



# Lolita: The Story of a Cover Girl: Vladimir Nabokov's Novel in Art and Design

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What should Lolita look like? The question has dogged book-cover designers since 1955, when Lolita was first published in a plain green wrapper. The heroine of Vladimir Nabokov's classic novel has often been shown as a teenage seductress in heart-shaped glasses--a deceptive image that misreads the book but has seeped deep into our cultural life, from fashion to film.

Lolita - The Story of a Cover Girl: Vladimir Nabokov's Novel in Art and Design reconsiders the cover of Lolita. Eighty renowned graphic designers and illustrators (including Paula Scher, Jessica Hische, Jessica Helfand, and Peter Mendelsund) offer their own takes on the book's jacket, while graphic-design critics and Nabokov scholars survey more than half a century of Lolita covers.

Through the lenses of design and literature, Lolita - The Story of a Cover Girl tells the strange design history of one of the most important novels of the 20th century--and offers a new way for thinking visually about difficult books. You'll never look at Lolita the same way again.

## Lolita: The Story of a Cover Girl: Vladimir Nabokov's Novel in Art and Design Details

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# From Reader Review Lolita: The Story of a Cover Girl: Vladimir Nabokov's Novel in Art and Design for online ebook

**Tia says**

Who was Dolores Haze?

There seems to be as many conflicting opinions about this as there are on Jesus. I mean, I read the Bible and clearly see it saying Jesus had brown skin and hair like wool, and he believed in tolerance and helping the poor. But his "good book" is used to preach hate, and he's depicted as a white guy with shiny blonde hair. If the apocalypse comes, a lot of his followers will mistakenly call him a terrorist and try to kick him out of America.

I read Lolita a few months ago, and it has quickly become my obsession, not because I loved it—it's a 3 star book for me. But I've NEVER finished reading something only to be so confused with other people's interpretations of it. It's changed my world view quite a bit, you know, it's like if you read Charlotte's Web and most people tell you it promoted pork consumption. You'd be confused, yeah?

For that reason, I'm now working on a book of my own, an illustrated literary analysis of Lolita. I'm a writer and artist who works in watercolor, colored pencil and graphite, and Nabokov writes more visually than any other writer I can think of. He was understandably frustrated by most of these book covers. He didn't even want a girl on the cover. And there has never been an accurate representation of Lo in the films, because it would be too disturbing if there were.

What do we know about her? She was very tiny at 12 years old. She was 4'9" and 75 lbs, something Nabokov got from a chart on children that was the average size for a girl of 10. He really wanted the reader to know this was a child, not someone sexually matured. Oddly enough, I was that same height and weight at 12, and I was one of the tiniest girls in my class. A late bloomer.

Lo has "breast-buds" rather than breasts. That's when you're still completely flat chested, not even an AA cup yet, but you're getting puffy. She is very slender, with boyish legs, a narrow behind. She is a tomboy who is described as wearing things like jeans and flannel shirts. She doesn't wash her hair often, or care about hygiene and appearance. Her face is described as plain, with a freckled snub nose. She's got bobbed curls that are brunette, like Lita Grey, Charlie Chaplin's child bride. She's an ordinary girl.

She acts her age, and has very age appropriate interests. Her mother reveals that she had no interest in boys at her old school, and she'd get frustrated when they flirted with her or touched her. If you really read the book, it's clear that the entire camp incident never happened.

Even at age 14, when Humbert describes her as an "aging mistress" losing her beauty because she's becoming so womanly, she is 5 feet tall and 90 lbs. That's similar to the size I was at her age, and I used to be so embarrassed in the locker room because I wasn't "developed" looking.

So how did we get here? With these crazy book covers, some of them of ADULT women? Or movie-tie in covers with Sue Lyon or Dominique Swain, both actresses who were 15 when they played her character? I think it's because the true nature of the book makes people uncomfortable. They'd rather imagine her as Britney Spears circa "...Baby One More Time." Which completely diminishes the story and the entire point Nabokov was making when he wrote it. I would be pissed if I were the author, and for a while he was.

Finally, he just gave up.

This book was very cool, aside from the prologue from Mary Gaitskill talking about tortured Humbert and the nature of love. She's so extra.

There was one chapter in particular that was all about Nabokov's thoughts on images. He says:

"Yes, I write in three languages, but I think in images."

"I never start from an idea, but always from an image... I then endeavor to reproduce exactly all that I saw in a flash... It is a long and difficult work."

