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HURRICANE DOLORES

A constant in Nabokov scholarship is the quest for the original of Dolores. An assortment of literary ladies, not to mention several 20th-century victims of crime, have stood accused of inspiring *Lolita*'s title character. This paper is a brief intervention on perhaps the narrowest form of the inquiry: the source of her name.

In full, the character is Dolores Haze. This is far from her only name. The famous opening paragraphs explain when she is Lo, Lola, or Dolly (*L* 9), and Humbert of course uses the exotic diminutive "Lolita" throughout (Sweeney). Even the whole is part subterfuge: "While 'Haze' only rhymes with the heroine's surname, her first name is too closely interwound with the inmost fiber of the book to allow one to alter it" (*L* 3-4).

When Alvin Toffler interviewed Nabokov for *Playboy* in 1963, the author explained how the names of his characters "occurred to [him]":

For my nymphet I needed a diminutive with a lyrical lilt to it. One of the most limpid and luminous letters is "L". The suffix "-ita" has a lot of Latin tenderness, and this I required too. Hence: Lolita. (Nabokov 1964)

He added: "Another consideration was the welcome murmur of its source name, the fountain name: those roses and tears in 'Dolores'" (Nabokov 1964).

Nabokov examined the virtuous qualities of the names, leaving unmentioned any prior literature that suggested the diminutive or its "fountain" (Luxemburg 121-22).¹ In the absence of an ur-Dolores, scholars have supplied several candidates: Algernon Charles Swinburne's

¹ In the *Playboy* interview, "Nabokov indicates the link of Lolita's name with the 'source name' Dolores, but does not comment on the origin of both. We are led to assume that their appearance in Nabokov's masterpiece is due to chance only" (Luxemburg 121).

“Dolores,”² H. G. Wells’s *Apropos of Dolores*,³ a passage from Valéry Larbaud’s *Des prénoms féminins*,⁴ and Heinz von Lichberg’s “Lolita,”⁵ to name a few.

There is no denying that Dolores Haze may be an echo of any or all of these forgotten Doloreses and Lolitas. But rather than direct inspiration or influence, circumstances suggest an attenuated connection, more in line with Nabokov’s prudent choice of an enduringly resonant name in dialogue

² Alfred Appel’s notation on “Dolores” states: “Less spiritual are the sorrows detailed in ‘Dolores’ (1866), by Algernon Swinburne” (*L ann.* 333). The note cites Carl Proffer’s *Keys to Lolita*, which states: “Lo has some actual namesakes among the demonic ladies of literature too. The most important literary echo of her real name, Dolores Haze, is from Algernon Swinburne’s ‘Dolores’—subtitled *Notre-Dame des Sept Douleurs*: thereby paralleling Humbert’s various puns on Dolores (dolorous darling, dumps and dolors, *adolori*, etc.)” (Proffer 28-29). Nabokov corresponded with and praised both Appel and Proffer, possibly suggesting his approval of a Swinburnian “echo”—but Appel and Proffer do not claim that VN drew the name Dolores from Swinburne.

³ Luxemburg, explaining that a young VN read Wells, supplies a long analysis of potential similarities between *Apropos of Dolores* and *Lolita* (Luxemburg 126-33).

⁴ Maurice Couturier writes: “Valéry Larbaud effusively celebrated this name in *Des prénoms féminins* (1927): « . . . Lolita est une petite fille; Lola est en âge de se marier; Dolores a trente ans; doña Dolores a soixante ans . . . Un jour, inspiré par l’amour, je murmurerai: Lola. Et le soir des noces, j’aurai Lolita dans mes bras »). [Translation: “Lolita is a little girl; Lola is old enough to marry; Dolores is 30; Doña Dolores is 60 . . . One day, inspired by love, I will whisper: *Lola*. And on the wedding night, I will have Lolita in my arms.”] (Couturier 2005 21n3). Julian Connolly notes the similarity of this passage to the opening paragraphs of *Lolita* (Connolly 22n14), a similarity Nabokov himself noted, although VN denied ever reading Larbaud (*SL* 479). Couturier supplies additional potential French precursors: “In France, for example, one finds occurrences of the name in titles like Isidore Gès’s *En villégiature. Lolita* as early as 1894, then in René Riche’s *La Chanson de Lolita*, published in 1920 (a title reminiscent of *Chanson de Bilitis* (1894), by Pierre Louÿs, which deals with nymphets), or again in *Lolita, roman algérien*, by René Gast (1927)” (Couturier 2005 21n3).

