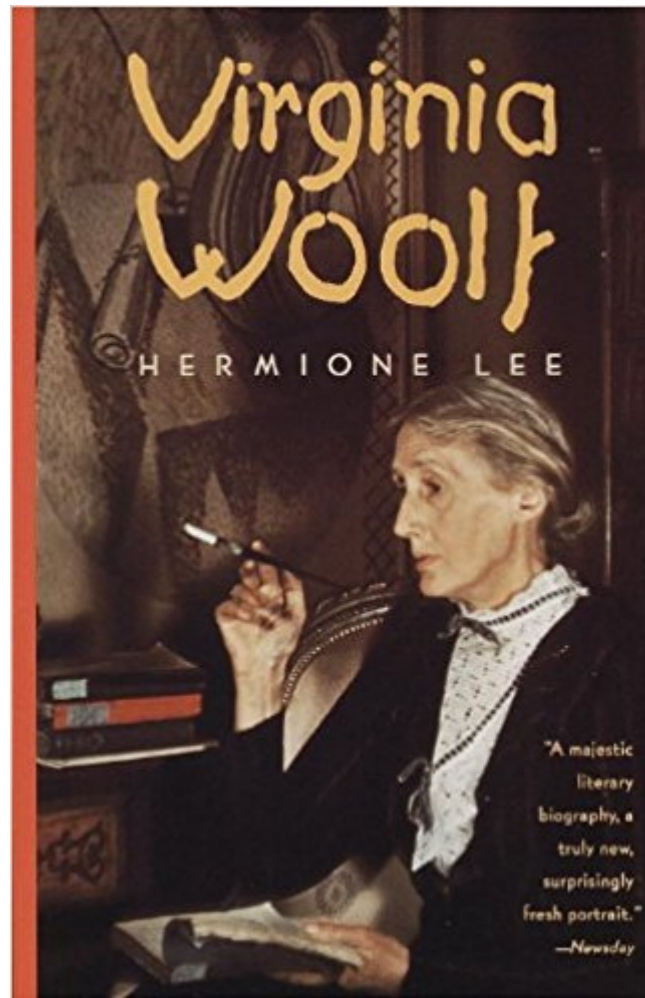




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Virginia Woolf



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Synopsis

"A biography wholly worthy of the brilliant woman it chronicles. . . . It rediscovers Virginia Woolf afresh." *—The Philadelphia Inquirer*

"While Virginia Woolf—one of our century's most brilliant and mercurial writers—has had no shortage of biographers, none has seemed as naturally suited to the task as Hermione Lee. Subscribing to Virginia Woolf's own belief in the fluidity and elusiveness of identity, Lee comes at her subject from a multitude of perspectives, producing a richly layered portrait of the writer and the woman that leaves all of her complexities and contradictions intact." Such issues as sexual abuse, mental illness, and suicide are brought into balance with the immensity of her literary achievement, her heroic commitment to her work, her generosity and wit, and her sanity and strength. It is not often that biography offers the satisfactions of great fiction—but this is clearly what Hermione Lee has achieved. Accessible, intelligent, and deeply pleasurable to read, her Virginia Woolf will undoubtedly take its place as the standard biography for years to come." One of the most impressive biographies of the decade: moving, eloquent, powerful as both literary and social history." *—Financial Times*

"The most distinguished study of Woolf yet." *—The New Republic*

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Customer Reviews

"Woolf's story is reformulated by each generation," writes Hermione Lee, a professor of English literature. But her richly human portrait, so respectful of the complexities of her subject's life, seems

unlikely to be surpassed. Lee extricates Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) from clichés about madness and modernism to reveal a vigorous artist whose work is politically probing as well as psychologically delicate. She makes brilliant use of the formidable Woolf archives to let the writer speak directly to us, then comments shrewdly on her words' hidden significances. Biographies don't get much better than this. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Before dismissing this new biography as just another in a long line of familiar material, one would do well to stop and take in it. Lee (English, Univ. of York, England) has succeeded in presenting a different side of Woolf somewhat overlooked in previous studies. Aspects of Woolf's personal life like her childhood abuse by her stepbrother and her stormy family life are already well documented (see Louise DeSalvo's *Virginia Woolf*, Ballantine, 1990, and Panthea Reid's *Art and Affection*, LJ 9/15/96, respectively); and literary studies abound (see James King's *Virginia Woolf*, LJ 4/1/95, and Lyndall Gordon's *Virginia Woolf*, Norton, 1993). By making use of Woolf's extensive correspondence, diaries, and works, Lee strives to present her not as a fragile, eccentric victim, as has been done often, but as a complex, sometimes troubled, yet brilliant artist who overcame much to accomplish what she did. What results is a biography that is part social history, part literary analysis, and overall a fuller picture of Woolf. Lee's eye for detail allows us to get closer than ever to knowing who she was. While the subject may not be new, this biography is well worth a close reading. --Ronald Ratliff, *Chapman H.S. Lib., Kansas* Copyright 1997 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

A long, satisfying biography of an important literary figure. Characters of friends, family, colleagues (of which there are an army) are convincingly sketched, along with their influence on the central, somewhat problematic woman. Virginia Woolf is not a particularly attractive human being: she spends a lifetime thinking mainly about *Dear Me*, rarely noticing the tribulations of others except as they irritate or inconvenience her, painfully insecure about her own talent and yet fiercely convinced that no other talent much matters, not a particularly warm or generous or brave person, but with a lifelong passion for comparing herself to others in case they are smarter or more eloquent or more successful than herself. Moreover, because of her loudly voiced beliefs about the oppression of women (another way of talking about herself) and her adoption by feminists as one of the great historical captains of their movement, one gets the feeling that the author is continually negotiating a minefield of potentially explosive judgments and emphases. She does so beautifully, giving a rich sampling of Woolf's own words so that the author can speak for herself on the most compelling

issues. A great job.

