

On the Trail of Nabokov in the American West

On his cross-country trips chasing butterflies and researching “Lolita,” the Russian-born novelist saw more of the United States than did Fitzgerald, Kerouac or Steinbeck.

Footsteps

By LANDON Y. JONES MAY 24, 2016

For the last 15 years my wife, Sarah, and I have driven every summer with our golden retriever from New Jersey to the Northern Rockies. I used to say that I felt like Humbert Humbert, the notoriously unreliable narrator of “Lolita,” who made a similar trip, but instead of traveling with a precocious preteen girl, I was traveling with a wife and a dewy-eyed dog.

But then I learned that Vladimir Nabokov himself had done the same thing. Nabokov wrote his disturbingly compelling classic, “Lolita,” over the course of five breathless years, from 1948 to 1953, filling 5-by-7 cards with notes he took riding shotgun while his designated driver, his wife, Véra, drove their black Oldsmobile from Ithaca, N.Y., to Arizona, Utah, Colorado, Wyoming and Montana.

In other words, at the height of the Cold War, an expatriate Russian novelist with the resonant name of Vladimir was roaming through the reddest of red states, researching a book about a jaded aristocrat’s sexual obsession with “nymphets” (a coinage the book put in the Oxford English Dictionary). The wonder is that Nabokov survived at all.

Today we revere “Lolita” for Nabokov’s bold, multilayered subject matter and his dazzling and allusive prose. But Nabokov’s most enduring contribution may be his portrait of the brash, kitschy, postwar America he observed on his cross-country journeys. Nabokov never learned to drive, and so he estimated that between 1949 and 1959 Véra drove him 150,000 miles — almost all of them on the two-lane blue highways that preceded the interstates.

Measured by the sheer number of miles covered, Nabokov is the most American of authors. He saw more of the United States than did Fitzgerald, Kerouac or Steinbeck, and what he saw was back-roads America: personal, intimate, ticky-tack and yet undeniably authentic. It took a Russian-born writer to awaken us to what Mark Twain knew: America is not a place; it is a road.

Nabokov went west because he was chasing butterflies. He was a passionate lepidopterist who wrote the definitive scholarly study of the genus *Lycaeides* and had several species named after him, such as Nabokov’s wood nymph. His travels over the years took him from the Bright Angel Trail in the Grand Canyon to Utah, Colorado and Oregon. But one of the best places to find many different species of butterflies congregating at one time was at nosebleed-high altitudes along the Continental Divide in Wyoming. Along the way the shape of the novel took root, and he started to take notes during his butterfly hunts and write them up back in his motel rooms.

So why not follow the trail of Vladimir and Véra today? Like a 21st-century version of Humbert’s nemesis, Clare Quilty, who pursued Humbert and Lolita across the country, I went west to chase Nabokov chasing butterflies and to piece together the plot of his most popular novel. It became a tale of three overlapping journeys: Humbert’s with Lolita, Vladimir with Véra, and mine with Sarah and my retriever, Mack.

The physical geographies of “Lolita” are still there — not only Humbert’s “distant mountains,” “oatmeal hills” and “relentless peaks” but also the daisy chain of Kumfy Kabins, Sunset Motels, Pine View Courts, U-Beam Cottages and Skyline Courts where Humbert took the captive Dolores Haze (Lolita’s given name). Among them are some of the same motels where Vladimir and Véra checked in more than a

half-century ago.

We traveled the same basic route the Nabokovs did, leaving the East, descending into Ohio and across the Midwest — or, as Humbert put it, “We crossed Ohio, the three states beginning with ‘I’ and Nebraska — ah, that first whiff of the West!” We stayed in motels, too, though they lacked the cheesy allure of Humbert’s “countless motor courts [proclaiming] their vacancy in neon lights, ready to accommodate salesmen, escaped convicts, impotents, family groups, as well as the most corrupt and vigorous couples.” Mack was no Lolita, either, licking my hand affectionately, unlike the frequently disdainful Lolita whose contempt only made Humbert more crazed in his obsession.

I had assumed that the sight of a man of Humbertesque age carrying a well-worn copy of “Lolita” might raise some eyebrows, but never once during my pursuit of Nabokov did I find a single motel owner who had heard of the writer or of “Lolita.”