"I'm a slave to image."

He had definite ideas about what he wanted on the cover of his book. He wrote a detailed request to his publisher. When he couldn't find an artist through them, he went looking for one. He insisted that it were better to have a plain cover with typography and no images than an inaccurate one. He could tell that most artists who illustrated a cover for *Lolita* hadn't ever read it, or even been given an adequate blurb about it.

To my knowledge, no one has ever attempted in all these years to create the cover Nabokov originally asked for.

This book was filled with the covers that have adorned the book throughout 60 years and across countries, as well as many that people created for the "project" that was this book. It was very interesting to see. I enjoyed most of the accompanying text as well.

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### **Brent Legault says**

Amazing illustrations but the essays are hit and miss. Plus, they are full of repetitions because they were collected, I presume, rather than written with this publication in mind. And so, we get the same biographical and plot summaries over and over again.

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### **Jennifer says**

Essays can get a tad repetitive, but nice to see the different book covers from different designers and countries.

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### **Fraser Kinnear says**

A pretty hit-or-miss collection of essays. I enjoyed the few that were purely about book cover design. In particular, the essay discussing paratext (the blurbs on book covers) was fascinating.

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## Nikki says

Ignore the words, ogle the covers.

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## kye says

You can see many of the covers here: <http://flavorwire.com/267127/15-wonde...>

This one's my favorite. <http://flavorwire.com/267127/15-wonde...>

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## Théo says

*Lolita* is one of my favourite books (if not my favourite one). Even though I am not the kind of person who usually read books many times, I have read it around 5 times now. *Lolita: The Story of a Cover Girl* is about the many covers that were used for this novel since its first publication in 1955, and how many of them portray the character Dolores Haze in an oversexualized way that really doesn't fit with the message of Nabokov's book ; a lot of people read the book as if it was supposed to be a love story or an erotic story, and many covers used for this novel really don't help.

This book was a really interesting read, and I highly recommend it to people who loved *Lolita* as much as I did.

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## Liz Murray says

An unsettling account of the cultural appropriation of *Lolita* through art and design. The powerless child is portrayed almost exclusively as a provocateur in heart-shaped sunglasses. The kidnap and horrific abuse of a twelve year old girl is simply ignored in the lollipops, short skirts and knowing smiles of a *Lolita* who appears again and again on book covers, fashion magazines and perfume ads but not once - not once - in the pages of Nabokov's haunting narrative.

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## Steve says

Describing a book of pictures to people who can't see them is somewhat silly. *Lolita: The Story of a Cover Girl: Vladimir Nabokov's Novel in Art and Design* is not the first book consisting primarily of images that I have tried to review, but it might be the trickiest.

First of all, the reader needs to know what *Lolita* is like. It is a novel that presents itself as a statement by a convicted murderer about what led to his crime. Perhaps the reader should know first that the killing, while obviously an illegal act, is not the most despicable crime that the narrator commits. And that leads us to

Dolores Haze, the twelve year old girl to whom the narrator refers as "Lolita."

It would almost be pointless to try to give a brief summation of *Lolita*; it is much too complex. I would guess that anyone interested enough to read about book covers for this extraordinary work is probably already familiar with the book. I will just say that the principal relationship in the story is between the narrator, who has chosen to use the name "Humbert Humbert" for himself in this chronicle of his life, and Dolores Haze. Humbert is a good-looking European immigrant in his mid-thirties. Dolores is, as stated, a twelve year old, who lives with her widowed mother. Humbert and Dolores's mother marry. Humbert feels no affection for his new wife; what he does feel is lust for his wife's daughter. Dolores's mother dies, and Humbert and Dolores live together, traveling much of the time. They (very) quickly become "lovers," or, at least, sexual partners. Humbert does this because he is obsessed and because he can; Dolores - Lolita - does this because she sees no other choice.

The book is greatly concerned with sex but it is not at all salacious. Much of it is very funny, but I would not consider it a comic novel. So what should be on the cover?

The reader should know what Nabokov said about his preference for a cover:

*I want pure colours, melting clouds, accurately drawn details, a sunburst above a receding road with the light reflected in furrows and ruts, after rain. And no girls. If we cannot find that kind of artistic and virile painting, let us settle for an immaculate white jacket (rough texture paper instead of the usual glossy kind), with LOLITA in bold black lettering.*

And in another quote from Nabokov:

*There is one subject which I am emphatically opposed to: any kind of representation of a little girl.*

This book has a section of eighty proposed covers for *Lolita*, designed by "a selection of international designers, including in-house designers at publishing houses and freelance book designers, as well as those for whom designing book covers is a rarity."