⁵ The subject of *The Two Lolitas* (Maar 2005); Luxemburg (122-25) sympathetically discusses Maar’s thesis.

with a musty literature long since passed.⁶ There is little evidence that Nabokov read or remembered any of these supposed influences,⁷ and there is no evidence that he held any of them in esteem. The fact that the Dolores-Lolita chord resonates with overtones both of sad Madonnas (*L* ann. 333) and “saucy little girls” (Couturier 2004) does not necessarily explain why Nabokov sounded the notes in the first place.

I suggest a simple explanation for how the name Dolores entered Nabokov’s head. There is strong circumstantial evidence that, in the crucial year for *Lolita*’s early composition, he heard a name strikingly similar to the one he eventually used. That name was “Dolores Grieves.”⁸ She is Veronica Lake’s character in the Andre De Toth film *Slattery’s Hurricane*. The remainder of this paper demonstrates that Nabokov (1) easily could have seen the film; (2) would have seen it at the precise time he chose the names Dolores and Lolita; (3) was frequently inspired by popular films; (4) would likely have noticed the name “Dolores Grieves”; and (5) made several express references to hurricanes in conjunction with the names Dolores Haze and Lolita.

Nabokov easily could have seen *Slattery’s Hurricane*. From Thursday to Saturday, October 20-22, 1949, the film played at the Strand Theatre in Ithaca, New York (*IJ* 1949a), less than a mile from, and on the same road as, the Nabokov house.⁹ In October 1949, the Nabokovs were home in Ithaca after a summer trip to Wyoming, and Vladimir was drafting “Student Days” and entertaining the visiting Katharine and E. B. White (*VNAY* 141-43).

Nabokov was a constant moviegoer (more on that below) who undoubtedly frequented the Strand. In *Look at the Harlequins!*, set at Quirn

⁶ Couturier considers the “intertextuality” of *Lolita* and the book’s apparent dialogue with prior namesakes, noting: “In French ‘literature’, the name [Lolita] seems to have been applied to two kinds of characters: highly perverse prostitutes or saucy little girls” (Couturier 2004). Couturier’s argument is dismissive of plagiarism accusations and accords with the notion that Nabokov chose a resonant name in dialogue with a past literature, much of it forgotten, with no direct influence.

⁷ The exception is Swinburne, whom Nabokov almost certainly read. In addition to Proffer 28-29, mentioned above, Brian Boyd identifies several references to Swinburne’s “Dolores,” including one suspected to be from memory, in *Ada* (BB *Ada* Online).

⁸ Sometimes written as “Greeves” or “Greaves.”

⁹ The Strand was at 310-12 East State Street, and the Nabokovs lived less than a mile east at 957 East State Street (*VNAY* 129).

University (whose “celebrated ‘Hotel’ course” leaves no doubt as to its antecedent), he describes a showing of the Ginger Rogers film *Black Widow* at “The Strand Theater” (*LATH* 141), and the Strand in real-world Ithaca showed that film in December 1954 (*IJ* 1954a). Alfred Appel described how, as a Cornell undergraduate, he sat behind Nabokov while the author laughed uproariously at the campy Humphrey Bogart film *Beat the Devil* in 1954 (Appel 310); this anecdote directly places Nabokov at the Strand (*IJ* 1954b). In April 1949, Nabokov “railed against Laurence Olivier’s film adaptation of *Hamlet*” (*VNAY* 138-39),¹⁰ which played for an Oscars encore at the Strand later that year, the week after *Slattery’s Hurricane* (*IJ* 1949b).

In short, the film played in Ithaca while Nabokov was in residence, at a theater on Nabokov’s street that he was known to frequent.

