Abstract. This article is a review of the collection of essays Lolita in the Afterlife, which examines to what extent recent public discussions of consent and power (such as the #MeToo movement) have impacted the reception of Vladimir Nabokov’s novel Lolita. The authors of the essays tend to record their emotional responses and draw on personal experiences to analyze their growing reluctance to inhabit Humbert’s point of view. The volume gives space for differing opinions, which inevitably creates an interesting dialog between contributors. Regrettably, there is very little dialog with prior Nabokov scholarship, and the analyses seem to retread some of the ground already covered by earlier critics. Yet, if the volume is aimed at the general reading audience rather than Nabokov experts and if its main goal is to document the staying power of the novel (and this seems to be the case), it is certainly successful.

Key Words. Nabokov, Lolita, Lolita in the Afterlife, Jenny Minton Quigley

In recent years, the growth of public awareness of sexual and other forms of abuse has prodded literary critics to examine how this awareness might change the reception of Vladimir Nabokov’s most well-known novel. The essays collected in Lolita in the Afterlife contribute to this discussion: the “afterlife” in the volume’s title refers not so much to the theme of the “Otherworld” so prevalent in Nabokov scholarship as to the unique challenges of reading the novel in the 21st century.
There is certainly a case to be made that readers today engage with Nabokov’s work differently than at the time of its publication. In the fifties, even as influential a critic as Lionel Trilling interpreted *Lolita* as a modern-day representation of courtly love (15) and suggested that the narrator, Humbert Humbert, manages to “seduce us to kinship with him” (11). In recent years, in the wake of public discussions of consent and power (several essays in the volume make explicit reference to the #MeToo movement), readers might be more reluctant than ever to inhabit Humbert’s point of view. Yet, in many ways the interpretative challenges posed by the novel have stayed the same. Newcomers to *Lolita* still react to some of the issues that have been at the forefront of secondary literature since the publication of the book, such as the contrast between the beauty of its language and the heinousness of its subject matter. Unfortunately, many of the authors in the volume seem to neglect the history of *Lolita*’s reception while trying to situate their reading in the here and now.

But perhaps it is not fair to expect a reflection on the parallels between prior criticism and the essays collected here. Most of the contributors are not Nabokov scholars but writers (with many of them working in the film industry) and the general tone is personal rather than academic. Thus, the volume is clearly aimed at the general reading public, not just Nabokov experts. Its real goal seems to be to document the staying power of Nabokov’s classic and to introduce a relatively wide audience to the main issues of the novel in an accessible form. *Lolita in the Afterlife* achieves this goal.

Editor Jenny Minton Quigley’s introduction is primarily a chronicle of how her father, Walter Minton (head of Putnam), came to publish *Lolita* in the US, but she also mentions how the idea for this volume took shape in her mind as she returned to *Lolita* after the rise of the #MeToo movement and found the book significantly more uncomfortable than she remembered it to be. The first essay of the volume focuses on a similar experience: Emily Mortimer reports how her recent rereading of *Lolita* differed from her perception of the book as a university student. The editor’s picking this essay as the first allows Mortimer’s text to function as a gateway for newcomers to *Lolita* criticism. Like other Nabokov scholars before (see, for instance, Zunshine 100-118), Mortimer notes that it was only on a rereading that she understood the full extent of Humbert’s depravity. She devotes her analysis to explaining the rhetorical devices and other features that numbed her outrage on her first reading: the extraordinary intensity of Humbert’s passion (which also played a key part in Trilling’s interpreting the novel as a modern-day take on courtly love), the beauty of his prose, and his disarming use of comedy. Her points parallel early scholarship on *Lolita* and her train of thought follows a rereader’s thought process, making the essay a good jumping-off point for those who want to engage with
the novel more thoroughly. Beyond this, however, Mortimer also manages to give a unique slant to her argument by comparing Humbert’s legal trial in the novel with what she learned about real-life court cases from her father, a criminal defense barrister. As it turns out, Humbert’s deployment of humor as self-defense is a long-established strategy among lawyers. “My dad always said you could get away with anything in court as long as you made people laugh: ‘In obscenity cases the first thing I did was to make the jury laugh. The great object of the judge and prosecutor was to stop the jury from laughing’” (10-11).

