I would like to start this foreword about the importance of the volume in front of you with a short account of my own personal experience of annually teaching Nabokov to 50–60 undergraduates at the University of Washington. Until recently, the course always featured *Lolita*, but then I caught myself increasingly wanting to skip it and instead teach thematic courses—such as “Nabokov and the Academic Novel” or “Nabokov and the Art of Self-Translation”—which for the past two years I have indeed been doing. This is because I have been finding it more and more challenging, given my own unease with some aspects of the novel, to respond to my students’ collective discomfort with *Lolita* (which, they admit, is brilliant) because Nabokov often makes them sympathize with a pedophile and a rapist. Their heightened concern is being expressed at a time when we, as a society, are finally discussing openly the horror of sexual abuse, which some of my students have experienced firsthand. Another recently published book, *Teaching Nabokov’s Lolita in the #MeToo Era*, edited by Elena Rakhimova-Sommers, directly addresses this thorny issue of teaching Nabokov’s most famous novel, but in my experience students’ discomfort with what they perceive as Nabokov’s questionable judgment is actually not limited to *Lolita* but extends to many of his other works. And this is where this volume—which is devoted to how to teach all of Nabokov, not just *Lolita*, to students today—becomes immensely helpful in addressing this particular pedagogical challenge. It presents a remarkable balance between confronting the negatives and accentuating the positives.

Let’s start with the negatives. Our students are significantly different from those of previous generations, including my own. My cohort of literary
scholars was often educated by American professors who espoused New Criticism, where literary and artistic values were all that mattered while cultural, social, and historical contexts were often beside the point. As Jane Gallop noted in the early 1980s, when I was still in graduate school, New Criticism was “appreciative, even worshipful” of the literary text through close and meticulous readings.² Having come as a young person from the Soviet Union, where the ugly official doctrine of Socialist Realism prescribed the opposite, and where the subversively nonpolitical Russian Formalism—which in many ways had helped to shape New Criticism—was virtually banned, I had no trouble eagerly embracing my professors’ approach. And since Nabokov himself maintained that “A work of art has no importance whatever to society...no social purpose, no moral message...no general ideas to exploit”³ as well as demanded—in his own lectures to Cornell students—very close (re)reading of texts, he and New Criticism seemed to be a match made in literary heaven.

Most of my current students, however, do not accept that such a purely aesthetic stand is either realistic or desirable in an artist, a critic, or a teacher. They live in a much more socially, culturally, and ethnically diverse environment than Nabokov and his characters inhabited, an environment where perceived prejudices against certain groups and segments of the population are, overall, much less tolerated than before. And let us face it, Nabokov had not only his share of strong opinions, he also had his share of strong prejudices, among them what my students perceive as obvious sexism, discernable racism, and unmistakable homophobia.

My students are of course not alone in seeing Nabokov as not being exactly complimentary to women’s intellectual abilities and moral character. There are, as we all know, admirable women in Nabokov’s works but, more often than not, they are objects of the protagonist’s past loves, thus living more in his memory than in real life. Or they are smart and capable but just enough to be good helpmates (and typists) for extraordinary men, not unlike Nabokov’s own wife, Véra. And even those “good women” are greatly outnumbered by rather despicable female creatures who are devious, disloyal and, often, plain evil. This regrettable tendency on Nabokov’s part is more or less an accepted notion among literary critics and his fellow writers, so the question that faces them is usually not whether this prejudice exists but how to treat it. Some pull no punches. Thus Edna O’Brien, upon receiving the 2018 PEN Award for achievement in international literature—an award that is actually named
after Nabokov—publicly regretted that “Mr Nabokov, genius that he was, was quite scathing of women.”4 Most Nabokov scholars, however, while avoiding directly praising his views on women or distorting them to make them sound better, tend instead to be very matter-of-fact about it, as Brian Boyd appears to be when he comments that Nabokov was “more comfortable with a woman as muse than a woman as writer.”5 The usual retort of many forgiving critics is that those were different times, and any attempt to blame authors for not having more progressive views than the majority of their contemporaries is a “woke” exercise in “cancel culture.”6