Some of these seem to me to be awful. One by **Vivienne Flesher and Ward Schumaker** and another by **Graham Wood** look belligerently ugly. Some appear to indicate that the book is straight-up comedy; that would include the submissions from **Johanna Drucker**, **Diane Shaw**, and (especially) **Chip Wasserman**. One, by **Sam Weber**, has a picture of a Humbertish man, eyes closed in ecstasy or exhaustion.

Too many of them perform typographical stunts with the title:

**Geetika Alok**

almost unreadable with a stylized LO over another stylized L and then three peculiar designs that, if the reader already knows the book title, look vaguely like ITA

**Michael Bierut**

L♥?

LI

TA

## **Aliza Dzik**

a giant, white on black

LO

## **Lauren Harden and Seth Ferris**

lo??li??ta

## **Daniel Justi**

pictures used in place of letters, *e. g.*, a flower for "O" and a lipstick tube for "I"

## **Marina Mills Kitchen**

"Lo" in upper left corner printed going up, "Li" in middle right, "Ta" in lower left corner printed going down

and similar shenanigans by **Sueh Li Tan**, **Catherine Nippe** (truly unreadable), **Andy Pressman** (a formless blur), **Tanya Rubbak** (unreadable without prior knowledge - if at all), **Paula Scher**, **Isaac Tobin**, **Anne Ulku**, and **Henry Sene Yee**. As far as I can tell, the covers by **Kate Gibb** and **Jen Wang** are determined not to let readers have any idea what the book title is.

The ones I actually like are:

## **Mark Abrams**

Exactly what Nabokov said he didn't want. A young girl in a bikini, showing the right half of her body from just below her shoulder to slightly above her knee. She is holding a large beach ball, pink with white polka dots. The name of the book is in script written across the ball. Nabokov's name is in block letters of different colors under the ball. The picture is entirely in Benday dots, like a comic strip or a Roy Lichtenstein painting. Yes, it's a girl in a bathing suit, but not remotely erotic.

## **Margot Harrington**

The top of the cover says VLADIMIR NABOKOV in a simple font. The picture below shows a red balloon escaping from a manicured, young-appearing female hand, with nails that are also red. The balloon has the book title on it in white. The consonants are all in elongated capital letters; the vowels are in extremely elongated non-capital letters, the same size as the consonants. Little pieces of red are flaking off from the balloon. The background color is gray. This obviously represents a loss of innocence.

## **Oliver Munday**

This is mostly the brown of a darker than usual paper bag. I would definitely want that changed to a different color. The name of the book is in the upper left, the name of the author is in the lower right. The letters are not in a straight line. I would change that as well.

What I do like is the picture. It shows a man facing to the left, but the "man" appears to be a sort of forest. I see the body as being made up of trees, although I am by no means certain that is what is intended. Just

under the man's right shoulder, there is the small figure of a girl in a pure white silhouette, looking into the distance. I think this captures the domination of Humbert over Lolita and her desire to get away.

## Transfer Studios

The top third or so of the cover is white. At the bottom of the white space, it says VLADIMIR NABOKOV in black letters in a simple font. The rest of the cover is mostly a light gray. At the bottom of the cover is printed LOLITA in a larger and wider font. The letters are a sort of purple. The "O" has been replaced with a reddish lollipop, with the lollipop stick in front of the second "L" in the title. There is a small pool of something pink under the lollipop, as if part of the lollipop had been wet.

For some reason, I find this quite affectingly sad. The lollipop obviously represents Lolita herself and the pink liquid would, I suppose, be tears.

Had I world enough and time (or if I thought anybody would be likely to read this), I would like to discuss each cover design in detail, but I will just include one more. **Agata Jakubowska** has a prospective cover with a mustardy green background. Throughout the background, there are small designs of pink pistols; this all looks rather like wallpaper. The central image is a large pink waterpistol, which has squirted out a large quantity of what is obviously meant to be semen. The title and author of the book are printed in the semen.

I am just amused to think that if this cover had been used, probably not a lot of people would want to be seen reading this on the subway.

