

OPINION

## Andrea Robin Skinner reminds us that monsters lurk within classic Canadian literature

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I read Andrea Robin Skinner’s devastating [front-page Sunday Toronto Star essay](#) with my heart in my throat, my opinion of one of Canada’s greatest writers transforming permanently in the process. Ms. Skinner had, courageously, come forward with the [darkest of family secrets](#): her stepfather Gerald Fremlin [had sexually abused her](#) when she was 9 and for several years thereafter, and her mother, Alice Munro, upon learning the news 16 years later, chose her husband over her youngest daughter.

She would choose Fremlin over Skinner again and again, even when Skinner pressed charges in 2005 and Fremlin pleaded guilty to sexual assault, receiving a sentence of two years’ probation. Munro would also write in her short story, [Vandals](#), published in the 1994 collection *Open Secrets*, this devastating line: “Bea ... had forgiven Ladner, after all, or made a bargain not to remember.” Munro, the bard of excavating domestic life, its secrets and the lies people tell themselves, had accepted her own devilish bargain, irrevocably rupturing her family in the process.

What made me livid was learning how open this secret was, a conspiracy of silence where all of the adults let Skinner down. Worse is that Fremlin was unrepentant about the abuse, because he did not ever see it as such.

As he wrote in a 1992 letter to Jim Munro, Skinner’s father, and his wife, Carole, he viewed Skinner as the aggressor – “it is my contention that Andrea invaded my bedroom for sexual adventure” – and that if she was “afraid, she could have left at any time.” Then Fremlin went on to a wild but all-too-common misreading of one of the great novels of the 20th century: “While the scene is degenerate, this is indeed *Lolita* and Humbert. For Andrea to say she was ‘scared’ is simply a lie or latter day invention.”

Lolita and Humbert, of course, refer to Dolores Haze and Humbert Humbert, the 12-year-old girl and her 37-year-old abuser who co-opts her life, her voice and her story in Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*. The novel recasts Humbert's deviant behaviour – which he dances on the edge of admitting, multiple times, without ever crossing the line into full comprehension – as a tale of seduction, a madcap American road trip, a poignant and doomed love affair.

But it's all a trick, and Nabokov employed all of his literary might to fool the reader, couching a tale of moral outrage against childhood sexual abuse (and the hidden-in-plain sight inspiration of the 1948 kidnapping of 11-year-old Sally Horner) in its pages. When *Lolita* was finally [legitimately published in Canada](#) in 1958, Nabokov appeared on the CBC television program *Close-Up* along with literary critic Lionel Trilling, who promptly called the novel “erotic” and concluded that “it is not a book about an aberration but about an actual love” that is “full of tenderness and compassion.” (Trilling also wrote [a long essay](#) equating Dolores to Shakespeare's Juliet, herself all of 13.)

Trilling wasn't the only one. Robertson Davies, in *Saturday Night* magazine, came to the absurd conclusion that *Lolita* was “not the corruption of an innocent child by a cunning adult, but the exploitation of a weak adult by a corrupt child.” Dorothy Parker sympathized so heavily with Humbert that she denigrated Dolores as “a dreadful little creature, selfish, hard, vulgar, and foul-tempered.”

The 1962 film adaptation directed by Stanley Kubrick leaned so heavily into this idea of a “twisted love story” that in doing so, it hid the alleged sexual abuse of Sue Lyon by producer James Harris during filming, when Lyon was just 14. (Harris [denied the allegations](#) in 2020.) Even as recently as 2000, J.K. Rowling gushed about Nabokov transforming a plot that “could have been the most worthless pornography” into “a great and tragic love story.”

Equating *Lolita* to a love story would have embedded deeply into the mind of someone like Gerald Fremlin, a ready-made means of justifying his pedophilia. He was a veteran of doing so, [once telling Andrea Skinner](#), in front of her mother, that “many cultures in the past weren't as ‘prudish’ as ours, and it used to be considered normal for children to learn about sex by engaging in sex with adults.”

As I wrote in *The Real Lolita*, which recounted Sally Horner's kidnapping and tragic life and the ways in which Nabokov mined Sally's story for his novel, the

culture of “teen-temptress vamping” did not account for the victimization at the novel’s core. Nearly 70 years after *Lolita*’s publication, “far too many readers still don’t see through Humbert Humbert’s vile perversions, and still blame Dolores Haze for her behaviour, as if she had the will to resist, and chose not to.”

One reader who always saw through the misunderstandings was [Nabokov’s wife, Vera](#), who famously recorded her vexed feelings in her diary in May, 1958. “I wish someone would notice the tender description of the child’s helplessness, her pathetic dependence upon the monstrous HH, and her heart-rending courage all along. ... They all miss the fact that the ‘horrid little brat’ Lolita is essentially very good indeed – or she would not have straightened out after being crushed so terribly.”

What Vera hinted at was bluntly articulated by Azar Nafisi in *Reading Lolita in Tehran*: Dolores Haze is a double victim. “The desperate truth of *Lolita*’s story is not the rape of a 12-year-old girl by a dirty old man but the confiscation of one individual’s life by another.” Fremlin’s deluded misreading of *Lolita* pretended to give Andrea Skinner agency while robbing her of it entirely. Munro’s merciless mining of life into art had unforgivable costs, and choosing her literary self – for Fremlin was a key part of it – over her youngest daughter alters her legacy for good.


In telling her story, Skinner has reasserted her actual, individual self. She is reshaping a narrative that turned a woman’s terrible decisions into near-literary sainthood, reminding us that character isn’t correlated with great art, and monsters lurk even, and above all, in the quiet, tranquil places associated with classic Canadian literature.