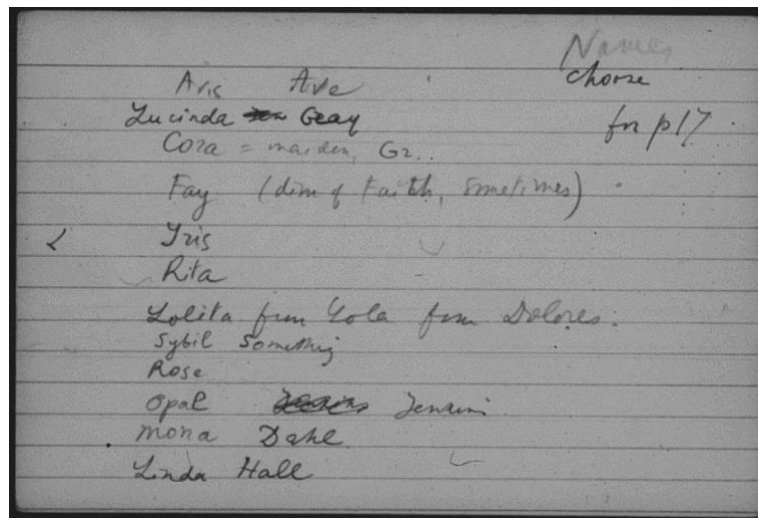
Nabokov would have heard the name “Dolores Grieves” at the crucial juncture in the drafting of *Lolita*. Before she was Dolores Haze, she may have been “Juanita Dark,” after Joan of Arc (OABEL 312, Bouchet 88-89). So suggests Nabokov in his afterword describing his failed attempts to pursue the themes of *Lolita* in the early-to-mid 1940s (OABEL 312). But “[a]round 1949, in Ithaca, upstate New York,” the “throbbing” of the nascent book began to “plague” Nabokov again (OABEL 312). By that same year,¹¹ Nabokov had chosen the names Dolores and Lolita (and Lo,

¹⁰ Nabokov denied seeing *Hamlet*: “Do you think I would waste my time seeing a film as bad as I have described?” (*VNAY* 139).

¹¹ Bouchet writes that Juanita Dark was “a name [Nabokov] was still working with in the summer of 1950,” but this assertion is not cited (Bouchet 88). There is little evidence from the cited sources that the Juanita Dark name remained current in 1950. Boyd states the currency of “Juanita Dark” as of 1946 and also mentions a “fair draft of the first twelve chapters of part 1 of the novel and several passages from part 2” (*VNAY* 169). For the latter, Boyd cites a letter from Nabokov to Carl Proffer in which VN mentions a “little diary” from 1951 in which he “listed under January 6 several projects [VN] was engaged in at the time, and among them is *The Kingdom by the Sea*, the first working title of *Lolita*, or more exactly a fair draft on index cards of the twelve first sections plus several passages from the second part” (*SL* 433). The confusion seems to come from an uncited passage in Boyd: “Nabokov had been planning the book that had become *Lolita* for years, but in 1950, Juanita Dark and *The Kingdom by the Sea* still had some distance to evolve into the novel we know” (*VNAY* 184). Boyd’s remark could be read to imply that the Dark name was still current in 1950, but this is contradicted by all other sources. Nabokov himself provides no timeline for the Juanita name in “On a Book Entitled *Lolita*,” and a kind

Lola, and Dolly); he later admitted that the “list of Dolores diminutives” found in Larbaud (discussed above) “certainly does resemble rather eerily the very rhythm of the passage (written in 1949) in the beginning of my *Lolita*” (SL 479).

The (mostly undated) index cards on which Nabokov wrote notes for the novel from 1950 to 1955 uniformly address the character as Dolores, Lolita, or some other form thereof (*L* notecards).¹² One even explains, “Lolita from Lola from Dolores”:



Both Nabokov’s recollection and the circumstantial evidence pinpoint the selection of the names Dolores and Lolita in, or at least by, 1949. Boyd’s biography sheds only a little light on the chronology of *Lolita*’s drafting in 1949, stating that, “[w]ith *Lolita* already taking shape in his mind, [Nabokov] had a notebook on hand as he traveled” the west that

reviewer of this note for the *Nabokovian* suggests that the name may be an invention for that essay—a play on the novel’s close brush with fiery destruction in the author’s backyard, akin to Joan’s burning at the stake, rather than a serious contender for the text.

¹² These are notecards bearing research on details for the novel (such as quotes from film magazines), not the “fair draft” index cards mentioned above. The notecard reproduced below is the second in the microfilm scan and corresponds to the discussion of Dolores’s cohort (*L* 190-91): “There was Opal Something, and Linda Hall, and Avis Chapman, and Eva Rosen, and Mona Dahl. . . .” VN evidently discarded some of the names between notecard and page, and indeed the card bears the note: “choose for p17.”

summer (VNAY 140). Boyd's chronology for *The Nabokovian* delineates two periods of literary work in 1949: January through the spring, when Nabokov first began translating *Eugene Onegin* and then wrote two chapters of his autobiography; and autumn, when he wrote "Student Days" and entertained the Whites (BB chronology).

