

## READING NABOKOV

The focus of the course is *Lolita*.

When the novel was published in 1958, one review dismissed it as ‘highbrow pornography,’ given its depiction of the lust of a middle-aged man for a 12-year-old girl; whereas a second review praised Nabokov for creating a ‘major work of fiction’ and suggested that its ‘horrific’ aspects were part of a satirical design. Complicating any judgment of the book was its tone -- the ‘funniest book I remember having read,’ is how one critic had it.

Opinion about *Lolita* remains complicated and contested. We will try to sort out the various positions. [e.g., Can a book about pedophilia be funny?]

It helps to have a sense of the man behind the book. Nabokov had a privileged childhood in pre-Revolutionary Russia, then an impoverished emigration in Germany and France, before moving on to an academic career in America, and then to the commercial success of *Lolita* that allowed him to retire to Switzerland. Nabokov’s autobiography [*Speak, Memory*] helps us trace this journey.

One notable event in Nabokov’s life was having to switch from the Russian of his earlier works to English, a highly unusual feat. The prose of *Lolita* has been both admired and criticized. Looking closely at several passages should allow us to reach our own conclusions. .

Besides *Lolita* and excerpts from *Speak, Memory*, we will also read several of Nabokov’s short stories.

### Required Texts:

1) *Lolita* (Vintage). An annotated edition, edited by Alfred Appel, is also available. It helpfully marks the connections and allusions that Nabokov has embedded in the text - but it should be used with care since the editor has mixed in his particular understanding of the novel.

2) *Nabokov’s Dozen*. (Penguin – but as long as the volume includes the stories indicated in the syllabus below, any publisher will do.)

### Readings:

#### Week One:

“Mademoiselle O” (in *Nabokov’s Dozen*), especially sections 1 and 7.

n.b., This piece was initially published as a chapter in Nabokov's autobiography, *Speak, Memory*).

"Cloud, Castle, Lake" (in *Nabokov's Dozen*).

**Week Two:**

Excerpts from *Speak, Memory* (in Dropbox).

"Signs and Symbols" (in *Nabokov's Dozen*).

**Week Three:**

"Spring in Fialta" (in *Nabokov's Dozen*).

"First Love" (in *Nabokov's Dozen*).

n.b., This piece was initially published as a chapter in *Speak, Memory*.

\* *Lolita*, pp. 3-6.

**Week Four:**

*Lolita*, pp. 9-109

**Week Five:**

*Lolita*, pp. 109-208

**Week Six:**

*Lolita*, pp. 208-317

Critics' responses to *Lolita*.

---

**Leader:** Victor Ripp was a professor of Russian literature at Cornell and is the author, most recently, of *Hell's Traces*

**LOCATION:** Zoom

**THURSDAYS:** 10:00 am. to noon, 6 weeks, beginning March 3 to April 7

**MAXIMUM:** 20