



Reading Lolita In Prison

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It has to make you wonder when someone tells you that their favorite book is *Lolita*. I was reading a Christopher Hitchens article in *Atlantic Monthly*, and he was going on about the overlooked humor of the book and the beauty of the writing and how the novel is Nabokov's love letter to the English language. It was a lofty article—Hitchens was doing his thing where he seems to get into an argument with himself just to show how much smarter he is than everyone else—but even in the midst of all his admiration, Hitchens had to acknowledge what everyone was thinking: the book's a little creepy.

I'm not saying that everyone who's read *Lolita* is a pervert. I've read it. I thought it was all right. I'm not sure that I'd read it again, but I'm also not dosing sixth graders with Robitussin. But there are some people who love the book, and they're the ones who worry me. No matter how many times they come back to *the language*, they come off like people insisting that, really, they read *Playboy* for the articles. Meanwhile, they're trying to convince their wives that they bought season tickets for the local middle school's girl's basketball team because they're really interested in fundamentals.

But that's how books are. They can tell you a lot about a person. Someone tells you their favorite book is *Mein Kampf*, you're probably not going to have them over for seder.

Of course, it's not always that easy. Take Burroughs for example. If someone tells you that their favorite book is *Naked Lunch*, you're looking at a range of possibilities: junkie, wife murderer, pederast, former English major who's still trying too hard. It's tough to know which direction to take the conversation—say you're talking about *Finnegan's Wake* while they're waiting patiently to ask what the most direct route to Mexico is. That's embarrassing. Personally, I always hope for the junkie, especially if I'm on public transportation, because then at least there's a chance they'll nod off and leave you alone.

Other books open up similar questions. *Grapes of Wrath*: sympathizer with the downtrodden or breast-milk fetishist? *Invisible Man*: African-American scholar or confused H.G. Wells fan? *The Great Gatsby*: Jay Gatsby or Nick Carraway? *The Naked and the Dead*: naked or, well, dead?

Then there are people who tell you that their favorite books are the latest *Harry Potter* or Tom Clancy. These people aren't exactly providing a window to the soul. That's not to say there's anything wrong with *Harry Potter* or Tom Clancy. (Full disclosure: I haven't read any of the *Harry Potter* books, so if there is anything wrong with them, such as a lengthy rant delivered by Harry about "the Jews," then I apologize.)

Still, picking one of these books as your *favorite*, the one that really gets to the core of you, reflecting your ideas and assumptions about life, seems a bit...shallow.

Of course, this is coming from someone whose favorite book was once *Please Kill Me: The Uncensored Oral History of Punk* (uncompromising faultfinder or high school virgin?). Please note that I don't say "was" because I don't like the book anymore. It's a great book, detailing punk's genesis in New York City in the 1970's, with bands like the Velvet Underground, the Ramones, Television, etc. No, I say "was" because I had the misfortune of meeting its author, Legs McNeil.

It was at a book reading for Legs' new book, *The Other Hollywood: The Uncensored Oral History of the Porn Film Industry*. I made the mistake of complimenting Legs, going so far as to hand him an essay I'd written a year before about how inspirational his first book had been to me. We'd gotten off to a bumpy start earlier in the reading, when I had the temerity to ask him a question about writing, in response to which he basically called me a homo. The fact that he thinks that's an insult gives you a strong insight into the man.

Still, as I waited for him to sign my book, I tried to play nice, handing him the essay and expressing my hope that his porno book could make a similar difference in some young person's life. We shook hands, and I waited to get to the car to read what he'd written.

"James," he'd written. "Read more than this! Educate yourself. Best, Legs."

To which I promptly added, upon getting home: "To Legs, Fuck you! James."

So, in the end, it appears that the books you read are less important than the fact that Legs McNeil is a dick. But, that's a downer note to end an essay on, so I'll try to go one step further.

Ultimately, we read books for a variety of reasons. Some of them are good: having a vicarious adventure, learning how to manage an organic garden. Some of them are bad: encouraging selfishness as a virtue, learning how to pipe bomb your local abortion clinic. Regardless of the books we read and our motivations for reading them, however, all readers can take shared solace in one great fact: we're way, way smarter than illiterate people.