

Jenny Rat

Martin Simons

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Simons' Jenny Rat updates Nabakov's Lolita for the twenty-first century with its observations on the nature of humanity.

For Michael Ingram and fourteen-year-old Jenny, the main characters in Martin Simons's striking, poignant novel *Jenny Rat*, the taboo subjects of pedophilia and prostitution bring them together.

Michael ekes out a lonely existence as a twenty-eight year old consulting engineer, building splendid cabinetry and other structures no one ever sees. He finds his only solace in socialization with Jacquie, a sex worker who visits weekly. When Jenny is dumped from a moving car after one of Jacquie's visits, she warns Michael not to get involved with the "filthy little rat." However, Michael nurses Jenny back to health, and she comes to live at his house because Australian authorities are unable to locate her family.

These two broken people embark upon a complicated journey to make themselves whole. It is to Simons's credit that he creates a situation in which a girl and a man have a relationship that threatens to cross the line into illegal territory, but it does not keep readers from empathizing with either Jenny or Michael. Simons is able to sensitively illustrate each character's individual brokenness and need for the other. They encourage one another artistically and creatively, and draw out the humanity behind the negative traits by which each has been defined. As their relationship evolves, the audience sees Jenny and Michael transform from broken selves into full-fledged human beings.

This nuanced book also contains a wonderful motif of the curative power of art. While still in the hospital, Jenny begins to draw, using supplies Michael provides. She sketches a rat in a cage to represent herself. Once out of the institution, Jenny creates a sculpture of herself and Michael fused and growing toward the sky like a blossoming tree. By this time, Michael has gotten back into cabinetry and is quite interested in sculpting, much to Jenny's delight.

The novel also tackles the topic of sexual consent as well as issues plaguing the foster care system. While readers may not be comfortable with the sex scenes between the pair given the age difference and power differential, Simons does an astute job of pointing out the nature of the Australian law that says any sexual contact initiated by Jenny is legal, whereas anything initiated by Michael is not because Jenny is under eighteen. Thus, the pair must be careful about how they express their affection for one another.

While readers may not approve of the pair's relationship, Simons uses their rapport to underscore the double binds of the child welfare system. *Jenny Rat* updates Nabakov's *Lolita* for the twenty-first century with its powerful observations on the nature of humanity.

JILL ALLEN (August 27, 2013)

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