And, yes, the times were different indeed. After the war, when Nabokov was teaching first at Wellesley, the women’s college which he called, in a rather condescending manner, “Looks and Books,”7 and then at Cornell, privileged young women who attended colleges were still assumed to be doing it mostly in order to net a suitable husband. Once they did supposedly accomplish this purpose, they were instructed to heed the advice of popular psychologists who warned female readers—based, supposedly, on “scientific surveys”—that “the women who earned enough to be financially independent of their husbands were not as happy as those more dependent on their husband’s money” and that if a wife “does not expect her husband to be the head of the household,” she is “likely a dominating person,” which was, apparently, one of the worst things a woman could be.8

In Lolita Nabokov, through Humbert, made fun of such how-to manuals when it came to parental skills in handling daughters’ boyfriends (“[S]top making the boys feel she’s the daughter of an old ogre”), and yet, Nabokov, even in his late interviews, appeared to cling to at least some of the by then largely outdated notions of women’s roles and abilities. “Bossy women strike him as irresistibly comic,” one of his interviewers, Penelope Gilliatt, wrote in 1966.10 The same year Nabokov declared to another interviewer, Alberto Ongaro, that he did “not believe the patriarchal structure of society has prevented women from developing in their own way...the reality is that women are biologically weaker than men.”11 A possible result of these beliefs is that Nabokov’s exploration of women as multidimensional characters is indeed much weaker than that of men. As Rakhimova-Somers accurately states in Nabokov’s Women: The Silent Sisterhood of Textual Nomads, “The readers of the Nabokovian woman find themselves on a narratorial diet because entry into her emotional and physical ‘I’ is rarely granted and the nuances of her pain or pleasure are rarely discussed.”12
But was he also a racist? This is a much more ambiguous territory. Upon arriving to the United States Nabokov was confronted by the most naked racism, which he, to his credit, immediately and vehemently rejected. In 1942, in a letter to Véra from South Carolina, where he was invited to give a lecture, Nabokov noted that the locals called their Black servants “darkies.” It was, he told his Jewish wife, “an expression that jars me, reminding me distantly of the patriarchal ‘Zhidok’ [Yid] of western Russian landowners.”

And yet he himself was not always above displaying more muted shades of this particular bias. In the 1950s and 1960s, as Nabokov was writing his three major American novels, *Lolita*, *Pnin*, and *Pale Fire*, he was inevitably thrust into heated and fluid cultural debates as to what the Black American population should call themselves. By that time the preferred term had become “colored,” but Nabokov did not like it. He wanted them to be called “Negroes” instead. Why he felt this way is not totally clear, but we should probably pay attention to Kinbote, as unreliable as he may be, when, in *Pale Fire*, he tells us that Shade, “as a man of letters,” objected to “colored” because it was “artistically misleading” and imprecise. It is also possible, of course, that to his ear “colored” did not sound that different from “darkies,” since the term was likewise based on the pigment of one’s skin. Consequently, in Nabokov’s fiction, Black characters are, in fact, called “Negroes” much more often than “colored.”

Kinbote further informs us that Shade did not appreciate that some Whites eagerly accepted the new term: “Many competent Negroes... considered it to be the only dignified word, emotionally neutral and ethically inoffensive: their endorsement obliged decent non-Negroes to follow their lead...the genteel adore endorsements.” While there is nothing wrong, of course, in Nabokov (and Shade) having his personal preferences, there is something quite condescending in claiming, as an outsider, that you know better what members of the Black community should call themselves.

Nabokov’s 1942 comparison in a letter to Véra of the treatment of Black servants in the South and Jews in Russia comes to mind again with the question of just how far this parallel really went for him. We all know of course that by the time the Nabokovs arrived in the United States, the country had likewise witnessed fierce debates within American Jewish circles as to what they should call themselves—namely, “Jews,” “Hebrews,” or “Israelites.” It was in many ways as thorny and vigorously debated an issue as that faced by the Black community. In one example from the early 1950s, as Nabokov was working on his early American novels, a prominent Jewish historian
sternly warned his co-religionists in the pages of the *Jewish Quarterly Review* not to be flippant about the name change: “‘What’s in a name?’ asked Juliet in Shakespeare’s play. By this was meant that a name has no particular significance. This may apply to the name of an individual, but not to that of a nation....Such changes cannot be ascribed merely to chance or caprice. A nation must have a historical reason for changing its name.”