I had steered clear of Mrs. Woolf's work due to a perceived effete-ness to her aesthetics and apparent lack of a mitigating human touch in her writing. I hold the same effete bias against classical ballet so I guess that dooms me as an open minded art lover. However, on the positive side I am a proud reprobate Londoner. Grew up in High Holborn during the blitz years, lived in Fitzrovia for another 20 years and proud of Bloomsbury's cultural position as a former literary hot spot, as much for Dickens as the later field of effete Bloomsbury writers and artists. However, this biography by Miss Lee is a first class literary work in its own right. It creates, on its own terms, a deeper and more rounded image of Virginia Woolf as a woman, as a feminist, and as a driven thinker and writer. Miss Lee's careful reconstruction of the Stephens family ancestry is followed by discussion of Virginia's own unmet paternal needs and a later traumatic physical intrusion from a male relative. That history offers a credible genetic and psychological explanation for both her creativity and depressions. The liberated personal lives her family and circle practised brought no severe judgments from Miss Lee. I admired -- which may just be my naivete -- Miss Lee's calm recital of the various liaisons and the adult camaraderie and bonds that governed their relationships even after passions cooled. It was certainly not the sort of P.G. Wodehouse world that my adolescent imagination fed on about that period. This book was not at all turgid or too scholarly. My unfamiliarity with Virginia Woolf's works was compensated by Miss Lee's analysis of Virginia's various literary themes and book character explanations. The book moves swiftly touching all the nuances of personality that made up Virginia's private and public world. The book retained the air of the eras through which Virginia lived. The author was very discreet and never intruded on the narrative. Too often biographers are only too willing to contrast an episode just described against a contemporary example of a similar incident, to allow a current reader - with the hindsight of more acquired knowledge and different mores and manners -- to come to satisfying "superior" judgements. Excellent book. Sorry it had to end and saddened the reason for the end was indeed such a sorry one.

I utilized this piece for my research thesis and discovered a lot about one of my favorite writers: Virginia Woolf. Hermione Lee does an excellent job at getting down to the nitty gritty in this book, however, it was very "thick" and, at times, very difficult to get through. The piece certainly covers a vast amount of material and, surely, you'll uncover a lot of information regarding the life of Woolf. I wouldn't recommend this book for a simple read but, instead, I'd limit my suggestion of it to only those who are studying Woolf as a subject.

I've become quite enchanted with the Overlook Illustrated Lives series. None of these books are going to go down as great classics, nor will any be regarded as among the essential biographies of their subjects. Nonetheless, every book in the series that I have read is critically solid, lavishly illustrated and quite handsome, and provides a great introduction or review (depending on the use to which one is putting the volume) of the writer under consideration. Virginia Woolf is an ideal subject for an illustrated biography. The background for her writing is a rich and varied one, and her acquaintances included a host of important writers and artists and intellectuals in their own right. The fact is that this book is less a treatment of Woolf considered solely in her own right, as Virginia Woolf in her overall context, especially in light of Bloomsbury. As a result the focus of the book is less on her writing, and a bit more on her friendships with Roger Fry. The book also focuses a bit more on her relationship with her sister Vanessa (a relationship presented as more mutually fulfilling than most other biographers do). The book therefore can function as a nice introduction both to Virginia Woolf as well as to Bloomsbury as a whole. There are helpful photos of all the major and many of the minor figures attached to the group. The weakness of the book is that it really doesn't take one very deeply into Woolf's writings. One gets more of a sense of Woolf's world than of her art. This is a problem the book shares with Mary Ann Caws's book in the same series on Marcel Proust. I like the way that Caws shows Woolf's great passion for life. She also has, however, a tendency to varnish over the negatives. Woolf famously suffered from serious mental illness, and Caws's account leaves her appearing less afflicted than does other accounts. It is a question of balance, and I must admit that the problem here is solely one of emphasis. She does a good job of detailing her relation with Leonard, who seems to have been as close to a perfect husband to Virginia as anyone could have been: the fact is that it was almost impossible for anyone to be Virginia's husband, and that Leonard managed to help her so much is nothing short of a miracle. He clearly provided her with an emotional stability she might not otherwise have enjoyed. These caveats aside, I do strongly recommend this book. It is very short and heavily illustrated so that it is possible in only two or three hours to enjoy a very pleasant time reading both Virginia Woolf and her world. But for those seeking a very short biography, I can even more strongly recommend the volume in the Penguin Brief Lives series by Nicol Nicolson, the son of Woolf's close friend and sometime lover (and the model for the title character in *ORLANDO*) Vita Sackville-West and Harold Nicolson, and perhaps destined to be the last biographer of Woolf to have actually known her. Though it isn't delightfully illustrated like this volume, it provides a much richer and insightful portrait of this fascinating writer.

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