

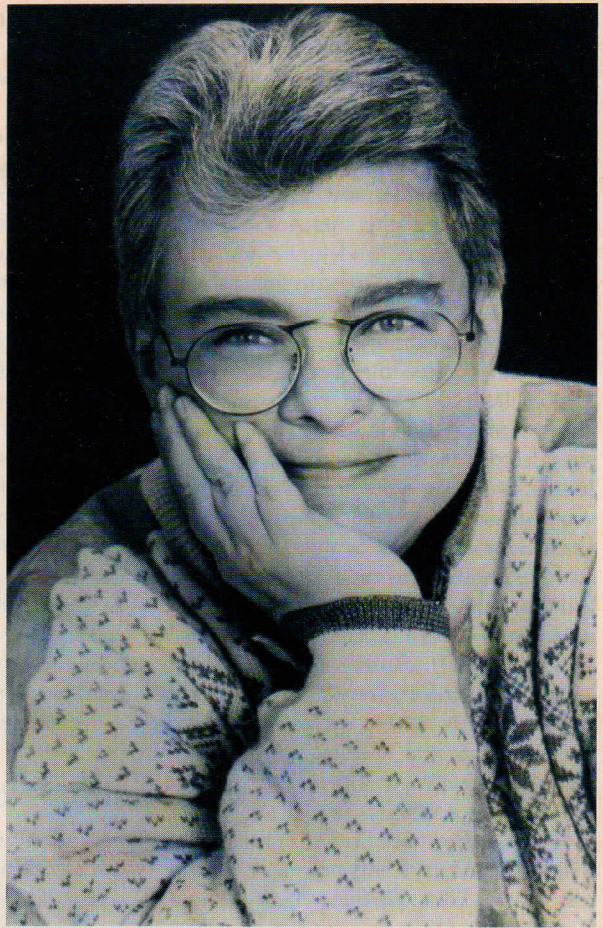
# Paula Vogel

## “How I Learned to Drive”

by Gerard Raymond

To say *How I Learned to Drive* is about pedophilia is to do Paula Vogel's Pulitzer Prize-winning play a disservice. Moving nimbly back and forth through time, Vogel chronicles the unconventional and potentially damaging seven-year affair between a girl called Li'l Bit and her Uncle Peck, begun when the young girl is eleven and the older man is 38. But this is no movie-of-the-week melodrama with clear-cut villains and victims. It's an affecting coming-of-age story — a love story even — and Vogel tells it with a lively sense of humor and remarkable empathy for both characters.

Given who wrote it, the unconventionality of *How I Learned to Drive* should come as no surprise. Over the past two decades, Vogel has defied attempts to pigeonhole her work and has consistently subverted the expectations of her audience. She takes on controversial subjects and hot-button issues — for example, prostitution in *The Oldest Profession*, pornography and domestic violence in *Hot 'n' Throbbing* — and refracts them through a disturbingly humane and humorous sensibility. But her intention, she says, is not to shock or to provoke. “In every play I communicate the way I see the world,” explains the 46-year-old, silver-haired playwright. “It's simply the way I think.”



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Vogel says she carried the idea for *How I Learned to Drive* in her head for about ten years, but the seed for her controversial and critically-acclaimed play dates back even further — to her high school days, when she first read Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*. She kept returning to the book over the years, she says, intrigued by the thought of what the story would be like if the author were a woman. "Its truthful misogyny — a vision of the world that lets us see how the gender system works — is the closest thing to my vision of feminism," she says. Even at the start of her writing career, Vogel was not interested in "trying to construct a world which does not exist," or merely to write positive portrayals and idealized role models for women. "I find it bracing and uplifting when somebody just tells me the truth. I felt enlivened by *Lolita* and thought, 'why can't women tell the truth this way?'"

