

Virginia Woolf in Manhattan

Maggie Gee

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Angela Lamb is a bestselling novelist who moonlights as a Virginia Woolf scholar. She's prepping her keynote address for a Woolf conference when the unthinkable happens, and more than papers emerge from the Berg Collection's stacks. Stones still in her pockets, Virginia Woolf is recalled, too, and the conceit of a person's work taking over their life is given breath in Maggie Gee's *Virginia Woolf in Manhattan*.

Spanning New York, London, and Istanbul, the story shifts between Virginia, Angela, and Angela's teenage daughter, Gerda. Concerned with the modern condition, relationships, and human connection, the novel is captivated by the conflict between people's interior lives and their ability to express that interiority to others.

Angela is not particularly likable, without youth or inexperience to excuse her insecurity and self-absorption. Virginia proves privileged and entitled too, but her wounded curiosity makes even her flaws surprisingly endearing. Gerda is poised somewhere in between, alternately insecure and brave, terrible and vulnerable. Their respective antagonisms and similarities define both who they are and the blind spots in their self-concepts.

While interested in the self, embodiment, and the freedom that comes from being fully known, the novel struggles to create this expansiveness. Its adherence to binary concepts of sexuality and gender, and its saccharine nostalgia, jangle against messages of inclusive, affirming personhood. In light of Woolf's documented queerness, bisexuality is frustratingly effaced. Her male partners are given overweening weight, and her sexual orientation is portrayed as proximate to transgeneriness.

As Virginia ruminates, "Maybe the past can never write the present." While progress isn't linear, the present's ability to see—much less to comment on—itsself in this novel is fraught, as Angela, Virginia, and Gerda's triumvirate exemplifies in its ongoing attempt to unpack and define a modern womanhood that's rooted in that past.

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