



Selected Letters

Virginia Woolf, *Joanne Trautmann Banks* (Introduction), *Hermione Lee* (Preface)

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Edited by Joanne Trautmann Banks. With a preface by Hermione Lee.

The finest and most enjoyable of Virginia Woolf's letters are brought together in a single volume. It is a marvellous collection - spontaneous, witty, often flirtatious and powerfully moving. Whether bemoaning some domestic travail, commenting publicly on the state of the nation, or discussing cultural, artistic or personal concerns, Virginia Woolf is one of the great correspondents. This volume displays not only Woolf's courage and brilliance, her generosity and love of gossip, but also her genius for close and enduring friendship.

Selected Letters Details

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Matt says

In one of the last letters in this collection, to her friend Ethel Smyth, Virginia Woolf writes, "Thank God, as you would say, one's fathers left one a taste for reading!" This is a book that surely seconds that notion. The letters present nothing less than a portrait of the development of a personality. One comes away from the book with a feeling of almost having known Mrs. Woolf, or, at the very least, wishing one could have known her.

For all intents and purposes, letter writing is now a lost art. Reading these letters leaves one bemoaning its demise.

Michael says

Woolf's letters, as always, are stunning. This edition's footnotes were thorough—and necessary, considering the swift pace at which the collection moves. Condensing the whole of Woolf's letters into a single volume inescapably meant speeding through the major events of her life, and at times the book can read as a bit disorienting. On the whole, though, Banks does a nice job of sketching Woolf's growth as a person and as an artist through her letters, making the book ideal for easy reading before bed.

Richard Smith says

I've been reading this collection of Virginia Woolf's letters for a long time, usually a letter at a time, and it's brought me close to her. She strikes every kind of note: loving, sharp, acute, desperate, funny, gossipy, bitchy, poetic, nostalgic. In many ways her letters are more readable than her novels because with her novels she was trying too hard, too conscious that she was writing a novel. The book begins with letters she wrote as a child and ends with one of her three suicide notes.

I came away with a marvellous collection of quotes:

All we can ever know of ourselves are scraps, spots, and fragments, held in momentary harmony and sympathy.

All good and evil comes from words.

The only thing in the world is music—music and books and one or two pictures.

Too many books have been written already—it's no use making more.

Let me create you. You have done as much for me.

They were richer beings when they were together.

Letter writing for her was "mere tossing of an omelette."

I never shall believe, and never have believed, in anything any doctors says...They can guess at what's the matter, but they can't put it right.

I am no judge and don't know from hour to hour whether my gifts are first—second or even tenth rate. I go from one extreme to another.

If I'm not sure of my brains power I am quite sure of my heart's power.

I don't suppose that even the most sensitive author cares what the Guardian says of him—preaching the charities of the parish in the next breath

I don't think that they [two Cambridge male students] are robust enough to feel very much. Writing is a divine art, and the more I write and read the more I love it.

I never wash, or do my hair, but stride with gigantic strides over the wild moorside, shouting odes of Pindar, as I leap from crag to crag, and exulting in the air which buffets me, and caresses me, like a stern but affectionate parent.

If you must put books on one side and life on t'other, each is a poor and bloodless thing. But my theory is they mix indistinguishably...

Virginia sometimes referred to herself collectively as “the apes.”

A true letter should be as a film of wax pressed close the graving in the mind; but if I followed my own prescription this sheet would be scored with some very tortuous and angular incisions.

A mind that knows not Gibbon knows not morality.

I'm inclined to let her name stand alone on the page. It contains all the beauty of the sky, and the melancholy of the sea, and the laughter of the Dolphins in its circumference...a breathing peace like the respiration of Earth itself.

The women in her first novels were “subtle, sensitive tactful, gracious, delicately perceptive, and perspicacious” whereas the men were “obtuse, vulgar, blind, florid, rude, tactless, emphatic, indelicate, vain tyrannical, and stupid.” Comments from Clive Bell

To be 29 and unmarried—to be a failure—childless—insane too, no writer. Virginia Woolf, 1911

My quarrel with marriage is that the pace is so slow, when you are two people.

I've never met a writer who didn't nurse enormous vanity.

Things in London were much the same as usual: a good deal of love, spite, art, gossip, and opera.

Why did you never prepare me for the Scottish dialect, and the melodious voice which makes me laugh whenever I hear it?

One can get within speaking distance of you, which is quite impossible with an ordinary male doctor.

I read [Henry James] and can't find anything but faintly tinged rose water, urbane and sleek, but vulgar, and just as pale as Walter Lamb.