Perhaps the most discomforting aspect of *How I Learned to Drive* is that the play elicits from the viewer something far more complex than a knee-jerk response to child molestation. "It is most important to me that we love Uncle Peck," she explains. Indeed, as Vogel explores the shifts in power and the emotional flux of the illicit affair, Peck seduces the audience, along

with his niece. "We think of people who are interested in young children as men wearing trench coats standing by playgrounds. What about the family member at the dinner table or the nice guy everyone knows on the block, who is a complicated, engaging, three-dimensional human?" asks Vogel. "We are trained as older people, in essence, to be pedophiles in this culture," she adds provocatively. "The eroticizing of children is so prevalent, yet so seldom acknowledged."

But Vogel makes it clear that by not demonizing Peck she doesn't mean to trivialize the very real traumas caused by incest and sexual abuse. "Let's face it, there are bastards out of Carolina," she says, referring to the searing memoir by Dorothy Allison. "I want to be responsible to people who have had bad experiences." But as Li'l Bit herself says in the play, she is one of the lucky ones. Uncle Peck has left his niece a complex legacy not all of which is destructive.

Vogel began the actual writing of *How I Learned to Drive*, just as she does all her work, only when the right image for the play materialized in her head. In this instance it was a young woman driving, who glimpses a ghost in the back seat as she adjusts her rearview mirror. That

image led to the play's highly theatrical structure — a series of flashbacks in jumbled chronological order, each humorously preceded by titles taken from a driver's ed manual. Vogel gets much mileage from her driving metaphor. Teaching Li'l Bit to drive is the stratagem the wily Peck employs to seduce the minor, but, on another level, those lessons also teach the girl how to fend for herself as an adult.

Peck insists on teaching his niece to drive "like a man" — to drive with confidence and with aggression. The masculine secret of driving he reveals to Li'l Bit is that when she's in control of the car — "just the driver and the road" — that's a "power" nobody can take away from her. "We all learn to drive in an age of sexual confusion," observes the playwright. And of course, it doesn't help when the lessons also help foster gender stereotypes. Recalling her own experience in high-school driver's ed class in the 1960s, Vogel says that women of her day were taught to drive very differently from men. They even related to automobiles differently. "I remember being bombarded in my teenage years with automobile advertisements where young women were draped on the hoods of cars," says Vogel wryly.

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sive and think ahead in order to become independent," Vogel continues. "He's reaching her to be five steps ahead of what the other guy is going to do. In essence, he creates Li'l Bit to destroy him. So I can't help seeing him as a hero." The dual nature of Peck's behavior echoes Humbert Humbert's interaction with his "nymphet" Lolita. "Nabokov was trying to show some positive things like ego formation in his book," says Vogel. "I'm interested in examining everything as a two-way street."

As Li'l Bit grows to adulthood — another positive effect of her experience with Peck is that she becomes strong enough to escape from the redneck environment of her family — the play's title takes on an added dimension. "I thought about that title over and over again, and how I could get all the implications of the word 'drive,'" Vogel says. "A lot of that has to do with female sexual aggression and power — the things that we have traditionally thought of as masculine." For instance, when the mature Li'l Bit picks up a young student, she appreciates for the first time the attraction and the inherent power of an intergenerational relationship: "Oh — this is the allure. Being older. Being the first... This is how the giver gets taken." For Vogel, "the notion of virility and passivity as being specifically male and female makes absolutely no sense."

Since Vogel has been an out-of-the-closet lesbian since her late teens, one could speculate that her views on gender have been shaped by her sexuality. But she cautions against reading too much autobiography into her work. "Everything I write is autobiographical and not," she says. A native of Maryland, she uses, what she calls, the geography of her own life as the backdrop for *How I Learned to Drive*, and the time period of the play roughly corresponds to her own youth. "I want to put my own sexuality on the table, but that's not the sexuality of the play," she continues. Rather than claiming Li'l Bit as a stand-in for herself, Vogel points out her connections with Peck. "I'm the same age as Peck, and yeah, I do identify with him." And, in typical Vogellian fashion, she adds gleefully, "It's important that a woman — and it's ironic that she's a lesbian — writes about how beautiful men are."

