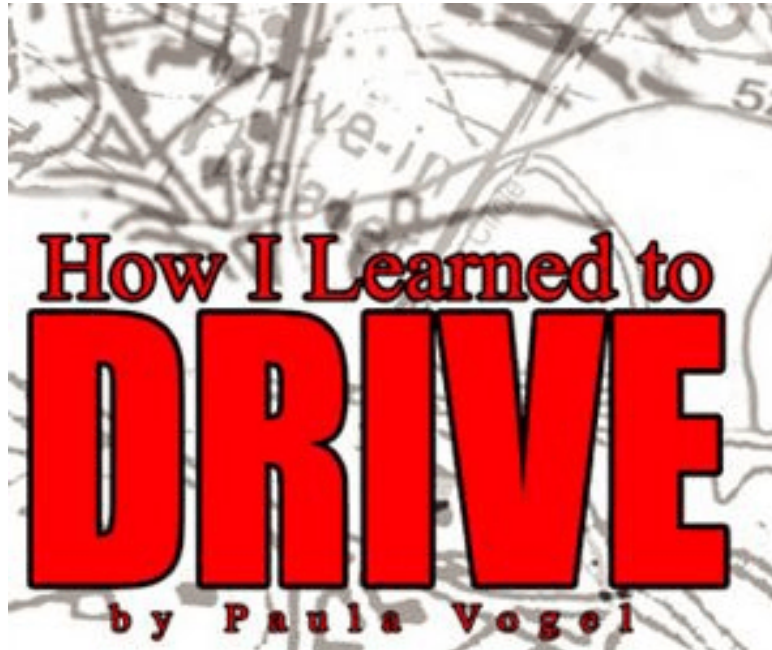


Paula Vogel's



A Playgoer's Guide

"*How I Learned to Drive* [was] one of the most challenging roles that I ever did. I never left the stage, and because of the subject matter, I had to get to that really dark place every night." – Molly Ringwald

"If the eyes are indeed the windows into the soul, then the vision of Paula Vogel's 1998 Pulitzer Prize-winning play, *How I Learned To Drive*, may very well show us a new way of seeing." – Brook Stowe, Theatre2K

Paula Vogel

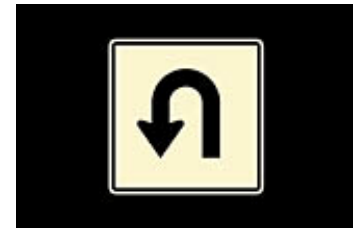


The American playwright Paula Vogel was born in Washington D.C. on November 16, 1951. She graduated from the Catholic University of America in 1974 and is best known for her provocative, funny, Pulitzer Prize winning play *How I Learned to Drive*, which deals with sexual abuse and incest. She is currently the Adele Kellenberg Seaver Professor of Literary Arts at Brown University. A few years ago, few would have predicted that a play about a pedophile could win a Pulitzer Prize, but Vogel is riding the waves of Pulitzer stardom. All this over Vogel's most recent and most successful

play, *How I Learned to Drive*. In its praise of the play, the New York Times wrote: It is hard to say who is the more accomplished seducer in *How I Learned to Drive* . . . Uncle Peck, surely the most engaging pedophile to walk across an American stage, or the woman who created him.

The critical reception and audience response to *How I Learned to Drive* really signaled a breakthrough for Vogel's career, she said in an interview the day after receiving the Pulitzer. "I don't know how the award has changed my life -- I really think that will take another year. I feel like my life changed when this show opened.

Psychologically, it's a profound honor to join this group of distinguished writers. But as to what it really means, I'm trying not to think about it. I'm trying to concentrate on getting to work next week and getting the new plays out." Vogel has no fear of controversial subjects - including AIDS, pornography, prostitution, and gay and lesbian relationships. Her mastery of humor, language and the chiaroscuro of morality are well established. And it really should not be a huge surprise that *Drive* won the Pulitzer: It also won the 1997 Obie in Playwriting, the Lortel Best Play Award, the Best Off-Broadway Play from the Outer Critics Circle, the Best Play from the Drama Desk, and the Best Play from the New York Drama Critics Circle.



A Bit of Background

Paula Vogel's Pulitzer Prize-winning play, *How I Learned to Drive*, recounts the story of a girl, Li'l Bit, and the complex relationship she develops with her Uncle Peck. Using the metaphor of driving, the playgoer follows Li'l Bit on the road from her childhood, through to her coming of age; complete with all the road signs and detours she encounters along the way, which in this case are the issues of pedophilia, incest, and misogyny. Through a sequence of non-linear scenes from her memory, Li'l Bit reveals the close but harmful bond that evolved between her and Uncle Peck over the years, and how she comes to terms with the tremendous impact it left on her life.

In an interview with the playwright, the Literary Director of American Repertory Theatre said the play was about how we receive harm from the people who love us. Paula Vogel said she believed the opposite is true. "I would say we receive great love from the people who harm us." It is from this standpoint that *How I Learned to Drive* unfolds.

Lolita

Paula Vogel claims that the novel *Lolita* was inspiration for *How I Learned to Drive*. The novel was written by Vladimir Nabokov in 1955, in Paris, France, and contains many similar themes. In the book, the protagonist and narrator, Humbert Humbert, becomes sexually obsessed with a pre-pubescent girl: Lolita. Humbert is tormented by a passion for what he calls 'nymphets' (sexually desirable pre-adolescent girls), which he believes was caused by his failure to consummate an affair with a childhood sweetheart, named Annabel, before her premature death from typhus. In 1947 he moves to Ramsdale, a small New England town, to write. By mischance he rents a room in the home of Charlotte Haze, a widow, but only after first seeing her twelve-year-old daughter Lolita (formally named Dolores) sunbathing in the garden. Humbert is instantly besotted by her, and does anything to be near her, including putting up with her mother, whom he dislikes. Gradually, the living Lolita supplants the memory of his childhood love completely.



The Greek Chorus

Vogel uses three different people to represent three different Greek choruses in the play. Two singular actors are used to represent the two leads, while three actors fluctuate between the three Greek choruses, representing different people in the lives of Li'l Bit.



Vogel turns modern day playwriting on its head by bringing back the Greek chorus and placing them in the life of Li'l Bit and Uncle Peck. In ancient Greek drama, the Greek Chorus supports the two leading characters, never taking control themselves, but accentuating the already flowing plot, and standing apart from the actual actions in the play.

"I wanted to do this in a very gentle way because I have been dissatisfied looking at the television movie of the week approach, and in many ways I think that this play is an homage to Lolita, which I think is one of the most astonishing books ever written. So I started this thinking I wonder if a woman writer could approach this, I wonder if this could be done as Lolita from Lolita's point of view." – Paula Vogel

This guide was researched by

The *How I Learned to Drive* Task Force
Allan Ford, Amanda Kilburn, and Chris Lyons

and edited by

Erin Breau, Katherine Johnson, Jessica Whalen, and Russ Hunt

St. Thomas University English 2223

The Page and the Stage

visit our Web site, at:

<http://people.stu.ca/~hunt/22230607/>