Most of the book is not about these eighty cover designs, which have never been and likely will never be used on a real book. The book also shows about 65 covers that have actually been used on different editions. Many of the ones that have been used ignore Nabokov's "no girls" instruction. In fact, one of the pictures shown in this book is the back cover of a Russian paperback edition; I think that it is unquestionably an example of child pornography. It is a photograph of a young, very pretty blonde girl, naked to at least well below her navel, which is where the picture is cut off.

There is a fair amount of text in the book. Since it was written by several different people, there is considerable duplication. There is also at least one example of extreme *non*-duplication. There is a 1957 Swedish edition that shows a seated young girl wearing a red dress and green shoes. She looks to me close to the correct age to be Lolita. The background of the picture is darkish brown.

Dieter E. Zimmer says:

*Like it or not, each of them makes the claim to be the Lolita of the novel, whether it's the 1957 Swedish edition's childish form lumbering cheerlessly in chocolate sauce (Nabokov had nothing against the book cover, but twice he took legal action because of the errors in translation and the outrageous omissions)*

Can one "lumber" sitting down? I don't think so.

Duncan White says of the same edition:

*Nabokov expressed his horror at the "horrible young whore" on the cover of the Swedish edition.*

So this sweet girl is really a horrible young whore lumbering (seated) through chocolate sauce. I suppose that the chocolate sauce might conceivably stimulate interest in her whoring. Would she actually be working as a



street-lumberer rather than a street-walker? (The girl in the picture looks to me not remotely like a whore. I wonder if Duncan White might be discussing the wrong book cover.)

A sizeable number of the covers shown use images that are taken from other sources. Several of them are from the two films that have been made of *Lolita*. Actually only one cover shown has an image of Sue Lyon, playing Lolita in the 1962 film, but there are half a dozen showing Dominique Swain as Lolita and Jeremy Irons as Humbert from the 1997 film. Some of the cover pictures are reproductions of paintings, two very different images by Balthus, one from Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus*, one from Klimt, and several different Russian editions using variations of an 1876 painting titled *In Bed* showing a young girl sleeping, painted by Federico Zandomenighi.

One of the other covers is from a Norwegian edition "which depicted Lolita as a duckling peeping out of a keyhole." One from Turkey shows a very happy-looking couple, both appearing to be adults, embracing. One of the Russian editions shows what Yuri Leving, author of the section about Russian publications of *Lolita*, describes as "a teenage school girl with typical Slavic facial features and dressed up as a cheap harlot." (She does look Slavic to me and she is lying on a bed - alone - and smiling. However, she is appropriately clad. I'm not familiar with the way cheap harlots dress in Russia, but I would expect something more provocative. Leving refers to a girl on another cover as having her appearance of "innocence...undermined...by the bold color of the girl's lipstick and her décolleté dress." Her lipstick as shown here is a very pale pink. The top she is wearing, which may be part of a dress, does have a vee neck, but it does not go down deeply enough to show even the slightest amount of cleavage. *Honi soit qui mal y pense*, Mr. Leving.)

Somewhat oddly, I think, none of the covers shown demonstrate any desire to follow Nabokov's wishes to have "pure colours, melting clouds, accurately drawn details, a sunburst above a receding road with the light reflected in furrows and ruts, after rain." My surmise is that publishers believe that a cover with an attractive young (but not *too* young) girl will sell more books than a painting of sunlight on muddy ruts.

I found this book visually fascinating. I have never given a lot of thought to the reasons for the designs of book covers but that may change now.

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### **mimo says**

A well-rounded collection of essays, and certainly eye-opening in the contexts it provides. I found the preface by Mary Gaitskill and Duncan White's chapter particularly enjoyable, as well as the gallery of 80 new cover designs naturally.

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### **Holly Dunn says**

Sadly I couldn't fit this into my suitcase. It's an amazing book though, and I plan on finishing the rest of the essays when I next return to New Zealand.

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### **Savanah says**

Obviously when i figured out i wanted to write my english research paper on the differing of interpretations

of *Lolita*, i had to go in search of the main books that helped show these distinct variance of opinions. this book is good for that, it's good to critically see where everything went wrong and where things went right

that being said, obviously i skipped through some stuff that was filler and wasn't imperative for me to read. what this book is great at showing is all the covers and let me tell you, the amount of fucked up *Lolita* covers out there is infinite. i found myself appreciating a small few, ones that were basically very plain and focused on typography, or, i quite enjoy anything with the butterflies even tho vlad buddy well, he didn't. (but that's a different story)

learned a lot, disagreed with a lot, agreed with a lot. yeah.

