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Qui A Connu Lolita: Who Killed Lolita? A Review

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Qui A Connu Lolita: Who Killed Lolita? A Review

Abstract

The brilliant and disturbing work *Qui a Connu Lolita?* (*Who Knew Lolita?*), or as it is more provocatively titled in the authors' English translation *Who Killed Lolita?*, starts with a *precis*: voices tell us there have been three deaths, of a mother and her two children, the bodies found in their Marseilles apartment two months later.

This is a composition for radio, not a collection of easy evidence for a police dossier. Who did kill Lolita? Who is to blame? The program draws its power from suggestion, like footnotes plucked from a subterranean soundtrack. It poses uncomfortable questions and leaves the listener to find answers, if any there be, and to harken to voices whispering from the shadows which hint at psychological depression, at pride, at faith, hope and charity. Church bells function to create beats, and they establish the rhythm of scenes, but tellingly (tollingly?), they also suggest and judge. The pace is deliciously careful, pausing all along to invite the listener in to the program, leaving wide spaces for the imagination. The more people we hear from, the more murky the mystery becomes.

Long after hearing a powerful documentary feature, what is it you most remember about it? The atmospherics, a sound, a striking image, a provocatively posed question that can't be avoided, yet has no simple answer? Many moments in *Lolita* may transport you into another realm of listening, a heightened sense of wonder at the producers' skills. I'll point your attention to just two gob-smacking scenes which got under my skin, and will stay with me forever. *Qui a Connu Lolita/Who Killed Lolita?* is a deeply fascinating work. Listen, and you will never forget it.

Keywords

radio documentary, audio feature, Cape Verde, Marseilles

Qui a Connu Lolita? (Who Killed Lolita?)

Reviewer: Chris Brookes

In 2009, Radio-Grenouille, a community radio station in Marseille, invited ARTE Radio, ARTE France's web radio station, to be its 'artist' in residence. Reporters, producers and presenters developed riffs on the sounds of the city, sound creations and three major documentaries, which all aired in public from September 29-October 4, 2009, as part of the Marseille-sur-écoute event, and were broadcast on Radio-Grenouille and arteradio.com.

On January 20, 2009, a woman from Cape Verde and her two young daughters were found dead in their small apartment in the St. Pierre district of Marseille, France. The tragedy made the national news for a few hours. Working at the time on various radio programs coproduced by Radio-Grenouille and ARTE Radio, three reporters from both teams decided to investigate. They met people who might have known Lolita and why she died. Six months of investigation resulted in Who Killed Lolita? -a tribute, a portrait of a community and of an individual destiny.

Authors: Anouk Batard, Mehdi Ahoudig, Olivier Apprill

Realisation: Mehdi Ahoudig

Mixing: Samuel Hirsch

Production : Radio-Grenouille / ARTE Radio

Duration: 50'.47"

Audio link to program: at end

Long after hearing a powerful documentary feature, what is it you most remember about it? The atmospherics, a sound, a striking image, a provocatively posed question that can't be avoided, yet has no simple answer?

A fine radio work may get under your skin in a number of ways, but I suggest that it will seldom be the factual information that sticks so vibrantly, like a burr in the brain, intellectually important as those facts may be. Radio/audio is an emotional and imaginative medium: harnessing its quicksilver to convey factual information can slow it to pedestrian speed, reluctantly instructional and perilously close to boredom, holding the listener at arm's length while declaiming from the front of the classroom.

At least that's how it seems to me.

The brilliant and disturbing work *Qui a Connu Lolita?* (*Who Knew Lolita?*), or as it is more provocatively titled in the authors' English translation *Who Killed Lolita?* could have followed the formula of a traditional whodunit: begin with a death, then follow Miss Marple and the police as they sift through a series of facts, display their clever detective work, and finally lay bare the truth like Exhibit A in the evidence room. Cause of death, time of death, who killed who, murder or suicide, just the facts ma'am: the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the two-dimensional, black and white truth.

