

John Bertram

LINGERIE, LOLLIPOPS, LIPSTICKS:  
INVENTING THE PERFECT  
*LOLITA* COVER

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Last summer I discovered *Covering Lolita*, Dieter Zimmer's fascinating online collection of *Lolita* book covers, 154 of them in all, spanning 54 years and a few dozen countries. It was intriguing to see them arrayed together, and surprising how few seemed up to the task of communicating anything approaching the depth and complexity of the novel which overflows with powerful, finely-wrought imagery.

Judged purely graphically, of course, many, many are extraordinary, representing a wonderful range of styles and techniques. But, on the other hand, in the context of Nabokov's masterful work, most seemed slightly absurd, banal, and wildly inaccurate, or, in rare cases, a laughable combination of all three. Among them are, as is to be expected, I suppose, images of young girls in sexually-ambiguous (and not so ambiguous) poses by Balthus and others, not to mention a parade of fine- and pulp-art maidens drafted to portray Lolita. And, of course, there is the panoply of inevitable schoolgirl tropes: lollipops, short skirts, saddle shoes and Mary Janes and short white socks. And, of course, the frequently too old Lolitas, the occasional and surprising too young Lolitas, the now iconic film stills of Sue Lyon and the not-so-iconic stills of Dominique Swain and Jeremy Irons

(alas, I can find no James Mason). There exist the synecdoche of body parts (lips, legs, and breasts), the author's signature butterflies, and a scattering of serious and quizzical images of Nabokov himself. Finally, amidst all of this spins an entire universe of typefaces, which ultimately began to speak more to me of the poignancy and delicacy and richness of the novel than the images themselves. I was left pondering whether my expectations were appropriate and if I was asking more from a book cover than it could reasonably deliver.

It made me wonder what would comprise a successful cover of the novel. For instance, if it were to portray Lolita herself, I'd mandate that it should avoid that egregious stereotype existing in the popular consciousness: the precocious, almost predatory, seductress, a young *femme fatale*, a perverse (and pervert's) fantasy. Surely this distortion is the cardinal sin of all portrayals. Should it then show her as she in 'reality' probably is, a rather ordinary twelve-year-old girl (but what would that mean since, after all, we know so little about Lolita aside from the fact that she cries herself to sleep every night)? Or shall it be the objectified and sanctified nymphet existing in the imagination of Humbert Humbert, our notoriously unreliable narrator? From a psychological point of view Lolita remains opaque (Humbert having no interest in the personality of the average pre-teen girl, aside from whatever will serve his manipulation of her), so perhaps it is appropriate that the cover not contain an image of Lolita at all. Better that Lolita is spared the indignity of being objectified all over again!

Then there is Humbert: Humbert, in whose mind we take up residence for the duration of the novel; Humbert, by whose charm we are persuaded; Humbert, in whose narcissism we become complicit. One can argue that he is the novel's true subject.

Beyond Lolita or Humbert there is so much in the novel to explore graphically: its brutality and humor, the beauty of its prose, the cleverness of its wordplay.

Ultimately, my ruminations on how best to represent graphically a profound novel with such a wealth of meaning, spurred me to inaugurate and finance a *Lolita* cover design competition. Fortunately, I knew Max Magee from The Millions, the well-respected, and well-visited literary blog whose posts about the competition rippled and eddied through cyberspace. I also posted information on a website that compiles graphic design competitions that I think was responsible for the large international turnout. In addition, the social networking site Facebook provided another avenue for exposure.

In all, 105 entrants from 34 countries submitted a total of 155 entries (multiple entries being allowed). After the US and the UK, Poland and India had the most submissions with five each, but dozens of countries were represented, notably nearly every country in Eastern Europe.

Judging the submissions was far more complex than I had expected. I am not a graphic designer, so my opinions on book cover design are those of an amateur. Nor, as I am sure it's clear, am I an academic. Trained and practicing as an architect, I am a dilettante when it comes to the complexities of designing, or for that matter, dissecting a book. This project was for me a diversion, an exercise for which my sole qualification has been that of a student perpetually under the spell of a cruel and captivating and gorgeous book.

The first cut was the easiest. My own prejudices lean towards simple, elegant, graphically-clear designs and typefaces and, in judging the submissions I also tended to avoid lingerie, lollipops, roses, hearts, lipstick prints, butterflies, heart shaped sunglasses, and overtly sexual poses (as well as the unexpectedly recurring minor themes of swings and Rorschach blots) all of which by now have been indelibly linked to the cultural concept "Lolita" and which seemed opposed to a close reading of the novel. And, as is probably the case with all representative art, there was a conflict in many of the submissions between the image and the meaning: some covers were graphically excellent but less redolent of meaning, and vice versa, and all gradations in between. From 155 I narrowed my selection to fifteen or so covers, from which I ultimately chose four; all conceptually excellent and each quite different, and any of which, I am quick to add, could have been the first place winner.