<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/article-andrea-robin-skinner-reminds-us-that-monsters-lurk-within-classic/>

**Sarah Weinman**

ABOUT BOOKS WRITING MEDIA EVENTS NEWS

## About



Sarah Weinman is the author of *Scoundrel*, named a Best Book of 2022 by *Time*, *Esquire*, *CBC*, and *NPR*, and *The Real Lolita*, named a Best Book of 2018 by *NPR*, *BuzzFeed*, *The National Post*, *Literary Hub*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, and *Vulture*, and winner of the Crime Writers of Canada Award in Nonfiction. She also edited *Evidence of Things Seen: True Crime in an Era of Reckoning*; *Unspeakable Acts: True Tales of Crime, Murder, Deceit & Obsession*, winner of the Anthony Award for Best Nonfiction/Critical Work; *Women Crime Writers: Eight Suspense Novels of the 1940s & 50s* (Library of America); and *Troubled Daughters*.

*Twisted Wives* (Penguin).

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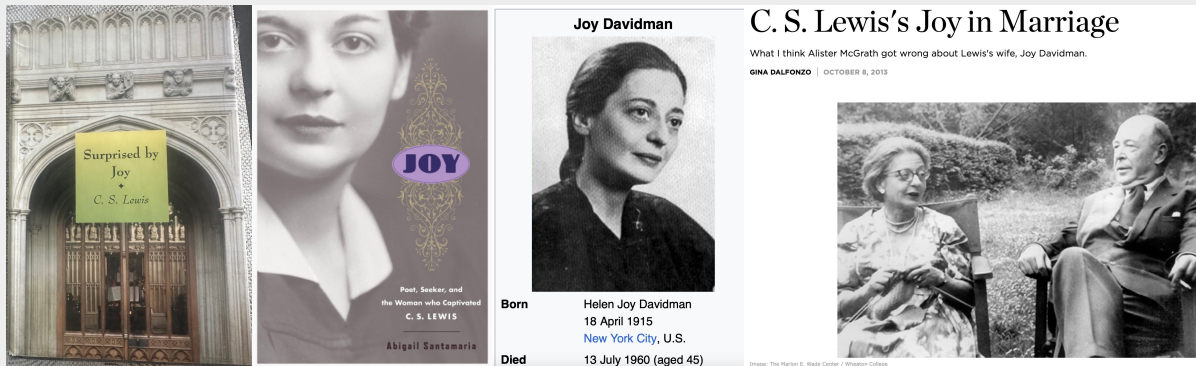
The lies that adults tell themselves. What was best for young Robin was not what Fremlin gave her. Robin needed a male father figure who would protect her (even at times from herself perhaps in the plasticity of formative sexuality) and provide a safe, nonsexual space for her in male-relationship developmental arenas, letting her mature and become sexualized in age-appropriate ways at the proper times. Alice’s jealousy of her own daughter gives the lie to so much. TJB

No one in their right mind ventures into these speculative arenas—at least not without a ten-foot pole of obfuscating ass-covering with all sorts of virtue signaling—but since no one reads my blog anyways, I will. Famous last words now in the online cyberworld, but really, I have nothing controversial to add or hide.

“Gerald Fremlin ... justifying his pedophilia ... was a veteran of doing so, [once telling Andrea Skinner](#), in front of her mother, that “many cultures in the past weren’t as ‘prudish’ as ours, and it used to be considered normal for children to learn about sex by engaging in sex with adults.” Such always gets trotted out by child molesters, and usually refers to ancient Greek taste for male homosexuality—I’m not sure they cared about lesbianism—and Roman delight in bacchanalia.

I first read C.S. (Jack) Lewis late in life; I have never read the “Narnia” books. I soon came to admire him, putting himself out there daring to speak as a Cambridge academic for Christianity. Not everyone could have written *The Screwtape Letters*, and the toll Jack reported it took on him venturing into such a mindset-terrain suggests maybe no one should. Biographers have unearthed some things—nothing perversely scandalous I think—that perhaps explain how Mr. Lewis knew what it was like off moral grids. C.S. had some deficits in his formative world, and the usual demoralizing WWI experience, that no doubt undermined his faith in conventional versions of life.

Of particular note was his love affair with and marriage to Joy Davidman. I still puzzle over some aspects of it; Joy leaves me wondering. For all the profundity of their bond, she also left Jack wondering too, never quite the same as evidenced in *A Grief Observed*. I understand grief and loss, but a truly healthy relationship with a wholesome woman should not leave a good, healthy man unbalanced and unnerved. A salvific introject should have been securely internalized that soothed and succored.



Besides his evincing the Anglo-Irish disdain for Englishmen, new to me and delightful given my paternal Orange roots, I found C.S.’s (*Surprised by Joy*) treatment of epidemic English public school homosexuality puzzling. He seems to have never indulged himself—maybe even escaping being “indulged” by a head-boy—and downplays both the perversity of it and its lasting fall-out. I have always wondered if the Classicism of that Victorian and Edwardian world, venerating Greek and Roman culture, wasn’t in part due to the subtext of—to put it recklessly with bad taste—Plato sodomizing a young Aristotle, or at any rate, the unsullied fancied-classical youth being schooled in libidinal affairs by a would-be Byron or Oscar Wilde. I suspect the basis for the grievous toll taken by Turkish prison guards on T.E. Lawrence’s (*A Prince of Our Disorder*) “T.E Shaw/J.H. Ross” psyche was laid in the Oxford High School for Boys. TJB