

Knowing Virginia

RENEE NORMAN

L'auteure est inspirée et hantée par l'oeuvre littéraire et la vie de Virginia Woolf.

I have been both haunted and inspired by Virginia Woolf. She is there in the bibliography of every feminist book I have read so far. I have written poems about her, used quotations from some of her books, and I feel her presence all the more whenever I write my words or encounter her once again in yet another book.

I know she was married to Leonard, had no children, suffered recurring bouts of debilitating melancholy, loved other women, declared her feminism even more strongly when she was in her 50s, and I know that she walked into a river in 1941 and committed suicide.

I know, too, that she wrote in *A Room of One's Own* that there were many women who would not be listening to her public lecture (upon which the book is based) because they were home “doing the dishes or putting the children to bed.” I know that she admitted that someone has to bear the children, because she wrote such words in *A Room of One's Own*, and I know, too, that she advises the women whom she is addressing that perhaps one or two children are enough. I know that she felt, during her difficult times, that even having children would be useless, because she wrote those very words in her diary.

I know that she was nurtured and cared for by her husband, Leonard, and that it is entirely possible that were it not for his care that many of her great works would never have been written.

I know, too, that there are feminist scholars critical of Leonard; who claim that he failed in his intellectual assessment of some of her work, and in the manner in which he treated her illness.

I know, too, that in his preface to her diaries, which he edited, he does not mention one word about his great grief or sadness about her suicide and death, nor does he refer to how difficult it might have been for him to even

consider her diaries for publication.

I have read—and am still re-reading—books by or about Virginia Woolf, and I suspect that I will go on reading these books for many years to come, and that there is still much I have yet to synthesize.

I have charted all the feminist books I've read, and somehow all the arrows in my flow chart diagram circle back to Virginia. And I wonder about her. I wonder what she was thinking about when she walked into the river, when she felt the first cold shock of soothing water upon her ankles, upon her knees, when she felt her skirts dragged down by the weight of the water, water rising up to her neck as she walked her way out of our life and into her everlasting words. Words which we still read, which I see everywhere in every feminist book I have ever read. What was she thinking in that underwater room of her own, that cold, wet room rising over her nostrils, closing her eyes, her hair spreading out above the water like the thin, skeletal hands of a thousand, thousand threads of time. Holding her hand up out of the river of her words to reach across to all of us who have learned from her.

And I wish I could tell her she was never alone, even when she walked into that river, when she could no longer bear the pain. All of us were listening to her words echo across the water, in that final, wet auditorium of time.

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