These circumstances suggest that Nabokov resumed drafting *Lolita* in autumn 1949 rather than earlier in the year. Boyd's biography and chronology have Nabokov carrying a notebook in summer 1949 (VNAY 140, BB chronology), when notecards would have been more suggestive of drafting. Nabokov himself admitted writing the "light of my life" passage in 1949 (SL 479) and renewing work on *Lolita* in Ithaca (OABEL 312), ruling out his summer travels. Finally, the preserved notecards for *Lolita* begin in 1950, which corresponds more logically to a resumption in late 1949 than earlier in the year (L notecards).

In short, the key dates for Nabokov's serious renewal of work on *Lolita*—likely including selecting the names Dolores¹³ and Lolita while drafting the "light of my life" passage—probably fall in late 1949. This is precisely when Nabokov would have heard the name "Dolores Grieves."

Nabokov was a constant moviegoer and often took inspiration from popular films. Nabokov admitted to Alfred Appel that his "constantly introducing cinema themes, and cinema lore, and cinematophors (VN)¹⁴ into [his] literary compositions cannot be contested of course" (SL 537). Indeed, the occasion for Nabokov's remarks was praise for Appel's book, *Nabokov's Dark Cinema* (1974), wholly dedicated to examining the master's filmic references.

Lolita in particular is in constant conversation with cinema. Both the Jules Dassin noir *Brute Force* and the Joan Crawford vehicle *Possessed* are mentioned by title in the novel as Humbert reads an old newspaper after Dolores's abduction by Quilty (L 262-63, Appel 210). A third film, in which "the boxer had fallen extremely low" and "met the good old priest (who had been a boxer himself in his robust youth and could still slug a sinner)" (L 47), is not named in the text or easily identified (Appel 112). Of course,

¹³ Appel's note on "Dolores" says that Nabokov defined the "nerves of the novel" as including his important butterfly capture in a portion of Colorado where a river, town, and county are named "Dolores" (L ann. 333). This occurred in 1951 (BB chronology), two years after VN reported writing the "light of my life" passage (SL 479). Accordingly, Dolores, Colorado (also mentioned at L 251) presents as another resonance of the Dolores/Lolita chord, rather than the initial stroke.

¹⁴ I.e. "cinema metaphors."

Humbert and Dolores are constant moviegoers, taking in “voluptuously and indiscriminately, . . . one hundred and fifty or two hundred programs during that one year” (*L* 172).

Nabokov admitted to Appel that he had seen both *Possessed* and *Brute Force* “and thought them appropriate [to *Lolita*] for several reasons” (Appel 210), presumably starting with the titles. He was reluctant, however, to confess his general viewing habits (Appel 210). In a letter to Appel, he gave his reasons:

You and I and other Nabokovians will readily realize that stylistically you are slanting my works movieward in pursuit of your main thought; yet it would be rather unfair if less subtle people—poor, benighted sheep and so on—were to conclude that I had simply lifted my characters (say, Gradus¹⁵) from films which you know and I don’t. (*SL* 537)

It is worth remembering that, unlike today, the cinema of the 1940s was almost wholly transient. A film that finished its theatrical run faded from existence, leaving no obvious reference source to consult for details. Indeed, Nabokov couldn’t “remember why” he mentioned *Possessed* and *Brute Force* in *Lolita* because “so many years ha[d] passed” (Appel 210).

In this context, there is little basis to claim that Nabokov made anything of the plot of *Slattery’s Hurricane* (a forgettable story about how love triangles bring out self-destructive impulses) or its characterizations (melodramatic and maudlin). It’s likely that, if Nabokov saw the film, he remembered it merely as “that horrid hurricane picture” (or, less plausibly, “that charming hurricane picture”). Nabokov has seemingly never registered an opinion on director Andre De Toth, stars Richard Widmark, Linda Darnell, or Veronica Lake, or screenwriter (and popular novelist) Herman Wouk.¹⁶ Likely this is because he didn’t—or didn’t care to—remember them, and in any event would’ve had no way of consulting the film again, even if he’d wanted to. Although Nabokov had “seen more films than he [was] able or care[d] to remember,” he had little care for names of directors and actors (Appel 58). Upon an introduction to a “tall, rugged fellow” at a Hollywood dinner party, Nabokov asked, “And what do you do?,” not realizing he was speaking with John Wayne (Appel 58).