Producer Mehdi Ahoudig and his colleagues are not above borrowing some tricks from detective fiction, but their program doesn't tread that well-worn path. We learn at the beginning that there's been a death (three in fact). Of course we'll keep listening to find out whodunit, who wouldn't? Was it Colonel Mustard in the kitchen with the revolver, or Professor Plum with the steak knife in the pantry? Nothing so banal. In the program, we never hear from the coroner or the police (although an assistant prosecutor makes a brief appearance). We are never told much about what the investigative authorities concluded in their clinical examination of the three deaths, for example whether the mother starved her children to death before she herself died. Such factual details are not the primary focus. Instead we hear rumours, and view events through the eyes of puzzled neighbours, priests, teachers (are they themselves culpable? Is the lover? The family? Lolita herself?) There are victims but no explicit conviction, no justice done and no sentence clearly pronounced. This is a composition for radio, not a collection of easy evidence for a police dossier. Who did kill Lolita? Who is to blame? The program draws its power from suggestion, like footnotes plucked from a subterranean soundtrack. It poses uncomfortable questions and leaves the listener to find answers, if any there be, and to harken to voices whispering from the shadows which hint at psychological depression, at pride, at faith, hope and charity.

"And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these [is] charity..." (Corinthians 13:13)

I've never been to Marseilles, so what do I know? I suppose it's possible that the place is crammed with so many churches that they insinuate a whiff of religion into any sound recordings you can make in the place. Perhaps it's impossible to record an atmosphere in the city for more than 30 seconds without some church bell shouldering its way into the microphone, which would mean that the striking of bells we hear throughout the first half of the program could be just an unavoidable accident of the recording environment.¹

¹ I often wonder what real-world recorded sound sometimes inspires a feature-maker to reshape it obliquely into a creative, rather than a reportorial, device. What sound gave Leo Braun the idea to create the descant sequence in *Bells of Europe*, for instance?

However church bells initially wormed their way into this brilliant and disturbing program, it was no accident. Of course they function to create beats, and they establish the rhythm of scenes, but tellingly (tollingly?), they also suggest and judge. And *Lolita* surrounds those suggestions and judgements with plenty of open space, room for the listener to enter the program and consider questions about fate and destiny, rationality and belief. It's the suggestions that we really follow, not the (rational) police investigation; we never meet the Sherlock on the case. We don't meet Madame Blavatsky either, but later in *Lolita* she seems to be on the case as well.

Lacking a religious or philosophical education, I won't bore you by attempting to untangle the metaphysical threads running through all this - but even if I could, I wouldn't. You must listen to this remarkable program, and let it draw you in to finger them for yourself, so that whatever you find will not be a flat, clear explanation, but a complex truth that resounds between your ears. Perhaps not even a truth, just a signpost pointing in the general direction. Which of course is the truest truth of all.

Many moments in *Lolita* may transport you into another realm of listening, a heightened sense of wonder at the producers' skills. I'll point your attention to just two gob-smacking scenes which got under my skin, and will stay with me forever.

The feature starts with a *precis*: voices tell us there have been three deaths, of a mother and her two children, the bodies found in their apartment two months later. Murder, suicide - who knows? Someone wonders if they may have died from 'hunger, solitude or whatever.'

Church bells ring in the background.

Immediately, we are in a bakery. People are buying food, it's so easy for them. Sounds of coins, a cash register, money being paid over the counter. Yes, the baker remembers the little girl who used to come with a note from her mother, for bread. After a while the account went unpaid, and the baker cut off credit. She was denied, the little girl. She didn't come back. Neighbours noticed the mother's laundry hung on the line for months, the mailbox was stuffed overfull. Why, they wonder, didn't someone check to see if the family was all right? Too late. A church bell strikes four times.

People say the woman was pregnant. They heard a baby crying, then didn't hear it anymore, but didn't enquire about it. Children kicking a football in the street complain that they have nowhere else to play. They say they petitioned for a neighbourhood

youth centre; they were denied. Again a church bell strikes. Denial, denial, denial. We have heard three denials now: of bread, of compassion, of youth.

