, *Lolita* has come to signify a precocious temptress, a cunning underage vixen who'll stop at nothing to get her man. How could this have happened? *Chasing Lolita*, published on the fiftieth anniversary of *Lolita*'s American publication, is an essential contemporary companion to Vladimir Nabokov's great novel. It establishes who *Lolita* really was back in 1958, explores her predecessors of all stripes, and examines the multitude of movies, theatrical shows, literary spin-offs, artifacts, fashion, art, photography, and tabloid excesses that have distorted her identity and stolen her name. It considers not just the "Lolita effect" but shifting attitudes toward the always volatile mix of sex, children, and popular entertainment—from Victorian times to the present. And it also looks at some real-life cases of young girls who became the innocent victims of someone else's obsession—unhappy sisters to one of the most affecting heroines in American fiction, and one of the most widely misunderstood.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

For 50 years, the nymphet *Lolita* (whose real name is Dolores Haze) has existed in the collective imagination. This sleek and knowing book takes an activist approach rather than a voyeuristic one

to search out, first, the sources of Nabokov's once-censored novel, and then its impact and all the misunderstandings surrounding his celebrated character. Vickers (coauthor, *Neal Cassady: The Fast Life of a Beat Hero*) examines the possible sources of inspiration, from Alice Liddell of Lewis Carroll fame to Fanny Brice's Baby Snooks; from an obscure German writer with the suggestive name von Lichberg to Edgar Allan Poe; from Chaplin's life story to a then unpublished novella by Nabokov himself. Most of the book is a romp through popular culture: the Stanley Kubrick film and Adrian Lyne's remake—the release unfortunately coincided with the murder of JonBenet Ramsey—as well as dismal stage adaptations; Brooke Shields's roles and ads and Japanese gothic *Lolita* fashion. Vickers succeeds admirably and entertainingly in his goal of separating Nabokov's character from the many copied and counterfeited *Lolitas*. 27 b&w photos. (Aug.)

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"In his outrageously readable literary criticism-slash-pop culture survey of her fate, Graham Vickers is determined to defend *Lolita*'s honor through a keen analysis of Nabokov's original novel."—Toronto Star"Ambitious . . . a companion book to Nabokov's misunderstood masterpiece."—Bitch

[Note: Nearly a hundred of my fiction reviews by great literary artists and others not so well known are now available in my book, "Novels and other Fictions." Get it at .]It is often complained in the postmodern literary world that *Lolita* did not have a voice in Vladimir Nabokov's famous novel. But in fact it is one of the great accomplishments of that novel that indeed her voice came through loud and clear, even though filtered through an "unreliable" and self-serving narrator in the person of Humbert Humbert. Not only did her voice come through in an indelible way that still enchants readers (and occasioned this book), but so too did her intentions and her actions. Had it been otherwise we would not be discussing her today.I like to compare what Nabokov did in *Lolita* to what Mark Twain did in *Huck Finn*. Both novels are jewels of American literature and both novels are first-person singular narratives. Both narrators can be considered unreliable in the literary sense, Huck because he is mostly unlettered and presumably lacks any literary skills, and Humbert because of his bias. The trick for the novelist when using such a conceit is to make the world (that the narrator sees and describes) authentic and vivid despite the narrator's shortcomings. This is not easy to do.But what Graham Vickers is getting at here in this splendid cultural "biography" of *Lolita* is that the persona of *Lolita* has not only been corrupted by the popular culture but to insist that she never was the girl that she has become, that "*Lolita*" has become a catchword for something