*How I Learned to Drive* is probably the most honored American play of the past two years. Since the New York premiere in March of 1997, it has received nearly every available accolade for best play. So far, there have been over 25 productions of the play in the United States alone; even more are scheduled this year both

here and abroad. But this kind of success has been a long time coming for a playwright who has written over twenty plays in as many years. Many of Vogel's plays have been produced at important regional theaters across the country, but none have had the reception of *How I Learned to Drive*.

Consequently, until now, she's had to rely for a living, on her day job as head of the graduate writing program department at Brown University.

Apart from the 1992 whimsical and heart-wrenching fantasy *The Baltimore Waltz* — a memorial to her gay brother Carl who died of AIDS — most Vogel plays remain unknown. *The Oldest Profession*, in which five aging prostitutes (the youngest is 72 years) bravely struggle to ply their trade in the economic climate fostered by the advent of Reagan to the Presidency, has yet to be produced by a major theater company anywhere in this country. The only production so far of *Hot 'n' Throbbing* — about a mother of two who makes her living writing pornography at home — has been a 1994 presentation at Hasty Pudding Theater in Cambridge, Mass.

In a climate where women playwrights in general find it more difficult than men to get their work produced anywhere, Vogel has perhaps been doubly marginalized as a lesbian, feminist playwright. Then there is the tone of her writing. Her seemingly playful approach to serious subject matter has, up to now, tended to confuse potential producers. (Audiences at *How I Learned to Drive* — with its hilarious Greek chorus composed of the three women in Li'l Bit's life — catch themselves giggling even as they shudder at the implications of Uncle Peck's behavior.) "It's like somebody put something in the drinking water," says Vogel about her sudden success. Her theory is that a writer and society often follow independent trajectories, but there comes a point in time where the playwright and the culture meet. It's probably no coincidence that in the year following the premiere of *How I Learned to Drive* we have seen two movies — Adrian Lynne's remake of *Lolita* and Todd Solondz's *Happiness* — tackling pedophilia with maturity and wit and, most significantly, without hysteria.

Riding on a crest of popularity for the first time in her career, Vogel is now inundated with offers of every kind. "All of the opportunities that you've wanted all of your life happen all at the same time," she says smiling. "You have to say no to things you've always dreamed of — like doing a

musical or a television series." Not that her plate was empty anyway. Just prior to the opening of this Los Angeles production of *How I Learned to Drive*, she was gearing up for the New York premiere of another new play, *The Mineola Twins* — an allegorical comedy following the lives of a pair of sisters (you'll have to decide which of them is good and which is evil) during the Eisenhower, Nixon, and Bush Administrations. She describes the work, which is lighter than *Drive*, as being about "our schizophrenia as a country." Coming up are the film versions of *How I Learned to Drive*, directed by Fred Schepisi who brought *Six Degrees of Separation* to the screen, and *The Oldest Profession* starring Olympia Dukakis and Rita Moreno. She is also scripting a cable TV project for Showtime, with playwrights Harvey Fierstein and Terrence McNally, which comprises three vignettes of gay life in the 1950s, 1970s, and 1980s.

Currently on leave from Brown University, Vogel also has ideas for two musical theater projects simmering, and she has just taken up a three-year post as playwright in residence at Washington, D.C.'s Arena Stage. Her first work for this company will be an elaborate Christmas pageant titled *A Civil War Christmas*. Vogel describes it as an attempt to capture what Washington, D.C. was like on the last Christmas Eve of the Civil War in 1864, using ballads of the era, Christmas carols and spirituals, and intermingling historical figures as well as ordinary folk.

Asked about her future plans Vogel says, "I'm very clear and have been all along, that I don't want to write the same play twice." Before *How I Learned to Drive* opened in New York she told a reporter that she hoped that by taking the audience along for a ride they wouldn't ordinarily take, or didn't even know they were taking, they might see highly-charged political issues in new and unexpected ways. You can bet that whatever her next project, she'll be traveling once again along unexpected paths. "In my private life, I'm boringly consistent and I do have my life arranged," she says. "But is the imagination ever arranged? I hope not!" □

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*Gerard Raymond is a freelance journalist on theater and film, based in New York City.*

***How I Learned to Drive* will be at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles from February 13 – April 14.**