I feel a rabbit, who's really a hare, on a lawn with other rabbits, who are really rabbits. Of course, literature is the only spiritual and humane career. Even painting tends to dumbness, and music turns people erotic, whereas the more you write the nicer you become.

Did you ever read George Eliot? Whatever one may say about the Victorians, there's no doubt they had twice our—not exactly brains—perhaps hearts. I don't quite know what it is; but I'm a good deal impressed.

What Virginia thinks Vanessa thinks of Virginia's life in contrast to hers: "I do think you lead a dull respectable absurd life—lots of money, no children, everything settled: and conventional. Look at me now—only sixpence a year—lovers—Paris—life—love—art—excitement—God! I must be off." On the writing of Proust: such is the astonishing vibration and saturation and intensification that he procures—there's something sexual in it.

How does one 'work' at one's novel? Well, scribbling journalism is one way, and lunching with Lady Colefax to meet Hugh Walpole, is another.

Life grows steadily more enchanting the fatter one gets. (quoting Roger Fry)

"We [the Hogarth Press] are publishing all of Dr Freud, and I glance at the proof and read how Mr AB threw a bottle of red ink on the sheets of his marriage bed to excuse his impotence to the housemaid, but threw it in the wrong place, which unhinged his wife's mind, and it is to this day that she pours claret on the dinner table. We could all go on like that for hours, and yet these Germans thing it proves something—beside their own gull-like imbecility." Virginia Woolf, 1924

He [Lytton Strachey] says that she [Elizabeth I] wrote to an ambassador: "Had I been crested and not cloven you would not have dared write to me thus."

You're abundant in so many ways, and I a mere pea tied to a stick. [To Vita Sackville West]

Our souls are so creased and soured in meaning that we can only unfold them when we are alone.

I slightly distrust or suspect the maternal passion. It is obviously immeasurable and unscrupulous.

I was always sexually cowardly, and never walked over Mountains with Counts as you did, nor plucked all the flowers of life in a bunch as you did. My terror of real life has always kept me in a nunnery....And then I married, and my brain went up in a shower of fireworks. As an experience, madness is terrific I can assure you, and not to be sniffed at; and in its lava I still find most of the things I write about. It shoots out of one everything shaped final, and not in mere driblets, as sanity does. And the six months—not three--I lay in bed taught me a good deal about what is called oneself. 1930

But what I want of you is illusion—to make the world dance. 1930

I have three whole days of solitude still—Monday, Thursday, and Friday. The others are packed with this damnable disease of seeing people. Please tell me what psychological necessity makes people wish to "go and see" so and so?

What's the point of writing if one doesn't make a fool of oneself?

I should like to die with a complete map of the world in my head.

What do I know of the inner meaning of dreams, I whose life is entirely founded on dreams (yes, I will come to the suicide dream one of these days). Written in 1930, 11 years before she killed herself

What's the point of writing if one doesn't make a fool of oneself?

If I call him not a born writer, it's because he writes too well—takes no risks—doesn't plunge and stumble and jump at boughs beyond his grasp, as I, to be modest, have done in my day.

"I'm the happiest woman in England," I said to Leonard yesterday, for no reason, except that we had hot rolls for breakfast and the cat had eaten the chicken.

The general impossibility, which over comes me sometimes, of ANY understanding between two people.

I can't altogether lay hands on my meaning.

It [grief at the death of Lytton Strachey] is like having the globe of the future perpetually smashed.

What a passion her love was...an elemental passion, unscrupulous, tyrannic, pure. [Of the love of Gwen Raverat for her husband.]

I write in the morning—to boil my year's pot; but from 4.30 to 1.30 I read. Isn't that gorgeous? ...books: printed, solid, entire: Do you know I get such a passion for reading sometimes it's like the other passion—writing—only the wrong side of the carpet. Heaven knows what either amounts to. My own brain is to me the most unaccountable of machinery—always buzzing, humming, soaring, roaring, diving, and then buried in mud. And why? What's this passion for?...doesn't it break your heart almost to think of me, with this passion, always consumed with the desire to read, chopped, chafed, bugged, battered by the voices, the hands, the faces, the bodily presence of those who are pleased to call themselves my friends?

I want to know all that you are thinking and seeing, and I want to be there, and I want to be there. (To Vita.)

She's [Vanessa Bell] taken her own line in London life; refuses to be a celebrated painter; buys no clothes; sees whom she likes as she likes; and altogether leads an indomitable, sensible and very sublime existence.

If you notice a dancing light on the water, that's me. [To Vanessa Bell after the death of Julian her son]
I can't say what it means to me to come into a room and see you sitting there. [In the same letter as above]

Asking him [T S Eliot] a question is like putting a penny in the slot of the Albert Hall.