Nabokov's little girl never was. In America she is the Lolita seen in the famous photo of Sue Lyon (who starred in Stanley Kubrick's 1962 film) behind heart-shaped sunglasses licking a lollipop. In Japan she has become Lolicon or Loligoth, a pornographic sub genre of child-like sexual objects. Elsewhere she has become a symbol of oppression, "the confiscation of one individual's life by another" (p. 218, quoting Azar Nafisi, author of *Reading Lolita in Tehran*). Vickers shows that Lolita had predecessors, real life ones as well as literary and cinematic, Edgar Allan Poe's Annabel Lee, Lewis Carroll's Alice Liddell, D. W. Griffith's Dollie, Carroll Baker as "Baby Doll," Gigi, etc. And of course Lolita has had successors, many of them. Vickers recalls the real life cases of Elizabeth Smart, Sally Horner, Jon Benet Ramsey, Amy Fisher, and others. He recalls Brook Shields in Louis Malle's *Pretty Baby* (1978), but missed Melissa Joan Hart in TV's "Clarissa Explains It All." Miss Hart was in the casting call for Adrian Lyne's *Lolita* from 1997, but by then was a bit too old for the part. There have also been some literary take-offs on *Lolita*. Vickers gives us a little of Pia Pera's "Lo's Diary," and Emily Prager's "Roger Fishbite." He takes note of the Barbie Doll phenomenon and pornography on the Internet. In short, *Lolita* or various approximations or misapprehensions of her have become a staple of the popular culture. A portion of the book is devoted to what amounts to reviews of the two films mentioned above that were adapted from Nabokov's novel. Vickers didn't care much for Kubrick's version, faulting it for lack of authentic atmosphere and for being ten years out of chronological reality. Both of those criticisms I think are valid. However, his faulting of the work of Shelly Winters as Charlotte Haze mystifies me since I think Winters was absolutely brilliant. He also didn't care for all the latitude that he believes Kubrick gave Peter Sellers, and again I tend to agree. However Sellers was brilliant in parts, so much so that his character materially changed the movie. Which leads us to the main criticism of Kubrick's film: it wasn't as true to the book as it could have been. Once again I agree, but overall Kubrick's film was deeply true to Nabokov's black comedic intent in a way that Lyne's film was not. To be fair, Kubrick's *Lolita* was an excellent movie, but not the *Lolita* that Nabokov wrote. It couldn't have been for many reasons, not the least of which is that the Eisenhower America to which it was to be shown, wouldn't tolerate a real *Lolita*. It was, as Nabokov put it, a "vivacious variant" of his book. (p. 120) Vickers very much liked Lyne's version. He raves about Dominique Swain's performance as *Lolita* and extends kudos to Lyne for the more realistic atmosphere. Lyne's film was indeed much more atmospheric employing a myriad of details from the late 1940s road culture as well as authentic music. However, Dominique Swain, was not a nymphet. She was a fully grown teenager, a talented and interesting teenager, but hardly what Humbert had in mind. To try to hid this obvious fact, Swain was dressed in somewhat laughable little girl outfits and swaddling bras. Sue Lyon, also a teenager, was, because of her more delicate figure,

closer to Humbert's ideal. One of Vickers' most penetrating insights is to see the *Lolita* of 1947 as a precursor of today's teen and preteen consumer. He writes: "America's golden period of consumerism might still be two or three years in the future, but even during the relative austerity of the late 1940s, the constant allure of consumer goods and services is already a potent force in *Lolita*'s young life." (p. 146) Two pages later, Vickers refers to *Lolita* as "that ideal consumer" who would "become an enduring object of interest to the commercial world." To this we could add that while teenage and preteen girls have been oh so carefully taught by corporate America through the mass media to consume, they themselves have become articles of consumption. The very interesting thing is they know it. In reference to Prager's role reversal novel, "Roger Fishbite," Vickers notes that it seems that "some dolled-up little girls at a beauty pageant...know all about JonBenet Ramsey and are generally philosophic about the tiresome attentions of men: 'They can't help it,' said Mary Jane. 'We look so beautiful, like little candy women or something.'" (pp. 214-215)

I never got through Nabokov's *Lolita* (sorry!). I tried reading it years ago and stopped over halfway through. I just found it... boring. But reading this book has made me want to reread it (maybe I was just too young to appreciate it the first time?). This book combines literary criticism, film criticism, and criticism of media and pop culture. The author's descriptions of Nabokov and the book are good enough that you don't need to be well-versed in either. But it does help if you've read at least some of the book. I was completely fascinated by the way he describes how the image and concept of *Lolita* have changed based on cultural contexts and twisted to fit the needs of artists or histrionic media outlets. He touches on such a wide variety of topics that I was always making notes on things to research further in depth, books to read, films to rent. (Topics include: Lewis Carroll's fascination with children, depiction of romance involving children and child actors throughout history and in modern-day films, how the news changes in treating accounts of underage sex and rape and assigns blame...) An interesting, worthwhile read.

That question puts a real chill on the "sense of life" that is being discussed when it comes to the situations that young girls can find themselves in around the planet in human worlds and societies.

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