Like Humbert, and presumably Vladimir, we observed “that curious roadside species, Hitchhiking Man, Homo pollux of science.” There are fewer hitchhikers on the interstates these days — I saw only one east of the Mississippi — but just as many roadside wonders. Like Humbert and Lolita, we stopped in restaurants festooned with “EAT” signs and sticky counters with sugar-drunk flies wobbling off them.

Humbert and Lolita toured “the crazy-quilt of forty-eight states” — Bourbon Street, Carlsbad Caverns, Yellowstone, Crater Lake, fish hatcheries, cliff dwellings and “thousands of Bear Creeks, Soda Springs, and Painted Canyons.” My wife and I saw picturesque red barns in Pennsylvania Dutch country, developments of Monopoly-style bungalows, double-wides, casinos everywhere, Victorian farmhouses with double-hung windows that look like Bette Davis eyes. Huge cell towers looming like the alien creatures from the 1953 movie “War of the Worlds,” out of scale with the environment of telephone poles and road signs observed by Vladimir and Véra.

And the road signs! PASSIONS: COUPLES ADULT SUPERSTORE. GUN CONTROL MEANS USING BOTH HANDS. Both Nabokov and Humbert would have been alternatively appalled and delighted by these: COLLECTABLES SIN-A-BAR CREEK, BADLAND’S REST STOP, DICK’S TOE SERVICE.

I asked Sarah if she thought that Dick had a foot fetish. She replied that he more likely runs a service station. When Humbert and Lolita made their trip, religious icons on the roadside were mostly confined to the South. They saw a “replica of the Grotto of Lourdes in Louisiana.” Today there are crosses everywhere — little white ones memorializing highway fatalities, gigantic ones like the 198-foot “World’s Largest Cross” at the intersection of I-70 and I-57 in Effingham, Ill.

And what would Nabokov have made of this sign: IF YOU DIE TONIGHT HEAVEN OR HELL? Followed by this one: GARY’S GUN SHOP.

As it happens, Véra Nabokov once packed a Browning .38 revolver in her purse. When she applied for her license to carry one, she explained primly that it was “for protection in traveling in isolated parts of the country in the course of entomological research.” She wasn’t kidding. Nabokov killed a large rattlesnake during their 1953 trip to Portal, Ariz.

The state Nabokov returned to for the third time in 1952 was Wyoming. I imagine that Vladimir and Véra approached the mountains cautiously at night, cringing as trucks thundered past them “studded with colored lights, like dreadful giant Christmas trees.” We knew the West had begun when we began seeing not 80-pound hay bales in the fields but the huge, rolled-up behemoths that only a tractor can lift.

Once in Wyoming, Vladimir and Véra stayed at the now-defunct Lazy “U” Motel in Laramie, at the edge of the Medicine Bow Mountains in southeastern Wyoming. Traveling with them was their Harvard-student son, Dmitri, driving his new 1931 Model A Ford. From Laramie, the family drove over the Snowy Range, passing “a remarkably repulsive-looking willowbog, full of cowmerds and barbed wire” where Vladimir immediately stopped to pursue butterflies. They eventually arrived in Riverside, Wyo., a dusty hamlet with “one garage, two bars, three motor courts and a few ranches, one mile from the ancient and obsolete little town Encampment (unpaved streets, wooden sidewalks).”

If Nabokov was hunting butterflies, I set about hunting for trout in the North Platte River, which flows through the same remote Saratoga Valley. Our base was the A Bar A Ranch, an upscale guest ranch that offers tennis, par-3 golf and massages along

with the traditional riding and fishing. The Nabokovs most likely checked into the present-day Riverside Garage and Cabins, on the banks of the Encampment River. Each log cabin wears its name on a shingle: Cowboy, Sodbuster, Wildcatter, Mountainman, Muleskinner.

Nabokov, who spent July 4, 1952, in Riverside, must have made note of the Independence Day festivities that day, which found a second life in “Lolita” when the European Humbert is mystified by “some great national celebration in town judging by the firecrackers, veritable bombs, that exploded all the time.”