Now comes the first sound moment I want to talk about, at 6.50 in the program. Of course it begins - again - with the sound of a bell, an altar handbell this time. We are in a church with a priest. He doesn't know the dead woman's religion, but assures that if she were Christian, she would have had help and support. At this moment a tramp wanders up, and asks the priest to make a phone call for him. The priest dismisses him. The tramp wheedles, the priest scoffs. Finally he asks for charity: one euro. No, says the priest, and turns away. The tramp is denied. The microphone moves with the priest deeper into the church. If the producers had hit their record pause button at this point, an incandescent sound moment would have been lost. They keep recording. Then, from the entrance, a distant desperate shout from the tramp: 'Not even one euro?' His call echoes hollowly through the church. A fourth denial, of charity, this one by a priest of all people, who has just expounded on Christian charity. What can I almost hear in this tramp's cry from the door of a church, echoing deep beneath the scene in those subterranean footnotes? Surely not Peter's denial of Christ? Ridiculous - I'm not even a Christian. It must be just my imagination running away with me.

It is an unforgettable, luminescent moment of sound that has stuck with me ever since I first heard it five years ago when this feature won the *Prix Europa*.

AUDIO CLIP #1: <https://soundcloud.com/radiodocreview/lolita-excerpt1-brookes>

Door creaks. Small bell rings. Silence of a church (6:45)

Priest: *Came to church? Perhaps she came to pray. I don't know. But I never met her. (Silence)*

Depending on her religion, I'd have sent her to see her congregation. I don't know how they work in terms of accompanying and supporting people. And if she was Christian, well, I'd have put her in touch with other Christians. Or I'd have talked to her to see what we could do, you see.

Another man arrives

Tramp *(background): Can somebody call Mystatta for me?*

Priest: *Sorry?*

Tramp: Good evening.

Reporter: Good evening.

Tramp: How are you?

Reporter: Fine, and you?

Tramp: You change, you get older... Like I said to the priest, I'm changing. He says why don't I come to church more often. That's what he said. (Laughs) I'm busy. I mean, that's why I can't come.

Priest: You're busy doing nothing.

Tramp: Doing nothing... He thinks I'm lazy. He thinks I don't want to go and work in the country. I let myself go.

Laughs

Tramp: Anyway, can you call Monetta for me?

Priest: You want to see your state?

Tramp: No. Monetta. My cousin, Pierre.

Priest: No, listen...

Tramp: Why not?

Priest: Listen. Every time we have to call Cassis or... And then nothing ever happens.

Tramp: No, they come to pick me up even so. They come for me.

Priest: So you say, but I always see you hanging around the neighbourhood. I never see you leave.

Tramp: No, they come to pick me up. At night, they come for me.

Priest: *At night? Strange time to visit!*

Tramp: *Can you spare me one euro? One euro?*

Priest: *No, no.*

Tramp: *You don't have one euro?*

Priest: *It's the same every day.*

Tramp: *You don't have a euro?*

Priest: *No, I think she was a member of a Baptist church, or something. Unless she went to Sebastopol where there's an Evangelical church, I think. "Come and see" it's called. But I'm not sure. I don't really know... She was from Cape Verde. I don't know if she was Christian, because even in Sebastopol, the churches are Christian. In fact, I think it's an ecumenical church. That means they work with us.*

Tramp: *C'mon, give me a coin!*

Priest: *It's non-stop.*

Tramp: *Give me a coin! To get a coffee. I promise you I'll invite you to my wedding.*