Shade does have a preference in regard to Jews as well, but it is a rather minor one that involves using a noun rather than an adjective. Thus in the same annotation to Shade’s poem in *Pale Fire*, Kinbote reveals that Shade prefers “is a Jew” to “is Jewish” and complains that “Left-Wingers” unjustifiably lump “two historical hells: diabolical persecution and the barbarous traditions of slavery,” while Shade himself believes that the two are vastly different. For that reason alone, it is virtually impossible to imagine him, and through him Nabokov, insisting on—and using—“Israelites” or “Hebrews,” which by then were deemed by many to be offensive to the population involved. It is also highly unlikely that either Shade or Nabokov would draw a distinction between “competent” Jews and the rest, thus implying that it was such a stand-alone group because most were not competent enough.

Nabokov, regretfully, also on occasion used directly racist language and images to describe Black characters, as when, in *Lolita*, Humbert Humbert refers to the old bellboy—who is first described as a “hunchbacked and hoary Negro in a uniform of sorts”—twice as “Uncle Tom” and once as “crayfish Tom.” We could of course choose to attribute this cultural insult solely to Humbert but that would probably be a bit too generous, even if convenient for reminding, and therefore assuring, one’s shocked students that Humbert is, after all, an unreliable narrator.

And then there are his fictional homosexuals. As Lev Grossman points out in his 2000 *Salon* article about Sergey (“The Gay Nabokov”), “Nabokov was the archenemy of cliché, a writer passionately committed to overturning tired literary conventions through careful observation of the real world, but his homosexual characters are as a rule egregiously stereotyped.”

“Egregiously” is, unfortunately, not an exaggeration. While reading *Mary*, many of my students truly bristle at Nabokov’s contemptuous depiction of giggling, cohabiting, and, therefore, obviously gay ballet dancers. Their disappointment becomes even more acute when they learn that Nabokov’s own brother, who perished in a German concentration camp, as well as his two uncles, on maternal and paternal sides, were likewise homosexuals. Here,
too, I am of course always keenly aware of how personal and painful such grotesquely stereotypical portrayal is to gay students in my class.

Some justify Nabokov’s homophobia in Mary by how close he still was in 1926 to Uncle Ruka’s (Vasily Rukavishnikov, his mother’s brother) unwelcome caresses of his favorite nephew. But Nabokov’s attitude toward homosexuality did not substantially change over the years. After all, Mary was one of the last two Russian novels to be translated into English (1970) and, as with his other Russian novels, Nabokov could have implemented some minor revisions to get rid of this overly clichéd representation of Kolin and Gornotsvetov. Nabokov, however, chose not to, even though by then he already knew the full circumstances of his brother’s tragic fate as a gay man at the time of Nazi occupation.

While teaching at Cornell, Nabokov inevitably encountered gay faculty who were forced to hide their sexual preference, often not very convincingly. At the time they were easy subjects of humiliating caricaturization, which is precisely what Nabokov does with “prissy” Gaston Godin in Lolita. Professor Godin, who knows “all the small boys in our vicinity,” is supposedly, like Humbert Humbert, a pedophile but because his amorous attention is directed toward adolescent boys rather than girls, he is immediately dismissed by his heterosexual counterpart as a ridiculous, one-dimensional, and insidious pervert. Nabokov no doubt wanted us to appreciate a deep irony in this situation of one pedophile despising the other, and yet there is every indication that—to slightly paraphrase him—“there is a green lane in Paradise where Humbert is permitted to wander at dusk once a year; but Hell shall never parole” Godin. Furthermore, reviving the crude stereotyping in Mary, but now applied to the other gender, Nabokov also makes Humbert poke fun at two female English professors, “tweed and short-haired Miss Lester and fadedly feminine Miss Fabian,” whose combined last names spell out “Lesbian” and who pretend to be just housemates.