From Riverside, Vladimir and Véra took a day trip into the nearby Sierra Madre mountains to hunt butterflies, taking an “abominable local road” to the Continental Divide. Sixty-three years later, I traveled up Wyoming State Highway 70 to the same pass with Justin Howe, second-generation manager, with his wife, Lissa, of the A Bar A Ranch. The highway goes through a checkerboard of timbers and lakes to reach Battle Pass, a wide spot in the highway on the Continental Divide at 9,955 feet. From there, Mr. Howe and I bounced over a dirt Forest Service road in his truck to a pristine alpine lake where he had camped as a boy with his parents.

On the way up to the pass, as Nabokov later described it in an article for *The Lepidopterists’ News*, he found the “best hunting grounds” in Wyoming and captured a number of “curious” specimens of butterflies, including the *Speyeria egleis*, that he later gave to collections at Cornell, Harvard and the American Museum of Natural History.

The Nabokovs next drove north to the Wyoming town of Dubois (pronounced Dew-BOYS), where they hunted for butterflies along the gorgeous Wind River and stayed in a log-cabin unit at the then Red Rock Motel, now doing business as the Longhorn Ranch Lodge and R.V. Resort. Located under buttes on the Wind River, flecked with reds and browns, the Longhorn pays enthusiastic homage to a Western aesthetic by way of Hollywood. Attached to the office is a museum-shrine to Harley-Davidson motorcycles.

We camped in a room outfitted in knotty pine and drove into Dubois for dinner at the Cowboy Cafe, a stacked-log restaurant whose breakfast specials include spicy elk served with two eggs, hash browns and toast. On the way we found ourselves on a

busy, motel-strewn street called Ramshorn — the name Nabokov modified into Ramsdale, the name of Lolita's fictional hometown. In front of a filling station at one end of town is a heroic 10-foot-tall polymer statue of a rabbit with antlers, the mythological creature called a jackalope.

After Dubois, Vladimir and Véra went north over the dramatic Togwotee Pass, overlooking Jackson Hole, which Humbert must have had in mind when he described “heart and sky-piercing snow-veined gray colossi of stone” of the high mountain West. They wound up in Jackson Hole and eventually Star Valley and what Nabokov called the “altogether enchanting little town” of Afton, Wyo., a place with 2,500 people and many more elk and trout.

The motel the Nabokovs stayed in, the Corral Lodges, is still there in the center of town. Built in the 1940s, the Corral Lodges is a semicircle of 15 single-unit log cabins huddled around a log office that used to be a gas station. In “Lolita,” it turns up as any one of the log hideaways with “glossily browned” pine logs that remind the 13-year-old Dolores Haze “of fried-chicken bones.”

Checking in, I resisted the urge to register under a Nabokovian anagram of my own name, as Humbert and Quilty might have done. Still, I could look straight out my cabin window at the view Humbert saw: “the mysterious outlines of tablelike hills, and then red bluffs ink-blotted with junipers, and then a mountain range, dun grading into blue, and blue into dream.”

On their journey west, Humbert and Lolita had gone sightseeing in a cave advertising the “world's largest stalagmite.” Right down the street from the Corral Lodges we saw the “World's Largest Elkhorn Arch,” a triumphant gateway spanning the four-lane main street built entirely of more than 3,000 antlers shed every year by bull elk.

Nabokov hunted for his beloved butterflies in the nearby mountain tributaries of the Salt River, including “the world's largest intermitting spring” on Swift Creek. The logs that had been used to build the Corral Lodges were floated down Swift Creek to be handcrafted in the distinctive “Swedish cope” style of cutting corners and chinking. Something about the Rocky Mountain West reminded Nabokov of his youth in Russia. “Some part of me must have been born in Colorado,” he wrote to the

critic Edmund Wilson, “for I am constantly recognizing things with a delicious pang.”

The Nabokovs made their return trip through Jackson Hole, where Dmitri would vacation with the Harvard Mountaineering Club. In 1951, they had stayed at the Teton Pass Ranch, a few miles west of tiny Wilson, Wyo. It no longer exists, but one of its cabins has been moved to the nearby Trail Creek Ranch, founded in 1946 by Betty Woolsey, captain of the first American women’s ski team. A working ranch, it offers weekly cabin rentals and deep-powder skiing. An added bonus a few miles away is Nora’s Fish Creek Inn, built in the 1930s, a popular hangout with locals like the celebrity lawyer Gerry Spence.

