

Lolita by Vladimir Nabokov recommended by Susann Cokal

A program of the Center for the Book at the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities, the “VABooks!” column suggests books for Virginians to read in common. This month, Susann Cokal—author of the novels *Breath and Bones* and *Mirabilis*, also an instructor at the M.F.A. Program at Virginia Commonwealth University—recommends *Lolita* by Vladimir Nabokov. We hope that individuals, book groups, families and neighbors will read and discuss VABooks! selections.



There is no book more beguiling than *Lolita*. Like the young girls who attract Humbert Humbert’s eye, it is demonic—otherworldly, bewitching, full of “fey grace” and “elusive, shifty, soul-shattering, insidious charm.” It is a subtle-spined serpent (to adapt another one of Humbert’s phrases) that invites readers to play, then makes us its playthings through gorgeous lyrical passages that bleed into biting wit, agonized despair, and a series of clever tricks with language. It is also just plain beautiful.

You can certainly read *Lolita* for story; there’s a great one, with perhaps the most notorious premise in twentieth-century literature. Middle-aged Humbert becomes fascinated with a twelve-year-old girl and, as any lover would, devises elaborate schemes to win her. He marries *Lolita*’s mother, Charlotte, but then McFate (as Humbert calls it) steps in and the bride dies in a gruesome accident. Freed of other ties, and finally having consummated their relationship, widower and stepdaughter take off on a meandering cross-country road trip, then settle into a small town where their uneasy equilibrium is threatened by a playwright who shares Humbert’s passion for nymphets. It’s all told in a memoir that Humbert has written for the “ladies and gentlemen of the jury” who are to judge him—not for seducing a minor, however, but for murdering a victim unidentified till the end.

To be sure, some of this is tough material, and in certain circles *Lolita* has a dangerous reputation. France banned it no fewer than three times—not, I think, so much because of the love story itself as because Nabokov casts a spell that has us actually sympathizing with Hum-

bert, then catching ourselves in a moral tangle. Humbert is the first to call himself a monster, but he also declares that in order to recognize a true nymphet, “You have to be an artist and a madman, a creature of infinite melancholy, with a bubble of hot poison” inside. If it takes a special, capital-R Romantic person to appreciate fey charm, there’s a kind of instant redemption for forbidden love. But “You can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style”—so perhaps it is best to concentrate on the poison after all.

For all *Lolita*’s tragic awareness, there are bits that make me laugh hysterically. Who could forget Humbert’s faithless first wife, Valerie, who ends up lumbering around on all fours and eating dates as part of an anthropological experiment? She comforts me when my heart is bruised. Or the porch scene at the Enchanted Hunters Lodge, where Humbert takes *Lolita* for their first tryst; the guilt-riddled lover goes mad over an invisible stranger’s small talk, hearing “Where the devil did you get her?” instead of “The weather is getting better.” And there’s this deceptively simple statement: “My very photogenic mother died in a freak accident (picnic, lightning) when I was three.” An entire world is contained and made silly within those parentheses. The sinister edge to these episodes heightens their humor—and tangles up our moral understanding again. Fate, like our fellow humans, is malevolent as often as it is benign, and it has a wicked sense of humor.

I must have used *Lolita* in classes a dozen times and have read it at least as often for pleasure. Each revisit shows me something new: a hitherto unnoticed anagram or pun, a

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recommended by Susann Cokal (continued)

sad undercurrent in *Lolita*'s brattiness, a hint of pathos in Charlotte's social and intellectual pretensions, another allusion to the mysterious man with the initials CQ (or "Seek You"). Choose *The Annotated Lolita* edited by Alfred Appel, Jr.

--that way you'll be spot some of the subtle tricks. But whichever edition you read, you won't have to be an artist or a madman to appreciate Nabokov's otherworldly brand of beauty. It's that enchanting.