And then there is, of course, Charles Kinbote in Pale Fire. As Stephen Bruhm wrote in “Queer, Queer Vladimir,” “[T]he only thing more painful than the homophobia of Pale Fire is the license it has given critics to volley diatribes against the purported apposition between Kinbote’s homosexuality and his madness, an apposition conveniently coalescing in the term ‘narcissist’…so palpable and parodic.” As another critic, Jean Walton, observes in “Dissenting in an Age of Frenzied Heterosexualism: Kinbote’s Transparent Closet in Nabokov’s Pale Fire,” back when Nabokov was writing his novel
there, in most cases, was very little ambiguity as to what gay fictional characters stood for: “to read the presence of ‘homosexuality’ in a work of fiction as a figural or metaphorical index to something else is to engage, whether implicitly or explicitly, in avoidance tactics, and to collude with, rather than scrutinize, a prevailing heterocentric imperative.” Nabokov himself was undoubtedly aware that his contemporary readers would be hard pressed to see Kinbote as anything but his creator’s disapproval of homosexuality. All this was of course happening at the time when the “Red Scare” was mightily competing with the “Lavender Scare,” the belief that gays (here somewhat similarly to Jews as well) were not just perverted but disloyal while increasingly occupying too many positions of cultural and political power.

This is, of course, not to suggest that we should “cancel” Nabokov. We also all know that among the writers of his generation, these biases are far from unique. Instead, the question pursued by many of us teaching Nabokov—and honestly engaged with by several articles in this volume, including by one of the editors—is how to present him to today’s generation of students, who are much more attuned to the uncomfortable social issues his prose often poses.

There are other challenges in teaching Nabokov today that are not directly connected to his personal views. In my experience one of the issues that tends to alienate them in Nabokov is his “haughty” origins, of which, for my students’ tastes, he was too proud and which they detect not just in his autobiographical writings but also in his fiction. Thus what they can easily forgive Tolstoy, they cannot always forgive Nabokov since he is a twentieth-century writer and students are predisposed to see him, unlike Tolstoy, as almost their contemporary. When I taught Nabokov side by side with Joseph Brodsky in the “The Art of Self Translation” course, the students kept telling me how much easier it was for them to relate to Brodsky’s more humble beginnings than to Nabokov’s nearly royal ones.

This is where accentuating the positive comes in: not just presenting him as deservedly one of the greatest twentieth-century writers—which previous Nabokov scholarship does so successfully—but also humanizing, updating, and retooling him for our students’ particular sense and sensibility, as many articles in this volume do when discussing finding commonalities between what Nabokov talks about and depicts in his novels, short stories, and autobiographical writings and what our students are experiencing today. For even though Nabokov lectured his own students not to try to relate to characters or writers (“only children can be excused for identifying themselves with
the characters in the book”), we obviously cannot—and why should we?—instruct ours in a similarly stern manner not to do so. One of my most gratifying experiences in teaching Nabokov has been to see how many bilingual students in my Self-Translation class, most of them heritage speakers in a variety of languages, are thrilled to compare their experience to Nabokov’s.

As to my teaching Lolita again, yes, I am going to teach the novel this academic year, now well armed with this volume as well as Teaching Nabokov’s Lolita in the #MeToo Era, which preceded it. Both will be required readings for my course.

Notes


4 Martin Doyle, “Edna O’Brien: Lolita Author Nabokov Was ‘Scathing of Women,’” The Irish Times, February 21, 2018. www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/edna-o-brien-lolita-author-nabokov-was-scathing-of-women-1.3399269. The prize, created in 2016 in partnership with the Vladimir Nabokov Literary Foundation, rewards “a living author whose body of work, either written in or translated into English, represents the highest level of achievement in fiction, nonfiction, poetry and/or drama, and is of enduring originality and consummate craftsmanship.” See https://pen.org/pen-nabokov-award/.


6 See, for example, Eric Naiman’s discussion of this attitude among some Nabokovians in “Nabokov and #MeToo,” 140–141.

7 Vladimir Nabokov, Think, Write, Speak: Uncollected Essays, Reviews, Interviews, and Letters to the Editor, eds. Anastasia Tolstoy and Brian Boyd (New York: Knopf, 2019), 211.


11 Nabokov, *Think, Write, Speak*, 346. When Ongaro pointed out that Nabokov had made Lolita stronger than Humbert Humbert, the writer replied: “She’s stronger only because Humbert Humbert loves her. That’s all.” Ibid.


