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Art and Affection: A Life of Virginia Woolf

Panthea Reid

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More than fifty-five years after her death, Virginia Woolf remains a haunting figure, a woman whose life was both brilliantly successful and profoundly tragic. As the author of *Mrs Dalloway*, *To The Lighthouse*, *The Waves*, *Orlando*, and *Between the Acts*, she helped reinvent the novel for the modernist era. And through *A Room of One's Own*, *Three Guineas*, and other writings, she continues to inform feminist thought. Yet this supremely gifted woman of letters endured crippling bouts of depression--the incandescent artist who captivated some of the most noted men and women of her time died alone, wading out into the depths of the river Ouse to drown, hoping to find "rest on the floor of the sea." Until now, we have had no adequate explanation of *why* she did so.
In this bold and compassionate new biography, Panthea Reid at last weaves together the diverse strands of Virginia Woolf's life and career. In lucid and often poetic prose, she offers a dazzlingly complete portrait that is essential to our reading of Woolf. Rich in detail and imaginative insight, *Art and Affection* meticulously documents how the twin desires to write and to be loved drove Woolf all her life. Drawing on a wealth of original documents, many unfamiliar and heretofore unpublished, including the surviving letters of Woolf's parents and grandmother, the vast collections of letters written among Bloomsbury friends and acquaintances, the manuscripts of Woolf's writing, her suicide notes, and other sources, Reid allows Woolf and her intimates to speak for themselves.
Her findings correct many misconceptions about Woolf's upbringing and her most significant relationships. She reveals, for instance, that recent reports of sexual abuse in Woolf's childhood have been exaggerated--that while the writer was sexually traumatized by her half-brothers and emotionally scarred by her father, she was most deeply wounded by the neglect of her mother (often depicted as the very model of Victorian maternal devotion) and by her love for and rivalry with her sister, the painter Vanessa Bell. Reid describes the competition between the sisters that became for Virginia a contest between their arts, the pen versus the brush. The effects of this rivalry were not uniformly negative--Reid shows that Virginia's jealous preoccupation with modern painting sparked her own aesthetic vision and experimentation with written forms--but the end results were tragic. Virginia's flirtation with Vanessa's husband, carefully documented here, so alienated her sister that after 1910 Virginia never again felt secure of Vanessa's affection. Reid presents powerful evidence that fear of losing both Vanessa's love and her own writing gift ultimately triggered Woolf's final suicidal depression. She also reevaluates Virginia's marriage to the writer and publisher Leonard Woolf. Reid also finds that Leonard was surprisingly supportive of Virginia's erotic relationship with Vita Sackville-West and that his constant devotion provided Virginia with the secure emotional soil in which art and affection could flourish and she could keep at bay, until her fifty-ninth year, the demons of manic-depression. Reid shows how, until the end, Virginia Woolf's own "insatiable desire to write something before I die" most sustained her.
Brimming with new revelations and graced with sixty-six rare photographs and illustrations, *Art and Affection* is the definitive new account of the triumphs and tragedies that molded Virginia Woolf into one of the most original voices in modern literature.

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