Nabokov sought “local ingredients” as he set about “inventing America” (OABEL 312), and he found them in the country’s popular

¹⁵ From *Pale Fire* (1962).

¹⁶ Nabokov did not even deign to call Wouk “second-rate” in *Strong Opinions* (1973).

cinema. It would make sense if Nabokov also took a cinematic cue for the name of his heroine. Indeed, the inspiration for the name, which came at a key juncture in the novel's drafting, may itself have provided a cue for the rest of Nabokov's cinematic patterning.

The name "Dolores Grieves" in the film is likely to have caught Nabokov's attention. About halfway through *Slattery's Hurricane*, a scene fades to Richard Widmark's character (that's Slattery) entering his home, sitting down at his desk, picking up his phone, and dramatically dialing while striking a handsome pose into a sunbeam (*SH* 38:20). This 15-second caesura in dialogue precedes the line, "Dolores Grieves, please," followed by a pause for response (*SH* 38:35). Only eleven more words round out the scene. The name "Dolores Grieves" is impossible to miss.

It is similarly impossible to imagine Vladimir Nabokov hearing the sentence, "Dolores Grieves, please," and failing to take note. In 1954, over Vera's admonishment, he divided the Strand Theatre crowd "between those who were laughing at the movie, and those who were laughing at (nameless) Nabokov laughing at the movie" before he "exploded" in laughter at a Peter Lorre joke (Appel 310).¹⁷ It is easy to picture the same author, in the same theater five years earlier, hearing "Dolores Grieves" and blurting out, "Does she, now?"

This is probably the right place to make a point so simple as to sound silly: "Dolores Grieves" is a lot like "Dolores Haze." Remarkably alike. This is not a case of an obscure literary "Dolores" or "Lolita" tucked away in some dusty collection of forgotten poems or stories. Instead, it is the very pattern of Dolores Haze's name, stated in full, in a movie Nabokov would very plausibly have seen, at the exact moment he was renewing the work that became *Lolita*. One pictures the author hearing the name and almost immediately realizing his Juanita (or whoever she was then) was actually Dolores (maybe not Haze, but something like that), and somehow sensing the meaningful resonances of all Doloreses and Lolas and Lolitas past and present, whether they be Swinburne lines or Colorado place names.

But that silly simple point requires an important caveat. If anything more than a coincidence, "Dolores Grieves" is merely a pattern. The name, although striking, operates almost as a redundant sentence ("the sad girl mourns").¹⁸ By contrast, "Dolores Haze" is a blurry-edged atmospheric phenomenon of mariological sadness. Whatever effect "Dolores Grieves"

¹⁷ The joke, from *Beat the Devil*, consisted of Lorre complaining that a portrait in profile didn't look like its subject because "it only has one ear!" (Appel 310).

¹⁸ One imagines Nabokov in *Strong Opinions*: "Decidedly second-rate."

stumbles toward, “Dolores Haze” achieves. What’s more, “Dolores Haze” stands in perfect equipoise to Humbert’s pornographic use of “Lolita”—sacred sorrow opposite the lewd profane. Indeed, Humbert runs the gamut in a single paragraph, calling her “my dolorous and hazy darling” as he practically prays the rosary over her “name with its formal veil (‘Dolores’),” and concluding his “spine-thrill of delight” as he possessively recasts her as “my Lolita” (*L* 52-53). If “Dolores Grieves” indeed set off Nabokov’s imagination, it was not as “influence,” but rather as a trivial agitation made beautiful, as a pearl forms around a tiny grain of sand.

Nabokov made reference to hurricanes when writing and discussing *Lolita*. The methods of this paper do not involve digging for deep correspondences between the novel and the surely forgotten plotting or characterizations of a cinematic trifle.¹⁹ That said, Nabokov was undoubtedly fond of making sly jokes on hidden patterns throughout his works. If indeed he secretly modeled the name Dolores Haze on a “horrid hurricane picture” (or even a “charming” one), it would be surprising, perhaps even disqualifying to the theory, if he had left no hints. Fortunately, at least three potential hints suggest themselves.

