

## INTERVIEW FEATURING DR. VANA NEVEROW – SOUTHERN CONNECTICUT STATE UNIVERSITY, USA

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When we were thinking about this interview, we were reflecting on the pandemic period and how art and literature had a fundamental role in people's lives. We thought about the post-pandemic period and how Woolf is still an extremely relevant author in the current days. During the pandemic, there were several courses on Woolf, many book clubs, and plenty of discussions on the internet on the British author. Recently, Claudia Abreu, directed by Amir Haddad, is touring all over the country with the play "Virginia" and it has been a great success. Her feminism in *A Room of Own's One* and the recent translation of *Three Guineas*, by Tomaz Tadeu and the publisher Autêntica, brought Woolf to the contemporaneity. The main question "how women can avoid war" and the fight for peace are the backbone of the book. The essay is more updated than never, a crucial issue if we think about the war between Russia and Ukraine. The fact is that woolfian text remains still current and necessary and her work allows us to make connections with the most diverse themes of contemporaneity, such as ecocriticism and ecofeminism. A fundamental and essential topic that is on the agenda around the world, with climate change and environmental disasters, it becomes increasingly urgent and necessary for us to discuss and reflect on environmental awareness and if we can do it through literature, even better. That is why we invited prof. Dr. Vara Neverow to reflect with us upon those issues and it is a great pleasure to engage in this discussion.

**Maria A. de Oliveira:** First of all, I would like you to introduce yourself and talk about *Virginia Woolf Miscellany* and your role in it and at the Annual International Conference on Virginia Woolf.

**Dr. Vara Neverow:** When I was in my late teens, I read *Sisterhood Is Powerful: An Anthology of Writings from the Women's Liberation Movement*, first published in 1970. The voices in that collection advocate for women's autonomy – in passionate and often furious ways. This volume inspired me and educated me even though I did not start my college degree until I was 21. During my last year at college, I became

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completely enamored of Virginia Woolf when I read “Lappin and Lapinova,” a short story that begins with a marriage that ends very abruptly. From the start, the wife is not comfortable with the new name imposed upon her by the wedding: “Rosalind had still to get used to the fact that she was Mrs. Ernest Thorburn. Perhaps she never would get used to the fact that she was Mrs. Ernest Anybody....” However, to her delight, she persuades Ernest to join her in a fantasy world populated by rabbits and hares. Ernest is transformed into King Lappin, the monarch of the rabbits, while Rosalind becomes Lapinova, a hare. But as the marriage evolves, Ernest ceases to care about their private imaginary world and cruelly rejects both it and Rosalind herself. The last words in the story are “So that was the end of the marriage.”

Having found Woolf, an author whose fiction all but bewitched me, I then began to read Woolf’s essays – including “Modern Fiction,” “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” and *A Room of One’s Own*. I wrote a paper on these works for a class during my last semester. While I had been much more engaged by Victorian literature up until that point, Woolf introduced me to Modernism. In fact, I was so immersed in Woolf that met her in a dream where we sat in a garden; she was wearing a pale cashmere cardigan over a matching top (I have no idea how that came to be) and a skirt that coordinated well. We had tea together. It was a great honor.

My dissertation was on Virginia Woolf and feminism. My full-time tenure offer from Southern Connecticut State University, where I started teaching in 1988, was specifically dedicated to feminist theory (intriguingly, only two positions for feminist theory were advertised in 1987 – the other was at Berkeley). I was very fortunate. As soon as I started, I became involved in the nascent Women’s Studies community and was directly involved in creating both the Women’s Studies Program and the Master’s degree in Women’s Studies. At MLA in 1989, Mark Hussey mentioned the idea for a conference on Virginia Woolf, and I assisted him in planning the early stages of the event and worked with him on the first volume – *Papers of the First Annual Conference on Virginia Woolf*, published in 1992, the same year that I hosted the second annual conference at Southern Connecticut State University. Mark and I co-edited the second and third selected papers (we changed the title). Subsequent volumes were typically edited by the organizers. My conference was held in New Haven at the Quality Inn (the hotel is still there, but that is no longer the name) because my campus was already booked for a major event. We were able to have up to four panels for each session, and a large room for meals and plenaries. The June weather was perfect, and the site was reasonably inviting. Downtown New Haven was close by. My own recollections about the conference can be accessed in Issue 98 of the *Miscellany* (the special topic, guest-edited by AnneMarie Bantzinger, focuses on the Annual Woolf Conferences).

In 2002, J. J. Wilson, who is one of the founders of the *Virginia Woolf Miscellany*, hosted the Twelfth Annual Conference on Virginia Woolf at Sonoma State University. The celebration was the culmination of J. J.'s many contributions to Woolf Studies, and later that year she invited me to take over the editorial role of the *Miscellany*. Issue 62, published in Spring 2003, was the first hosted by Southern Connecticut State University. From the start, Susan Wegener, then a graduate student at Southern, was my brilliant co-conspirator as we considered new approaches for the journal. The most revelatory idea was to make the *Miscellany* accessible online. We also invited longer contributions, though only Issue 72, the one dedicated to Leonard Woolf and edited by AnneMarie, was so robust that it could not be stapled and had to be bound. Over the years, the *Miscellany* has continued to evolve but also fulfill its original purposes – to share ideas about Woolf and Bloomsbury and to bring together the curious and the knowledgeable, the academics and independent scholars, artists and poets and common readers, graduate and undergraduate students, from all walks of life and locations and cultures.

