

**LOLITA (USA, MGM, 1962). Dir. Stanley Kubrick. 152 mins.
Black and white. X-Rating. DVD (Warner Home Video, 1999).**

The most influential American novel by Vladimir Nabokov (1899-1979), *Lolita* was published in 1955. It was printed in Paris at the infamous Olympia Press, which had printed the *Story of O (Histoire d'O)* the previous year; however, it was taken there only after having been declined by every major American press. (In perhaps the kindest rejection, the chief editor at New Directions wrote, "We are worried about possible repercussions both for the publisher and the author.") The novel was twice banned in France, first under the Fourth Republic and then under the government of Charles de Gaulle. Its importation was banned in England, where its publication by Weidenfeld and Nicolson in 1959 cost Nigel Nicolson his seat in Parliament. However, it was allowed into the U.S. in 1957. Putnam's became its first American publisher in 1958, and sales exceeded all expectations. Nabokov's agent said it was the first novel since *Gone with the Wind* to sell more than 100,000 copies in the first three weeks. In 1960 Nabokov resigned his position as Professor of Comparative Literature at Cornell and left the U.S. to spend the rest of his life in Europe.

Imagine the surprise in 1961 when the MGM studio in Elstree, England, announced the production of a film version. Publicists in the U.S. built on this surprise when they chose the tagline, printed on the movie poster where Lolita wears heart-shaped sunglasses the color of her lipstick: "How did they ever make a film of LOLITA?"

The answer was that it took a courageous director as well as a cooperative author. Stanley Kubrick (1928-1999) realized that Humbert Humbert, the protagonist of Nabokov's story, was taken not so much with a particular girl as with a type: the sassy mouthed American beanpole that would soon become known as the teenybopper. He also realized that Humbert's passion for the twelve-year-old Dolores Haze would make more sense on the screen if the character was literally rounded out. Rather than choose a child actress for the role of Nabokov's four-foot-ten-inch "nymphette," he picked a total unknown: Sue Lyon (b. 1946), who had exactly two television appearances to her credit. (One of them, appropriately, was on *Dennis the Menace*.) Though not yet fifteen, she was a full-blown nymph for whom the new term "sexpot" was all too fitting. When Nabokov complained that she did not look like a twelve year old, Kubrick shot back that she also had to play an eighteen year old, and indeed the role calls for an actress to play everything from precocious child to young wife and expectant mother – a challenge that Lyon meets at least as well as the less fully rounded Dominique Swain (b. 1980) in the 1997 remake by Adrian Lynne (b. 1941; dir. *Indecent Proposal*, 1993).

Kubrick and producer James Harris (b. 1928) chose the other cast members with an eye to Nabokov's conception of the story as a comedy. James Mason (1909-1984) plays Humbert, the middle-aged professor of European extraction who rents a room at the Haze house. Though he got his start in British film noir (e.g., *The Upturned Glass*, 1947) and played similar roles in the U.S. (e.g., *North by Northwest*, 1959), he had a vulnerable side that would show so well in films like *Georgy Girl* (1966). Watch the pained expressions as he follows the object of his unfulfilled desire – for Kubrick keeps it so. Meanwhile, Shelley Winters (b. 1920) plays Lolita's widowed mother, who waves an arty cigarette holder with aplomb as she craves the affection and respect of her sophisticated lodger. Peter Sellers (1925-1980), who would star in Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove* (1964), improvises the role of Clare Quilty, Humbert's rival for Lolita's affections.

Finally, Kubrick convinced Nabokov to write the screenplay – after he first declined – and thus make the story of Humbert's increasing paranoia into one that could be shown on the screen. Nabokov conceived and wrote Humbert's voice-over narrative at the film's beginning, which makes everything that follows a flashback, and he kept the dialogue close to the novel's. For his efforts, he earned an Academy Award nomination for Best Adapted Screenplay. Curiously, the very genius of his style was daunting to Kubrick, a director whose adaptations included works by the likes of Arthur C. Clarke (*2001: A Space Odyssey*, 1968), Anthony Burgess (*A Clockwork Orange*, 1971), and Stephen King (*The Shining*, 1980) as well as the old

master William Makepeace Thackeray (*Barry Lyndon*, 1975). Kubrick said in retrospect that he could have made a “better film” from the work of a “lesser author” (*Der Spiegel*, 1987). He also remarked that he would not have made the film had he realized how great the fear and reality of censorship would be (*Newsweek*, 1972).

The obvious problem for censors (which earned *Lolita* the “X” rating shown below when the Motion Picture Association of America’s rating system was instituted in 1968) is the frank treatment of pedophilia. The old Hays Code (adopted by the film industry in 1930) stipulated that seduction and rape “are never the proper subject for comedy” (§II.3.b) and that “cruelty to children” is “repellent” (§XII.5). There was no specific mention of child molestation and abuse, which became hotter issues in years to come. It may be pure coincidence that “haze,” the last name of Nabokov’s nymphette, is the homonym of “hays,” the surname of the Motion Picture Producers Association’s first director, Will Hays (1879-1954). Similarly, it may be coincidental that Lita Gray (1908-1995), the child bride of Charlie Chaplin (1889-1977), was billed as Lillita when she appeared as the Flirtatious Angel in his 1921 film *The Kid*. The more likely source of Nabokov’s impassioned prose, as reviewers like Anthony Burgess suspected, was his love affair with the English language. But it was, above all, an affair with the American English of young females. Nabokov confessed he had followed schoolgirls onto streetcars, but only to eavesdrop on their conversations and learn their lingo.

The general sentiment was that the film proved “naughty but nicer” than the novel (*Los Angeles Times*, 1962). The League of Decency requested several small cuts, which Kubrick made, and the film actually got a wider screening in the Kennedy era than the remake would get in the Clinton era.

In the recent bestseller *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, Azar Nafisi (b. 1955) tells of her experience with a small study group in post-revolutionary Iran. The young women who gather in her apartment for weekly discussions of English-language novels, mostly American, have experienced systematic oppression that few Westerners can fully imagine. For example, they have seen the legal age of marriage for females decline from eighteen to nine. They feel violated with *Lolita*, robbed of their innocence. At the same time, several think of moving permanently to the U.S., never considering that the New World may corrupt them as easily as it undid Humbert. Few readers in Iran or the U.S are likely to accept Nafisi’s comparison of Humbert to the Ayatollah Khomeini when she says of the latter: “Like all great mythmakers, he had tried to fashion reality out of his dream, and in the end, like Humbert, he had managed to destroy both reality and his dream.” But surely both were dreamers.

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