Our final stop on the Nabokov Trail in Wyoming was the Battle Mountain Ranch on the Hoback River, southeast of Jackson. A working guest ranch when Véra and Vladimir visited on their butterfly quest, it has since moved downriver and is now the Broken Arrow Ranch, home of the nonprofit City Kids Wilderness Project. Every summer it hosts a camp for inner-city children and teenagers from Washington, D.C. During the off-season, the cabins are rented out to help cover the costs of the camp. It seems fitting that the guest ranch where Nabokov stayed while writing “Lolita” is now operating as a resource for disadvantaged children.

A year after his 1952 trip across Wyoming, Nabokov finished the “great and coily thing” that had haunted him for a half-century. Concerned about a negative reaction, he had tried at least twice to burn the cards on which he had written the manuscript. Each time, Véra rescued them from the fire. Rejected in the United States, “Lolita” was first published in 1955 in England, where the London Sunday Express called it “sheer unrestrained pornography.” But the novelist Graham Greene praised it, rescuing it from the critical flames.

It was published in France and then, to a tumultuous reception, in the United States in 1958. It became an instant No. 1 New York Times best-seller, and the movie rights were grabbed up by Stanley Kubrick for \$150,000. It has been in print ever since, and today Nabokov’s reputation has never been higher, with new books published about him every year, most recently Robert Roper’s insightful biography, “Nabokov in America.”

Reader, please allow me to give Mr. Humbert Humbert the last word. On the final pages of the novel, Humbert finds himself back in the Rocky Mountain West. In a scene Nabokov himself anticipated in a letter written in 1951 to Edmund Wilson, Humbert walks to a cliff on the edge of a mountain where he rhapsodically and perhaps ruefully reports hearing “a melodious unity of sounds rising like a vapor from a small mining town that lay at my feet, in a fold of the valley ... all these sounds were of one nature, that no other sounds but these came from the streets of the transparent town, with the women at home and the men away. Reader! What I heard was but the melody of children at play ...”

That was exactly what my wife and I heard as we drove out of the Broken Arrow Ranch on the Hoback River. The happy melody of children at play.

IF YOU GO

What to Read

In recent years authors and academics have been pursuing Nabokov with the same monomania that Ahab chased whales and lepidopterists chase butterflies.

“**Nabokov in America: On the Road to Lolita,**” by Robert Roper (Bloomsbury, 2015). This critical biography traces the writer from Ithaca, N.Y., to Cambridge, Mass., and the High Mountain West, showing how Nabokov used closely observed details to invent a new way of experiencing America.

“**Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years,**” by Brian Boyd (Princeton, 1991). The second and final volume of the definitive biography of Nabokov chronicles the years from his arrival in the United States in 1940 through his self-exile to Switzerland in 1959 and death in 1977.

“**Nabokov’s Blues: The Scientific Odyssey of a Literary Genius,**” by Kurt Johnson and Steve Coates (Zoland Books, 1999). Everything you wanted to know about the significant scientific achievements of Nabokov, including his pioneering classification of a diverse group of butterflies known as the Latin American blues.

“Véra(Mrs. Vladimir Nabokov),” by Stacy Schiff (Modern Library, 2000).A portrait of the artist’s wife, showing how critical she was to his success.

“The Annotated Lolita,” by Vladimir Nabokov, edited and annotated by Alfred Appel Jr. (Vintage Books, 1991). The infinitely detailed reference guide to Nabokov’s richly allusive novel.

Where to Stay

The Longhorn Ranch and R.V. Resort (5810 U.S. Highway 26, Dubois, Wyo., thelonghornranch.com; from \$89 to \$109) is located under a red sandstone bluff.

The Corral Lodges Motel (161 South Washington, Afton, Wyo., corrallodges.com; doubles, from \$99), the first motel in Afton, offers 15 log cabins.

Trail Creek Ranch (Wilson, Wyo., trailcreekranch.com; from \$180 to \$385 per cabin, three-night minimum) is a working guest ranch near Teton Pass with sweeping views of Jackson Hole.

A Bar A Ranch (820 A-Bar-A Road, Encampment, Wyo., abararanch.com; \$485 per person, includes meals and activities). A traditional guest ranch where cowboys can include United States senators and celebrities like Jimmy Fallon.

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