I think human beings are fundamentally crushed by a sense of their insignificance.

A voice so thrilling ne'er was heard
In springtime from the cuckoo bird
Breaking the silence of the seas
Among the farthest Hebrides

Wordsworth

Here I cook dinner, so must stop, just, it happens, as a flock of fine feathered ideas perches on my wire.

I think that the art of painting is the art for one's old age. I respect it more and more. I adore its severity; it's bareness from impurity. All books are now rank with the slimy seaweed of politics; mouldy and mildewed....Those distorted human characters are to me what the olive tree against the furrowed hill is to you [her painter sister, Vanessa]

The immense reciprocity demanded by civilisation.

Another confused note in the general clamour.

I always think of my books as music before I write them.

Sabrina Cheves says

Okay, I never finished it, but it wasn't because of a lack of interest. I don't remember what happened. I had never read someone's letters before. I'll just say it was very cool; how's that? The great thing about this book is that you don't really have to read ALL of it to get something from it...but you'll probably want to. I think I will find this one again and finish it.

Lylah says

I drank this book slowly for half a year, and what a book it was.

First off, I'd like to say that the many footnotes were crucial to comprehension and very helpful on Joanne Trautman Banks's part, and I thought the letters she chose for this selection were great at serving their purpose of giving us a real picture of Virginia Woolf through her own words.

It was interesting getting to know Virginia as a person; I'm a bit sad to have finished the book because it feels like saying goodbye to a good friend, and of course the last two letters are suicide notes to her sister and husband. I'm glad there are volumes of more letters I could explore if I wished to; Virginia had many friends and correspondents.

It really surprised me how many names I recognized. All the authors of the time seem to have known each other, had controversial opinions on one another. Their connections were very interesting and have made me look into works that seem long forgotten today.

I loved learning of Virginia's jealousies of other writers, her passionate love affairs with men and women, her relationship with her sister and her nephews and her long-winding mental health journey that culminated in her suicide. Her issues with writing, her goals and her own opinions of books that I've read. It was all very intriguing and I feel motivated to read everything she's ever written. Even in letters, her writing is beautiful.

This is, of course, no fault of the book, and I am thankful these negative things were included by the editor—it is ALWAYS very disappointing, though not unexpected, when supposed intellectuals can overcome the prejudice of their own gender, but not prejudices of race (she makes many absurd jokes about Jewish people, even while she married one), class (she mistreats her servants, calls poorer classes stupid and hardly sees them as human), and she's incredibly xenophobic to anyone who isn't British, particularly Americans but reaching other cultures. How hard would it be for a woman with so much going for her to overcome these prejudices of the time? Truly very disappointing to see, over and over again, with favorite authors of older times.

Overall, in spite of my frustrations with Virginia's racism and classism, I greatly enjoyed the novel and getting to know one of the great literary women of history.

Samantha Kang says

When I reached the end of the book, I felt an overwhelming sense of despair. No longer would there be another page of clever humour and lovely poetry in prose; I have reached the ultimate end of the book. I also felt rather angry; why should a woman who so strongly championed the oppression of women in her society ever succumb to the oppressing devils in her head? Then again, I know that her life should not - and can not be ever defined by her eleventh hour. Thus, “given her griefs, it is a courageous life.” Your journey across uncharted waters as you walk barefooted over the fluid ground, words spread on the soles of your feet, has inspired me tremendously. Thank you so much, I wish you had known that you did have an audience to write to - you left such a legacy; the ripple effects of your extraordinary walk over the waters.

Ellen says

Superb. Added so much to my understand of the relationship between Virginia Woolf and her sister, Vanessa Bell, the acclaimed Bloomsbury artist. Highly recommend this book!

Zen Cho says

Virginia Woolf was startlingly classist and (sadly, less surprisingly) racist, but so charming, brilliant (and pleasingly aware of it), warmly human. I read this slowly, beginning to end, and felt so upset when I read her last two letters: it was a little like losing a friend.

Naomi says

Beautifully written letters, with some poignant moments - very pleasant 'reading to sleep' material.

Booksnpieces says

Another fascinating insight in the mind of this remarkable woman. The more I read about her the more I wish I could of met her. The letters cover the whole array of human emotions but the last two are particularly heartbreaking.

Christian says

what a perfectly imperfect character; i'm still amazed by the beautiful way of depicting common moments

Catherine says

“When the Day of Judgment dawns and people, great and small, come marching in to receive their heavenly rewards, the Almighty will gaze upon the mere bookworms and say to Peter, “Look, these need no reward. We have nothing to give them. They have loved reading.”
