

## *The Nose Was the Final Straw*

By Patricia Cohen

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THE imitation of Virginia Woolf's writing was presumptuous. The obsession with her suicide irritating. The absence of her politics vexing. And the Nose? Don't get them started on the Nose.

"Ugh," huffed Jane Marcus, an English professor at the City University of New York Graduate Center and the author of three volumes of essays on Woolf. "Imagine the great brilliance of Virginia Woolf to be turned into this absolutely maimed fool with a really ugly nose."

One source of this travesty in Professor Marcus's view is Michael Cunningham, the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of "The Hours," a reimagining of Woolf's "Mrs. Dalloway." And the Nose is the elongated prosthetic attachment that adorns Nicole Kidman's face in the acclaimed movie version in which she portrays the Queen of Bloomsbury.

This week the movie and Ms. Kidman were nominated for Oscars, ginning up even more publicity for a book and film that have helped turn Woolf into this season's It girl. Buyers are snapping up "Mrs. Dalloway," as book groups and college professors do a tag-team reading of it and "The Hours" (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1998). "Mrs. Dalloway" is the No. 1 paperback on Amazon's sales list, the first time the 78-year-old book has ever been a best seller.

Woolf aficionados are certainly grateful for all the attention and sales. Still, at conferences, over dinner and through Virginia Woolf e-mail lists, many Woolfians are fuming, arguing that their idol has been turned into a pathetic, suicide-obsessed creature, her politics ignored, her personality distorted and even her kisses inaccurately portrayed.

The Woolf that Professor Marcus knows and loves is funny, witty and clever, a committed feminist and pacifist, a productive writer and editor. In her view, Mr. Cunningham doesn't come close. "It's a tiny, insignificant spinoff from a great book," she said. "Neither Cunningham nor the filmmakers capture the multilevel quality" of "Mrs. Dalloway."

"Nobody likes it," she declared, referring to her colleagues' reception of "The Hours" in both its forms.

In reality, that assessment is too harsh. Some like the book and hate the movie, others hate the book and like the movie. And a few love both. "It's one of the great books of the 20th century," said Louise DeSalvo, whose own book, "Virginia Woolf: The Impact of Childhood Sexual Abuse on Her Life and Work" (Beacon Press, 1989), kicked up a storm among Woolf scholars, and is cited by Mr. Cunningham as a source in "The Hours." "And the movie was fabulous."

But the passions engendered by the portrayal of their beloved Virginia in one, or the other, or both, are white hot.

Artists have certainly always borrowed from the classics. Jane Rhys's "Wide Sargasso Sea" was a sequel to Charlotte Brontë's "Jane Eyre"; Amy Heckerling's movie "Clueless" was based on Jane Austen's "Emma." And before everybody started borrowing from Shakespeare, he borrowed from Italian novellas. Cutting and pasting are staples of postmodern literature. Carping -- and worse -- are predictable. The Margaret Mitchell estate went so far as to sue the author of a sequel to "Gone With the Wind," "The Wind Done Gone," to try to prevent its publication. (The suit failed.)

And it is no surprise that scholars are sensitive about outsiders trespassing on their turf. "I have to defend my territory," concedes Vara Neverow, the president of the International Virginia Woolf Society, with a just-doing-my-job matter-of-factness.

But to many of the Woolf faithful, there is a bigger problem. They argue that the book and movie play into long-held, insidious views of Woolf that they have spent their professional lives repudiating. For years the standard take on Woolf was as the invalid lady of Bloomsbury, a frail, snobbish madwoman. It was not until the 1970's and 80's that feminist scholars finally rescued her from being a pinched neurotic.

Professor Neverow, who is also chairwoman of the English department at Southern Connecticut State University in New Haven, makes a point of saying she does not want to attack Michael Cunningham. "Both the film and book are worthy creative efforts and deserve to stand on their own," she said, adding that she liked the movie even better the second time around. "But at the point where they begin to seep into representing Woolf as helpless and an emotional vampire, my hackles go up."