Priest: *No, look...*

Tramp: *I promise I'll invite you.*

Priest: *Go on...*

Tramp: *I'll invite you to my wedding. I promise I'll invite you.*

Priest: *Can't you see we're busy?*

Tramp: *Just one euro! What's one euro?*

Priest: *No! I already told you.*

Tramp: *One euro's nothing, absolutely nothing.*

Priest: *I said no!*

Tramp: *Give us a euro...*

Priest: *We're going inside with these ladies and gentlemen.*

Tramp: *Come on!*

Priest: *Ah!*

Priest: *He's a joker.*

Tramp *(background): Can't you spare even one euro?*

Priest laughs

Neighbours tell us that Lolita's little girl seemed increasingly hungry. We go to her school and meet her teachers. They castigate themselves for not making enquiries when she stopped coming to classes. We learn that the Cape Verdean community in Marseilles is tight-knit. They mostly all know each other. They cluster at a local cafe. They sing heart-rendingly sad songs about fate and destiny. Later, we learn that there was some sort of argument between Lolita, her new lover and her ex-boyfriend. Although she was pregnant, she denied it. She avoided people, stopped answering her door. Her cousin thinks the whole family is too proud. Pride, that's the real culpability, he says.

Hang on a minute, there's nothing going on here about Lust and Pride and the Seven Deadly Sins, is there? Of course not, that's just something that occurred to me because of all that funny business about Charity earlier on.

The pace is deliciously careful, pausing all along to invite the listener in to the program, leaving wide spaces for the imagination. The more people we hear from, the more murky the mystery becomes.

(mystery: noun, origin early 14c. "religious truth via divine revelation, hidden spiritual significance, mystical truth").

And now as a listener I begin to feel that something extraordinary is happening. The program is opening a door into a deeper interpretation of mystery - deeper, at least than you'd find in a commonplace 'murder mystery' with a plot-derived fascination. *Lolita* swims well below that surface, and it is from the depths that it draws its power. Earlier I referred to Madame Blavatsky being on the case, and at 35 minutes into the program, there is an astonishing scene.

Picking up on the priest's earlier reference to Lolita's religious affiliation, Mehdi Ahoudig and his colleagues introduce us to Lolita's religious advisor: a janitor, the president and high priest of 'Christian Rationalism'. (Here it is again, the dialectic of reason and belief). He tells us he is a medium who receives 'notes' from spirits. He refers to 'the police spirit'. He explains how it works: the medium sits at a table and takes dictation from the police spirit, writing down messages to pass on to his followers. Lolita was in crisis and the police spirit told her what to do. At this moment, we hear a faint knock. That's right, a knock. Someone wants to come in. Surely I am not the only listener who played with a *ouija* board as a teenager? Then the doorbell rings. Okay good, that's fine then, nothing weird going on after all - it's a real person asking to come into the room. The knock comes again. It's fine now, just a knock on the door. The president/priest/medium (or someone else, it's not clear) lets someone in, and says 'yes?' A little bell tinkles, reminiscent of the Catholic priest's small bell in the earlier scene. But whoever comes into the room is silent. He/she/it makes no sound at all. Are things getting a little spooky now? What is being suggested here?

The president/medium continues talking about Lolita. The knock comes again, inserting itself into the scene, underlining, the way the church bells did earlier. As a listener, I feel like I'm being led down a dark, mysterious alleyway, unseen shadows plucking at my sleeve, an occult path toward some subconscious unknown. The priest/president continues. The religion is about suffering, he says. Lolita might have wound up in a mental hospital if it hadn't been for Christian Rationalism, police spirits and notes. Only Lolita really knows why she fell so low, he says. The knock comes again. She took the answer with her, he says. Another knock. And another. There is a long, long pause. We think about what we've just heard. Was that... could it have been...? Lolita's spirit knocking? Impossible, this is a documentary. Real recordings made in the real, physical world. But what... what have we just witnessed? And then... another knock, but now it becomes an ordinary knock in the 'rational' world, on an apartment door, with Lolita's neighbour. Phew.

[AUDIO EXCERPT #2](https://soundcloud.com/radiodocreview/lolita-excerpt2-brookes): <https://soundcloud.com/radiodocreview/lolita-excerpt2-brookes>

Door. Mechanical sounds. (35:11)

Fortes: *My name is Fortes Joao. Cape Verdean. Born in Cape Verde. I left the country when I was 16 years old. I spent eight years in the merchant navy. So I did three, almost three trips, round the world before I moved here.*

Elevator.