Other contributors also benefit from approaching the novel from a deeply personal perspective. Susan Choi,Bindu Bansinath, and Mary Gaitskill compare their own childhood experiences of abuse with the novel’s depiction of an abuser’s tactics and point of view, and they come to differing conclusions about the potential harmfulness of Lolita (this difference between their conclusions is highlighted in Trousdale 3-4). Unfortunately, some essays emphasize the critic’s personal relationship and emotional response to the novel at the expense of a close reading. For instance, Jill Kargman contrasts her memory of reading Lolita in high school with her adult view of mass culture’s condemnable tendency to sexualize teenagers. She suggests that preadolescents discovering their body and their femininity do not have an adult’s understanding of sexuality, which is important to understanding the novel (even if it is not quite new in Nabokov scholarship). Unfortunately, this observation leads only to a very simplistic reading: “through the prism of 2020 and motherhood, my literary analysis is das shit fucked up. Pervs like H-squared should be vilified as the slimeballs they are, not vaulted to protagonist immortality in the literary canon” (270). This evaluation misses the point that some works in the literary canon, especially those with unreliable narrators, are meant to undermine identification with the protagonist. As Erika L. Sánchez puts it in another essay in the volume: “We’re not supposed to root for him [Humbert]. He is objectively a terrible person. What makes him interesting as a character is his delusion, his entitlement” (294).

Perhaps the most unique contributions are penned by Cheryl Strayed and Jessica Shattuck, who blur the line between fiction and argumentative prose by offering their observations on the story in the form of monologues spoken by characters from the novel, an eighty-five-year-old Lolita and the ghost of Charlotte, respectively. Both pieces curiously echo other essays from this volume.

Strayed imagines a scenario where the seventeen-year-old Lolita does not die in childbirth but is helped by two retired nurses, her neighbors in Gray Star. Not only do they assist her in the deliverance of her baby, they also listen to her account of what Humbert had done to her. Their sympathy for Lolita’s suffering contributes to her reevaluation of the events
and sets her down the path of healing: “I did not […], until I met Mavis and Betsy, understand that what had transpired between me and H had not in some unconscious way been brought on by me” (212). The introduction of the attentive and compassionate neighbors highlights how indifferent Humbert’s environment is in Nabokov’s novel, and how this plays into Humbert’s hands. This is also Laura Lippman’s point when she mentions that “[p]edophilia almost always has dozens of unnamed co-conspirators—family members who cannot face what’s happening under their roofs, neighbors who feel it is inappropriate to inquire about another child’s home life” (79) and provides a list of characters that “failed to pay attention to Dolores Haze, to notice the victim in plain sight” (79-80).

Shattuck retells Charlotte’s life from the point of view of a Charlotte speaking from beyond the grave. Not only does this choice recall the theme of the afterlife in the volume’s title, it also resonates with those essays – like Tom Bissell’s well-written examination of the novel’s film adaptations and screenplay versions – that argue that Charlotte is also a tragic figure, not only the titular little girl (250). The ghostly version of Charlotte complains that her voice has been suppressed because a middle-aged, suburban woman’s experience is less interesting to the average reader than Humbert’s morally dubious confession. She tells Humbert that her “bald fury and sadness” is “[s]o much less glamorous than lust, less voyeuristically exciting than perversion, less intriguing than guilt. […] Your disregard for me is so bold, so outlandish as to signal the morally off-center world of your narrative” (284, 286).

The contributions are not always in such perfect agreement. For instance, while Strayed and Shattuck stress that Charlotte and Lolita love each other despite Humbert’s suggestions to the contrary – Strayed imagines Lolita mourning Charlotte, Shattuck has Charlotte’s ghost say, “There can be no insult, no torture, more horrifying to a mother than the abuse of her own child” (283-284) –, Dani Shapiro’s deeply personal essay compares Charlotte to Shapiro’s own mother, whose relationship to Shapiro was characterized as much by envy as affection. Shapiro argues that Charlotte’s envy for Lolita’s youth and beauty heightens and distorts Lolita’s blooming interest in sexuality and makes her vulnerable to the preying Humbert. The reader might get a fuller picture of Charlotte by reflecting on the tension between these highly different but not completely irreconcilable approaches.

Hopefully, the aforementioned examples managed to show that Lolita in the Afterlife is a colorful volume. While Nabokov scholars might find some of the arguments familiar, the essays are a testament to the continuing richness and provocative power of Nabokov’s notorious work.
Works Cited


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Péter Tamás is in the Department of English Studies at Kodolányi University. He received his Ph.D. from Eötvös Loránd University (Hungary) in 2021. He wrote his doctoral dissertation on “Ethical Readings of Nabokov’s *Lolita*.” In 2015, he was a Fulbright Visiting Student Researcher at Fordham University (New York, NY). He has published several articles on Nabokov, including one in the *Nabokov Online Journal*. Email: tamas.peter@kodolanyi.hu