First, Nabokov famously dubbed the controversy attending the novel’s 1958 U.S. publication “Hurricane Lolita.”²⁰ He wrote the phrase into the title poem of *Pale Fire*: “It was a year of Tempests: Hurricane / Lolita swept from Florida to Maine” (*PF* lines 679-80).²¹ Brian Boyd identifies these as important lines that introduce Nabokov as an immanent authorial presence within the novel, beyond Kinbote’s ken and towering behind even the poem’s ostensible creator, Shade (*BB* 1999 239). Certainly much more could be said about references to “Hurricane Lolita,” particularly within *Pale Fire*, but that is beyond the scope of this note.

Second, aside from the exhortations in the opening paragraphs, the first time that Humbert rhapsodizes on Dolores’s name (the passage

¹⁹ Another kind reviewer, however, notes that the film opens with an acknowledgement of technical assistance from the Weather Bureau amid images of hurricane winds, tying into Nabokov’s preoccupations with wind and weather in *Lolita* and more broadly; and that Slattery later sings a drunken rendition of the Frank Sinatra song “Dolores” before saying, “Dolores, you know, she kisses just like a little girl” (*SH* 47:20).

²⁰ The first reference to this may be his inscription of “Hurricane Lolita” in the 1958 entry in which Vera resumed her diary (*Chupin* 5-6, *VNAY* 361).

²¹ The line echoes an earlier couplet with a similarly blustery connotation: “A male hand traced from Florida to Maine / The curving arrows of Aeolian wars,” which describes the drawing of a wind map (*PF* lines 408-09).

discussing “my dolorous and hazy darling”), the day’s entry begins: “We are paying with hail and gale for the tropical beginning of the month” (*L* 52). A few sentences later, he explains that the cause of his reverie—a mimeographed list of students at Ramsdale School that includes “Haze, Dolores”—appears “counter to the unfinished outline of Florida and the Gulf” as drawn by a child’s pencil (*L* 52). To belabor the obvious, hurricanes are synonymous with hail, gale, tropical weather, Florida, and the Gulf—and *Slattery’s Hurricane* is set in Florida—and these allusions lead directly into the most comprehensive meditations on the full name Dolores Haze.

Third, Humbert provides a pseudo-Freudian self-analysis of his youthful obsession with Annabel Leigh in which he confesses to seeking a “Kingdom by the Sea” in which to rape Dolores (*L* 162-63). His plans are for a time ruined because “[a] couple of semitropical beaches on the Gulf, though bright enough, were . . . swept by hurricane winds” (*L* 162-63). With apologies for stating the obvious once again, Nabokov’s original project, titled *The Kingdom by the Sea*, may itself have been swept by a hurricane, namely the film *Slattery’s Hurricane*.

That concludes the brutally literal statements of putative hints at *Slattery’s Hurricane* in *Lolita*. The above three seem plausible, though the gap between an analysis of Nabokov’s hidden patterns and the ravings of a schizophrenic elucidating the secret messages on the back of a cereal box is slender indeed. In any event, the traces exist for those who wish to see them.

Conclusion. In a letter to Carl Proffer, Nabokov poked fun at the kinds of musty works that scholars have claimed as the originals of Dolores:

In the autumn of 1958, when working on my Pushkin at the N.Y. Library, I glimpsed the title “Lolita”, a novel by some obscure Frenchman (the name escapes me but could be easily checked in the title catalogue), wrote out my slip and gave it to the attendant. With impatient disgust (it had evidently happened before) he tore my slip in two and uttered the immortal phrase: “This is not the *Lolita* you want.” (*SL* 433)

Only tenuous connections link Nabokov to the dusty back-shelf European arcana that sounds a resonant but hopelessly faraway echo to *Lolita*’s shout. In an effort to place Nabokov in the room with Lichberg’s “Lolita,” for instance, Michael Maar claims that the “the missing link, if not the smoking gun” is the fact that the Nabokovs’ 1930s Berlin landlord had a noble

Hessian ancestor who married into Lichberg's line in the 18th century (Maar 2016).²²

Slattery's Hurricane, by contrast, played just down the street from the Nabokov house, at the crucial moment of *Lolita's* drafting, and contained the dramatic statement of a name, "Dolores Grieves," that is the very pattern of "Dolores Haze." *Lolita* is replete with American cinematic references, and references to hurricanes appear in and around the book as well. This is not conclusive evidence, but Doloreses have stood accused of inspiring *Lolita* on a lot less.

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²² Note that Lichberg was a pen name; the actual family name was von Eschwege.

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