Fortes: *I thought, the situation in America doesn't suit me. I took a look at Europe and I chose France. And I've been in France since '82 and I'm happy here. Right now, I work as a concierge/janitor. I've been in this building 11 years now.*

Let me tell you... When you were talking about Christian Rationalism... It's a school. It's a school where people learn to live. When it came here in Marseille, they chose me as president, because presidents don't grow on trees. You need someone who has a gift for it. Because Christian Rationalism takes people who fall, such as Lolita, and explains to them that life is also about suffering. Life isn't just about fun and joy.

We have books and we have notes. The president receives notes. This note is the police spirit. The police spirits sent it.

Knock on the door.

Fortes: *And who receives the note? The mediums. When they're at the table, the mediums' spirit... the spirit leaves the medium. And the spirit of the police medium who dictates... (doorbell rings) who dictates the information. And he writes it down and the information goes from one centre to another for us to read, so we... (knock on the door) So... (opens the door. "Yes?") So people learn to live their lives correctly.*

Bells.

Fortes: *For example, the problem with Lolita was she'd fallen so weak psychologically, so low. Low, low, low, low, very, very low. She closed into her shell. She had people around her. Her brother searched really hard. Maybe he didn't search deep enough, but he searched. He told people that knew her to tell her, 'Go to see Christian Rationalism*

because that's what you need. That's the only doctor, because if she goes to the hospital, they'll diagnose her as being sick. They'll say she's going off the rails and send her straight to a mental hospital, and that will be a disaster.'

A knock.

Fortes: *Lolita... To be honest with you, financially, Lolita didn't need any help. She didn't need any help at all. All that stuff people say about her dying of hunger because she didn't have any food and she couldn't afford it... That's just not true.*

She had work and she had funds that she'd left behind in Portugal. She left Portugal for no reason. I mean, perhaps she had her reasons, but it's not a reason to start a new life here. She had a life in Portugal.

But the problem now, if you want to know the truth, she's... (knock on the door) She's the one who knows why she broke down like that. And she's... (knock on the door) She took the answer with her.

(pause)

A knock

(long pause)

A knock

Neighbour #2: *Sophie! (knock on the door) No, it's not locked. There's no lock.*

(several knocks on the door)

I saw her just an hour ago. I saw her downstairs at the shop. I don't know...

(knock on the door)

The lady was a mystery.

How many of those knocks really happened that way in the scene as recorded, and how many did Mehdi Ahoudig place there?

‘Which is more true: a fact or a metaphor?’ (*Canadian poet Molly Peacock*)

‘Ah, the beauty of documentary, and the truth of fiction’ (*Danish feature-maker Mads Badstrop.*)

Qui a Connu Lolita/Who Killed Lolita? is a deeply fascinating work. Listen, and you will never forget it.

AUDIO LINK TO FULL PROGRAM IS [HERE](#):

http://www.arteradio.com/son/491214/qui_a_connu_lolita___/

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CHRIS BROOKES:

Chris Brookes is an independent radio producer who has crafted audio documentaries professionally for three decades. His documentaries range from current affairs to features to music to *ars acoustica* and commercially-released CDs. They have won many international awards including the *Peabody Award* and the *Prix Italia*.

He has directed documentaries for Canadian network television, is a published author and playwright and has taught documentary storytelling at workshops in North American and Europe. Before coming to radio, he founded a theatre company and pioneered the use of theatre as a vehicle for community development.

He has been named an International Audio Luminary by the Third Coast International Audio Festival, is inducted to the Newfoundland & Labrador Arts Hall of Fame, holds an honorary doctorate from Memorial University of Newfoundland, and is a recipient of the Order of Canada.

He lives in Newfoundland, Canada, with a traditional fiddler, a cat, and far too many seagulls.

