In 1940, after living for two decades in Germany and France, Vladimir Nabokov, the scion of an eminent anti-Bolshevist Russian family, and Vera Evseevna, his Jewish wife, fled the Nazis with their young son, Dmitri, and emigrated to the United States. Already an accomplished novelist, Vladimir was struck by many characteristics of America, which he explored in 200,000 miles of cross-country automobile trips, undertaken in part to indulge his passion for collecting butterflies.

Before the Nabokovs moved to Switzerland in 1960, Vladimir wrote three novels: “Lolita,” “Pnin” and “Pale Fire.” In “Nabokov in America,” Robert Roper, the Berkeley author of eight novels, a study of the poetry of Walt Whitman, and a biography of mountain climber Willi Unsoeld, examines Nabokov’s “American turn.” Written in English, showcasing a familiarity with contemporary American manners and mores, a command of American literature, an American-style audacity and a psychological hard edge, Roper maintains, these books established Nabokov’s claim to greatness. They may even have called “a new America into being — a Lolitaesque, Nabokovian new land, layered with perplexities, rippling with edgy laughter.”

Nabokov’s claim — “I had to invent America” — should, of course, be taken with a grain of salt. That
said, Roper does demonstrate that Nabokov was a keen observer (and satirist) of the social and cultural norms of mid-20th century America. In “Pnin,” for example, the title character, based on emigre professor of history Marc Szeftel, finds himself in a technology-obsessed land of washing machines. Casting aside “all decorum and caution,” Nabokov writes, Pnin fed them “anything that happened to be at hand” (handkerchiefs, kitchen towels, shorts and shirts), “just for the joy of watching through that porthole what looked like an endless tumble of dolphins with the staggers.”

Cluttered with “sundry Americana” and featuring a Hudson River that stretches to Colorado as well as antic wordplay, “Pale Fire” concerns a lonely language instructor who thinks he is — and may even be — the king of Zembla, a nation near Russia, who has been deposed and has escaped to the United States.

Although Nabokov railed against fiction preoccupied with political or social issues and mocked people who found larger meanings in “Lolita,” Roper makes a compelling case that this novel (which includes a journey across America, motor court operators, that “curious roadside species, Hitchhiking Man,” and slang expressions like “spic and span,” “brand new,” “goof-off,” and “sad sack”) is a “deep and excoriating” (and parodic) critique of Eisenhower-era values and behavior. Nabokov observed those around him, Roper writes, “curious, half-asleep people — a perky populace with gloomy secrets, inhabiting a magnificent landscape that it tended to crap up, prone to stifling social norms best depicted via caustic comedy.” They made sex “the springboard for all else — nonstandard, indeed, perverted sex, because the country in its youthful aspect was fresh and sexy but also strapped in with prohibitions.”

Stories of compromised innocence are not that rare in American literature, Roper reminds us. It is not all that surprising that J.D. Salinger wrote “The Catcher in the Rye” at this time. Both novelists, Roper suggests, tapped into an American zeitgeist in which “a certain period of childhood — nymphethood for Humbert [Humbert], and for Holden [Caulfield] those years when a child comes out with things that ‘just kill you’ — is a window upon radiance.”

Although, at first, Nabokov could not find an American publisher for “Lolita” and feared that his new book would be stillborn, his timing turned out to be excellent. By the late ’50s, enforcers of public morality in the United States, including censors of James Joyce’s “Ulysses,” D.H. Lawrence’s “Lady Chatterley’s Lover” and “Women in Love,” and Henry Miller’s “Tropic of Cancer,” Roper indicates, had gone “from weak to moribund.” And “Lolita” appealed to ordinary readers: “it was decked with gaudy allures, wickedly funny, sure to offend, but with its doors wide open.”

Embraced by highbrows, lowbrows and middlebrows, despite and because of the moods of disgust and horror it evoked, the novel sold hundreds of thousands of copies in its first year, and many millions after that. Movie rights brought Nabokov $150,000. Vladimir and Vera could not believe their ears when Steve Allen joked on his television show that he was sending Mr. Nabokov the latest scientific toy, a “doll-girl who can do everything, oh but everything.”

In his American books, Roper concludes, in a claim more applicable to “Lolita” than to “Pnin” or “Pale
Fire,” “a veritable American reality” reigns. That reality is often communicated intimately, to be sure, in ghastly images, sometimes eliciting horrid laughter, that are frightening because they are so recognizable. As the critic F.W. Dupee put it, “In the startled first moment of ‘Lolita’s’ birth,” Nabokov’s fiction conveys the sense of “the gag that life is.”

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Nabokov in America

On the Road to Lolita

By Robert Roper

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