"We fought hard to get her into a cultural perspective where she is respected, a remarkably productive novelist, publisher, critic, activist," Professor Neverow added. "But that is now being undermined by the Cunningham book and movie and I'm very uneasy about that."

Brenda R. Silver, an English professor at Dartmouth and the author of "Virginia Woolf Icon" (University of Chicago, 1999), also finds this latest presentation of Woolf troubling. "There's a whole history of presenting Woolf as this neurotic, suicidal, bad-to-the-servants kind of

woman, and for years Woolf scholars have been working against that," she said. "This image of her really should have disappeared years ago."

Professor Silver couldn't finish the "The Hours" when she first picked it up because she was so annoyed by the "faux Virginia Woolf" writing and voice, she said. "My response was 'if you want to read Virginia Woolf, then read Virginia Woolf.' "

Virginia Nicholson, Woolf's great-niece, echoed those views in an article in The Times of London in January, although she conceded that as a member of the family, "from my angle, whatever they do is going to be wrong."

Some criticisms were specific to the film. Moviegoers who see Ms. Kidman wading into the River Ouse at the film's beginning and end may have the impression that Woolf kills herself right after finishing "Mrs. Dalloway," her first great novel, and not 16 years later, in 1941, at age 59, after years of astonishing creativity. ("Oh my God," said Leslie Hankins, the vice president of the International Virginia Woolf Society, who is writing a book on Woolf and the cinema. "Did they have to drown her twice?")

Particularly irksome to some is Ms. Kidman's pointed prosthetic nose. In a film review in The New York Times, Stephen Holden said the makeup gave Ms. Kidman an "uncanny physical resemblance" to Woolf, but that sentiment is vehemently disputed.

"What really put me off was The Nose," Martha Musgrove, a lecturer and doctoral candidate at the University of Ottawa, wrote on a Virginia Woolf e-mail exchange. "Nicole Kidman wore a permanent frown and looked cross-eyed throughout the film, clearly distressed at this Thing in the middle of her face. Were Woolf's contemporaries preoccupied with her nose? It never really occurred to me that her proboscis was the defining feature, so to speak, of Woolf's appearance."

In her lifetime Woolf was considered to have come from a family of great beauties. Her photograph appeared in Vogue London and the British photographer Cecil Beaton included her portrait in his 1930 "Book of Beauty," writing of her "chaste and somber beauty" and her "timid, startled eyes set deep, a sharp birdlike nose and firm pursed lips."

"It was a mistake to make her so dowdy," Professor Silver said of Woolf's film portrayal. She argues that the dowdiness feeds into the "belief that intellectual women aren't stylish or fashionable or beautiful."

For his part, Mr. Cunningham is perplexed by all the hullabaloo. "I wonder what movie those people are seeing and what book they're reading," he said. "The book I wrote and the movie that was made from the book do as much honor as was possible to her vitality, charm and brilliance."

"To see it otherwise," he continued, "is a sort of cranky and willful misviewing."

But that is to be expected. The question is not so much whether you like or dislike this or that characterization of Virginia Woolf, Professor Silver said, but "who claims to speak for the true Virginia Woolf -- who owns her?"

As Hermione Lee wrote in her celebrated 1997 biography, "Virginia Woolf's story is reformulated by each generation. She takes on the shape of difficult modernist preoccupied with questions of form, or comedian of manners, or neurotic highbrow aesthete, or inventive fantasist, or pernicious snob, or Marxist feminist, or historian of women's lives, or victim of abuse, or lesbian heroine, or cultural analyst, depending on who is reading her, and when, and in what context."

***A correction was made on Feb. 22, 2003: An article in Arts & Ideas last Saturday about Virginia Woolf purists' reaction to the novel and film "The Hours," which center on Woolf's book "Mrs. Dalloway" and on Woolf herself, misstated the given name of a writer who was inspired by another classic novel and misstated the plots' time sequence. The author was Jean Rhys, not Jane. Her novel "Wide Sargasso Sea" takes place before the action in "Jane Eyre"; it is not a sequel.***

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