After no small amount of agonizing, I awarded the first prize to Lyuba Haleva of Bulgaria, whose wonderfully lyrical submission, arguably anachronistic in its imagery and typeface, perfectly communicates the novel's poetry and Humbert's high-minded yet deluded pursuit of fantasy and art through the image of Lolita (and perhaps her 'twin' Annabel?) as Humbert's wings. Leland de la Durantaye's elegant thesis *Style is Matter* makes the point eloquently and incisively:

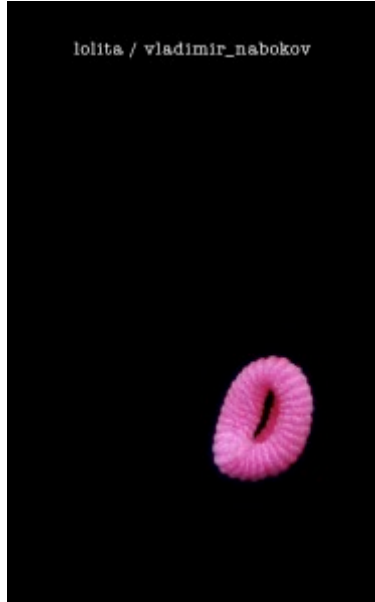


Lyuba Haleva (Bulgaria)

*“Entranced by his senses and pursuing his image of Lolita as if she were an inspiring image of art, Humbert fails to see that ‘there was in her a garden and a twilight, and a place gate.’ These ‘dim and adorable regions’ are forbidden to him because of the intensity and the single-mindedness with which he occludes them, with which he concentrates on ‘another Lolita,’ an ‘image’ created in his sensual haze that his desperation and desire lead him to call ‘more real’ than the little girl in his charge. In this, Nabokov has Humbert fail to observe the line that divides art from life – that same line that Nabokov’s compatriot Khodasevich identified decades before Lolita as lying at the heart of the burgeoning writer’s aesthetics.*

*In works early and late – and nowhere more spectacularly than Lolita – Nabokov asked how the artist was to live in the world, how to balance fierce independence of vision with the necessity of seeing the world from the standpoint of others. This is a question of judgment: the question of how to balance the aesthetic with the ethical, the disinterested remove of aesthetic judgment with the interested proximity of moral judgment.”*

Since I felt this was an important aspect of the novel, it ultimately edged out others that leaned towards a darker reading.



Aleksander Bak (Poland)

Aleksander Bak of Poland submitted a reductive exercise that succeeds in being sad, lurid, and funny. The lone unmoored pink scrunchy bobbing against a black background is a potent *memento mori* symbolizing Humbert's loss of Lolita, Lolita's loss of her childhood and the tragedy of the novel in general. As a banal hair accessory it's a stand-in for the everyday Dolores Haze, preoccupied with the quotidian interests of her young life of which, because of Humbert's interminable *derive*, she is deprived. Then, of course, there is the perhaps not completely inevitable suggestion of a vulva. All in all, the tension between the base and the sublime readings is delightful and the composition is wonderful.



Derek McCalla (USA)

Derek McCalla's radical image is shocking in a totally different and novel way. I see it as witness to Humbert's unconscionable destruction of Lolita through his deluded and narcissistic acts of manipulation, but it also represents the violent deaths of most of the main characters. Interestingly, Chris Pritchett, McCalla's instructor at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University used this contest as an exercise for his screen printing class (offered through the university's architecture department and populated by first-year through fifth-year architecture students). When I asked Pritchett why he had chosen to use this as an assignment, he responded:

*"I felt this was a good project for architecture students because as a graphic exercise they are forced to convey a wide range of emotion through one image."*



Egor Krasnoperov (Russia)

Egor Krasnoperov, from Russia, cleverly and with a liberal dose of humor gives us a triple-entendre. First of course, the lollipop theme is present in all its banality, but rendered here beautifully and naively; then the circle that censors Lolita's pudendum. (the three simple lines representing her crotch), and, finally, the hypnotic vortex centering on Lolita's sexuality into which Humbert has fallen.

I was also interested in another perspective, particularly one with a professional imprimatur. I was extremely fortunate to enlist John Gall, vice president and art director at Vintage/Anchor Books and designer of the latest cover of *Lolita*. His cover has an interesting story of its own, having been composed initially with the image of Lolita's lips vertical instead of horizontal.



