



A Moment's Liberty: The Shorter Diary

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The Diary of Virginia Woolf has been acclaimed as a masterpiece. Anne Olivier Bell edited the five-volume original, and she has now abridged the Diary in this splendidly readable single volume edition.

A Moment's Liberty: The Shorter Diary Details

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Paige Walker says

Reading Virginia's diary was a great companion while reading her novels. You are given a chance to see a little bit of the backstory and reasons behind her experimental writing while suspecting she was still keeping something hidden, even from her personal diary (which she never intended for publication). The final entry, just before her suicide, is especially haunting and the shift in mental state from her happier days to the darkest days of her depression is quite powerful.

David James says

Woolf, Virginia. *A Moment's Liberty: The Shorter Diary*, ed Anne Olivier Bell.

This abridged version of Virginia Woolf's diaries is compacted from the original five volumes written in the years 1915-1941. As Clive Bell says in his Introduction, she has been deemed 'snobbish, elitist and malicious,' not to mention obscure as a novelist. But in these diaries she is, Bell maintains, always sharp and clear and doesn't disdain the commonplace.

For those who enjoy her writing, *The Shorter Diary* makes an admirable companion, while for readers who seek to know about her relationship to such as TS Eliot, Arnold Bennett, HG Wells, Shaw and Yeats, Isherwood and Spender and others of the Bloomsbury group the book is a treasure house. To hear Virginia talking about Clive, Maynard and Tom as intimates makes the reader feel very close to the worthies of the 1930s, although Tom began as 'Mr Eliot.'

Yes, VW was undoubtedly by today's reckoning snobbish, elitist and at times malicious, but such terms barely detract from her readability. In fact her blunt and pointed dismissal of those she doesn't much like is revealing of a general class consciousness current in those times. While she takes a pee in a splended West-end store she gleefully records the conversation of 'two cockney tarts' and Auden, a young poet she is introduced to in the Albert Hall, she finds 'a small, rough-haired terrier man: slits for eyes, a crude face, intertesting I expect, but wire haired, yellowish and white.' While Paul Robeson is 'a sympathetic, malleable nigger, expressive, uninhibited, all warmth and the hot vapours of African forests.' Such fervent sketches bring out the essence of the writer. For students or scholars of the period these gems are precious, and they abound in the letters.

Ben Dutton says

Virginia Woolf began her diary in 1915, by which time her first novel had been accepted for publication but had yet to appear. She was known as the husband of the novelist Leonard Woolf. Her diaries appeared in full to much public acclaim between 1977 and 1984, but it was only in 1990 that Anne Olivier Bell reduced them to this, *The Shorter Diary*. As A.S. Byatt said: "Her nephew Quentin Bell claims that the 30 volumes of Woolf's diary are a masterpiece. Anne Olivier Bell has reduced them to a single volume. I think it is still a masterpiece." She is right.

I will admit some reluctance to read the fiction of Virginia Woolf (though I have read some of her novels), and it was only hesitatingly that I began the diaries. I found them in a charity shop for a quid. There is something about the diaries that is missing from the novels: the novels are intellectual works, Woolf is playing games, challenged conceptions of what the novel is and can do – work that creates her reputation – but these diaries seem simpler, they are more direct. Through them one gains an impression, better than one can from the novels, of what it meant to be Virginia Woolf, and to be thinking of these novels. She also paints one of the best pictures of what it is to be alive during these turbulent decades – the 1930s, and the 1940s. Each entry has some little gem: I opened the diary entirely randomly just now, and it gives me this scathing portrait: “The reason why Colefax is so dull is that she never feels or thinks for herself. That is why I should suffocate of dust if she spent a night here.” Wonderful. Then a few lines later this: “It is a good idea I think to write biographies; to make them use my powers of representation, reality, accuracy; and to use my novels simply to express the general, the poetic.” Could I find a better example of what I was just saying?

Woolf’s diaries are not a work to be read quickly: they are a work to be savoured; each entry is a delight. I read the diaries over a three month period – and for the sake of honesty I’ll admit entirely on the toilet in the morning! (No jokes about that’s where Woolf is best left). The one downside to reading this version is that it makes you wish you’d begun with the full thing: I want all five volumes, and I want them now!

If you’re a lover of literature, and of early twentieth century literature in particular, then it seems to me Woolf’s diaries are essential reading. She knew just about everyone, and thought about all of them and her place within this pantheon, and her portraits and commentary illuminate not just her own work, but the work of her peers. A masterpiece for sure.

Joseph says

Absolutely amazing

Julie says

This is a very special book. I've had it for years, and revisit it often.

Katherine says

My mother gave me this book when I was fourteen or something. It's long; I can't claim to have read the whole thing. But I did leaf through it fairly regularly and read longish passages. I would daydream about Virginia and Leonard's existence: Bookish, independently wealthy-enough, dividing their time between city and country, running a printing press, writing, having a circle of bookish, famous and semi-famous friends. 'That is the life for me!', I thought. In short, this book was the beginning of my complete ruination.

Matt says

A fantastic reading experience. This is much more than a traditional diary. It is rather the account of the

growth and development of the soul and spirit of an extraordinary personality and one of the world's great writers. Mrs. Woolf's ability to record both the major events of her life and the quotidian makings of what she terms "uneventful days" with the same depth of insight and appreciation is an astonishing accomplishment. In writing about the desire to continue living life amidst the terror of the onset of World War II, she says, "Its the vastness, and the smallness, that makes this possible." And as always with Mrs. Woolf, the writing is beautiful. There is much to be savored here, a myriad of sentences that, standing on their own, might be discussed or written about at length. Her ability to compact large aspects of her world into these sentences is rather astonishing. Frankly, I loved this book.

Ruth Garcia says

Very enlightening and I enjoyed seeing things from her perspective.