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## Mark says

When an acquaintance, whom I wouldn't consider a close friend, asks me about my favorite novels, I never mention *Lolita*. The reputation of this novel is too fraught with what those who haven't read it might infer about a professed fan of the book. *Lolita*'s notoriety is somewhat unique; unlike the reputation of, say, Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer*, D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, or even Pauline Réage's *The Story of O*, *Lolita* sparks controversy not just because it has sex in it, but because it describes sex between a grown man and a twelve-year-old girl who consents to this abuse only in the most liberal interpretation of the word. To say I love a book narrated by a pedophile and sexual predator isn't something I'd share with a colleague I barely know who sits in the office down the hall from me at work. And I work for a scholarly-book publisher.

If *Lolita* weren't so well-known, I believe I'd be much more inclined to mention it, because in that situation someone who hadn't read it would be more likely not to have heard of it, in which case I could craft that person's initial understanding of what the book is about. But even people who haven't read *Lolita* have usually heard of it, and their conception of the book has usually been dictated by the image of a young Sue Lyon gazing suggestively over a pair of heart-shaped sunglasses with a lollipop entering her mouth. This image, created by MGM's marketing department in support of Stanley Kubrick's 1962 film version of the novel, is extremely provocative and clearly intended to titillate the viewer. The problem is that this image has no bearing on the contents of the book. Never mind that Sue Lyon looks nothing like the *Lolita* described (albeit vaguely) in Nabokov's prose; *Lolita* also doesn't wear heart-shaped sunglasses, and never sucks on a lollipop. More importantly, she is not an adolescent seductress, but rather a twelve-year-old girl trapped in an abusive relationship with her brand-new stepfather, who uses his intellect to bully her into their sexual encounters.

This is the crux of the book's "image problem," which *Lolita: The Story of a Cover Girl* explores: how do you create a cover image for *Lolita* that adequately conveys the book's subject matter without falling into the pitfall that, frankly, most of the book's many covers have fallen into over the last sixty years (i.e., depicting *Lolita* as a seductress, or even just as an object of desire, rather than as the victim she actually is)? The book collects several essays (a few written specifically for it, the rest previously published) and the "best" of several *Lolita* cover designs commissioned by the book's editors (which previously appeared online).

The cover designs are hit and miss. I really like a dozen or so, and appreciate another dozen; the rest are not as inspired as I'd hoped for, considering that they're not hindered, as most actual cover designs are, by a marketing department's requirements for how to most effectively sell a book to its prospective readers. But still, there are quite a few ingenious proposals contained here that are worth pondering.

The essays are, in some ways, more effective. Although they don't all discuss *Lolita's* "image problem" directly (and there's some repetition among them), they do discuss the disconnect between prose and image, between the marketing of a work of art and the work of art itself. When I bought this book, I hadn't expected to read it from cover to cover, but that's exactly what I did. I enjoyed it quite a bit and, furthermore, it's inspired me to read *Lolita* again (for what will be my fourth time).

Interestingly enough, the cover on my copy of *Lolita*, designed by Marc J. Cohen for Vintage in 1989, is not discussed in the book. Probably because it's ugly as hell in the way that so many covers designed in the '80s were. It matches all the other covers Cohen designed for Nabokov's books, which were the standard Vintage editions until they were all (excepting *Lolita*) redesigned using a shadowbox theme in 2009. Cohen's version of *Lolita* features a faux-leather background in tan and gray, with Nabokov's name hugging the upper left corner of the cover, the book's title in a handwritten-looking purple font, and a somewhat muddy photo of a girl in a tube top holding a bicycle in front of her. Along the edge of the photo is that ridiculous blurb from *Vanity Fair*: "The only convincing love story of our century." The cover is decidedly unsexy, but that's pretty much all it gets right. At least I don't have to be too embarrassed when I carry it around with me in public.

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### **Kenickie says**

Very interesting! As someone who will pay extra for a cover that isn't garbage, and Nabokov's notorious distaste for the trashy harlot covers that ended up splashed all over his book, it was refreshing to read the history and page through alternative designs which honestly, seems like one of the hardest books to design for. Can you imagine? What a job. But it's for design people or Nabokovists.

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### **Kolleen says**

A must have for *Lolita*/ Nabokov fans.

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