

Virginia Woolf: Pushing against the darkness

Contributed by Gary Peterson
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"She pushed the light of the language a little further against the darkness," E.M. Forster said of Virginia Stephen Woolf.

"To know the psyche of Virginia Woolf, and this is what she is in effect asking of a biographer, one would have to be either God or Virginia, preferably God," wrote Quentin Bell, her biographer and nephew.

Woolf was born Jan. 25, 1882, at the height of the Victorian Era, and has since become an important figure in the history of women and literature. So it's fitting to remember her during March, Women's History Month, the same month in which she died 66 years ago.

Bell, the son of Clive and Vanessa Stephen (Virginia's sister), grew up amongst the Bloomsbury Group.

"What did you feel when she walked in a room?" someone once asked him.

"I don't know," he replied. "She was my aunt. I wasn't observing for posterity's sake, I was just living."

I've only ever met two people who actually met Bell — one of them is Sandra Wade, Lake County's Poet Laureate.

Anne Olivier Bell, the editor of Virginia's diaries, saw Virginia only once.

"It was across a crowded room, in the summer of 1939," she said in an interview two years ago. "She was like a vision."

"The extreme beauty of her writing," Eudora Welty wrote, "is due greatly to one fact, that the imprisonment of life within the word was as much a matter of the senses with Virginia Woolf as it was a concern of the intellect."

Virginia wrote of "Orlando," he who became she and skated through centuries of time. She wrote of "Mrs. Dalloway," a day in the life. She wrote of "A Room Of One's Own."

"If truth is to be found on the shelves of the British Museum, where — I asked myself picking up a notebook and a pencil — is truth?" she said in the latter, an essay Quentin Bell claims is "very close to her conversational style."

Not to forget the "Letters," in six volumes edited by Nigel Nicholson and Joanne Trautmann; the other essays, nine volumes, including "The Common Reader, First Series," and "The Second Common Reader;" the non-fiction biographies of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's dog, "Flush," and of "Roger Fry."

There are books about Virginia and books about and by Leonard Woolf, her husband. There are books about Bloomsbury and books about Bloomsbury People. There are even books about Virginia and Leonard's Hogarth Press.

And there is the other fiction, from the most famous, "To The Lighthouse," to the early, "The Voyage Out," to her masterpiece, "The Waves."

Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, her American publisher, has helped make Virginia Woolf's life one of the most examined in literary history.

From this, Edward Albee has his play, "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?"

From this, Madison, Wis. has its feminist bookstore, "A Room of One's Own."

From this, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich had its centenary editions of "A Room of One's Own," "Mrs. Dalloway," "To The Lighthouse;" and a play, "Virginia" by Edna O'Brien.

From this the composer and once member of another Bloomsbury Group (his first rock band) Sigmund Snopek III has his symphonic song, "Virginia Woolf."

"Virginia walked into the sea, because she wanted nothing to be," Sigmund sings.

He told me one midnight morning in the 1970s of Virginia coming to him in a dream ... inspiring a piece of music about singing and life, suicide and dreams and "a sea, which rhymes better than the River Ouse does with 'be'."

Does a vision of Virginia singing seem strange?

She wrote to Violet Dickinson in 1927: "Many scenes have come and gone unwritten, since it is today 4th September. A cold gray blowy day, made memorable by the sight of a kingfisher and my sense, waking early, of being visited by 'the spirit of delight.' 'Rarely comest thou spirit of delight.' That was me singing this time last year; and sang so poignantly that I have never forgotten it."

Sigmund told me later that he had never read Virginia Woolf.

I believed him and it no longer seemed strange.

Though "A Room of One's Own" most closely approaches Virginia in the flesh, I remain partial to "The Common Readers" particularly to her essay, "The Russian Point of View."

Here it seems, in describing Dostoevsky's writing, she describes her own:

"It is all the same to him whether you are noble or simple, a tramp or a great lady. Whoever you are, you are the vessel of this perplexed liquid, this cloudy, yeasty, precious stuff, the soul. The soul is not restrained by barriers. It overflows, it floods, it mingles with the souls of others ... nothing is outside Dostoevsky's province, and when he is tired, he does not stop, he goes on. He cannot restrain himself. Out it tumbles upon us, hot, scalding, mixed, marvelous, terrible, oppressive — the human soul."

"Her words are very strange," Aldous Huxley once said. "They're very beautiful, aren't they?"

"But one gets a curious feeling from them. She sees with incredible clarity, but always as through a sheet of plate glass. Her books are not immediate. They're very puzzling to me."

Yet there remains that incredible clarity.

And there remains Vanessa writing to Madge Vaughn about Virginia in 1904:

"She is really quite well now – except that she does not sleep very well – and is inclined to do too much in some ways ... she ought not to walk very far or for a very long time alone.

"... Now she goes out before beginning to write in the morning for one-half an hour alone ..."

And there remains that final walk into the River Ouse, 28 March 1941.

She wrote, before going out this time. "I feel certain I am going mad again. I feel we cannot go through another of those terrible times. And I shan't recover this time ..."

Then, she took a stone, placed it in her pocket, walked alone into the river and drowned like Ophelia, leaving our sight, but never our minds.

Yes, "Virginia walked into the sea." But before she did she pushed the light of the language a little further against the darkness."

"Rarely comest thou, spirit of delight."

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