John Gall (USA)

As Gall mentioned in an interview:

*“After retrenching I came up with one of my favorite covers of all time. A very simple variation on a standard Lolita theme yet with a very subversive twist. I was surprised how well it went over, but after a day or so everyone started to get a little queasy looking at it (myself included). So the twist was taken out and we have what the New York Post said was the ‘raciest cover yet’ for Lolita. If they only knew.”*

Gall kindly agreed to review the submissions. In the process he made a point a few times of stressing the difficulty of the task:

*“This is a tough assignment. So many clichéd images to either avoid or make new. Not an easy task. I teach a cover design class and wouldn’t give this as an assignment in a million years!”*





Suzene Ang (Singapore)

His favorite is by Suzene Ang of Singapore, a clever cover that takes the schoolgirl notion but abstracts it into geometric shapes.

*"It takes a second before you see what is going on. It's abstract enough to keep it metaphorical, yet literal enough to imply a sense of story. I love the tease of having the type run up the leg. Elegant, with a sense of humor."*

He also liked the Aleksander Bak cover:

*"For second place I like the simplicity of the hair scrunchy design. Nice double entendre. I worry though, that it might be too much of a contemporary reference."*

Of the remainder of submissions there are several others that are worth mentioning here. Having revisited all of the submissions for this article, I find that different covers resonate with me now. Interestingly, the four that I was drawn to all address Lolita's anonymity.

I particularly like this one from Federico Diaz Mastellone that suggests Humbert's projection of his fantasies onto Lolita and behind which an ordinary girl, who yearns for an ordinary life, is obscured and appears almost in the process of being obliterated.



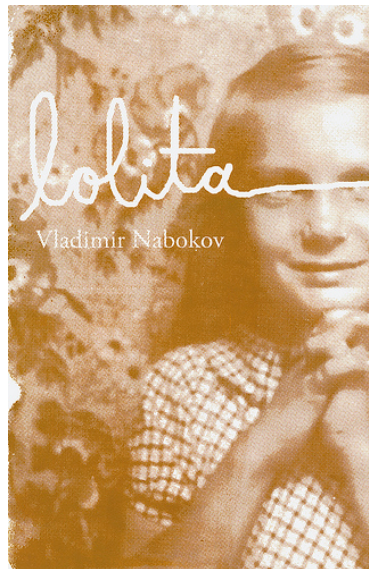
Federico Diaz Mastellone (Argentina)

Jihee Yoon suggests that Humbert's single mindedness somehow effaces him as well as Lolita. The lack of connection between Humbert's headless and armless trunk upon which a transparent image of Lolita's legs are superimposed, suggests the complete lack of connection between the two. The wonderful ambiguity of the composition seems to embrace the poetry of the novel.



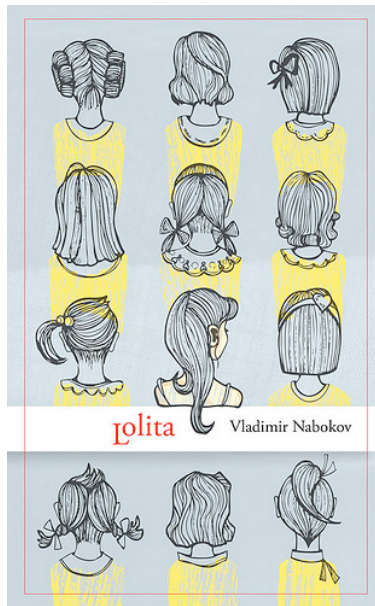
Jihee Yoon (USA)

Several covers noted the victimization of Lolita, and this disturbing powerful cover by Katie DeMoss stood out. In the little girl's forced fixed smile and clasped hands one reads a pleading, cringing fear that reinforces the lopsided arrangement of power between Lolita and abuser. Her eyes, obscured by the text, suggest the censoring of victims of abuse and the severely cropped, out of context, sepia image reads like photographic evidence of a crime.



Katie DeMoss (USA)

Lastly, Justin Chen's whimsical cover illustrates Humbert's description of picking the nymphet from a group of schoolgirls. Amidst the anonymity of the primly-dressed girls whose identity lies only in the way they wear their hair, Lolita, with her hair down and apparently in some state of undress, perhaps in the process of turning toward Humbert (or the viewer) offers the slightest glimpse of her face. The tragedy of the novel is that this is really all we get to see of Lolita and she remains fully three-quarters anonymous.



Justin Chen (Canada)