**Maria A. de Oliveira:** Secondly, can you please discuss on Woolf's relevance in Modern Literature, why does she still matter after one century, considering *Jacob's Room* centenary last year and the pandemic in 2020? And finally, how can you envision the future of Woolfian studies, taking into account new perspectives, new directions. Is it possible to talk about a planetarian Woolf?

**Dr. Vara Neverow:** As I have observed in my chapter "The Academy and Publishing," in Anne Fernald's 2022 *The Handbook to Virginia Woolf*, Woolf received strong endorsements from many of her contemporaries.

Many reviews of *Jacob's Room*, Woolf's third novel and first truly modernist work, affirmed her techniques of writing. The novel was well-received and continued to be viewed as a turning point for Woolf. It was the first of her novels to be published by The Hogarth Press, founded in 1917, and was also a radical leap forward for her as a writer completely free of a publisher's constraints. Her half-brother, Gerald Duckworth, had published Woolf's first two novels – *The Voyage Out* and *Night and Day* – and she had to request him to end her contract when she wanted The Hogarth Press to launch the book. Fortunately, he agreed to do so. The critical reception of the novel has evolved over the decades and now is recognized as a major contribution to Woolf's oeuvre.

In 2022, *Jacob's Room* reached its celebratory centenary. A number of conference papers and plenaries were held in honor of the novel in 2022 (though, sadly, it was not featured at Charleston even though T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* was). The papers from the plenary on *Jacob's Room* at Amy Smith's Woolf and Ethics

conference (the 31<sup>st</sup> Annual Conference on Virginia Woolf) are included in Issue 99 of the *Virginia Woolf Miscellany* ([https://virginiawoolfmiscellany.files.wordpress.com/2023/01/vwm99spring-fall2022-standard\\_format.pdf](https://virginiawoolfmiscellany.files.wordpress.com/2023/01/vwm99spring-fall2022-standard_format.pdf); pages 45-54). The free online 26 October 2022 symposium honoring *Jacob's Room* (Virginia Woolf 100; @VWoolf100) organized and hosted by Rachel Crossland and Alice Wood is available as a video on YouTube (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TGDceSkGSfw>). On 27 October 2022, Crossland and Wood hosted an online reading of *Jacob's Room* from beginning to end presented by engaged Woolfians. Other accessible sources regarding the recognition of *Jacob's Room* include Paula Maggio's blog post "Celebrate Jacob's Room with a Walk" (<https://bloggingwoolf.org/2022/02/26/celebrate-jacobs-room-centenary-with-a-walk/>). On this webpage, Maggio provides access to the link to the 40:30 minute Literature Cambridge podcast of *Jacob's Room*, by Karina Jakubowicz, Susan Sellers, and Peter Jones (see <https://www.literaturecambridge.co.uk/podcasts>).<sup>1</sup> For those who are interested in accessing the annotated editions of *Jacob's Room*, there are now seven, published over a period of thirty years that started briefly in 1992 but then was quashed by the reinstatement of copyright until the early 2000s: Kate Flint (Oxford University Press, 1992); Sue Roe (Penguin Books, 1992); Edward L. Bishop (Blackwell Publishing Shakespeare Head Press, 2004); Suzanne Raitt (Norton Critical Edition, 2007); Vara Neverow (Harcourt, 2008); Stuart N. Clarke with David Bradshaw (Cambridge University Press, 2020), and Urmila Seshagiri (Oxford University Press, second edition, 2022). Only a few scholarly articles that focus even in passing on *Jacob's Room* were published in 2022. A particularly interesting one is Valérie Favre's "The Token Woman of 1922? Virginia Woolf and the Gendered Battles of Anglo-American Modernist Criticism" (pages 330-334; included in the themed topic Revisiting 1922 of *Études anglaises* 2022/3 [Vol. 75]). As Favre notes in her abstract, her article concludes by "analyzing the various functions of Virginia Woolf's tokenism in the construction of the myth of 1922, before briefly evoking, in lieu of conclusion, Woolf's own 1922 reflections, in *Jacob's Room*, on the writing of history, the celebration of 'great men,' and women's tokenism in the literary tradition."

As Woolf's oeuvre has evolved, Woolf's reception continued surge during her lifetime. In 1928, Woolf won the French *Femina Vie Heureuse Prize* for *To the Lighthouse*. Winifred Holtby's *Virginia Woolf: A Critical Biography*, published in 1932, was very enthusiastic. Woolf was also recognized by continental European, USian, Commonwealth, and South American readerships during the time leading

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<sup>1</sup> For those who are interested, the podcast webpage also offers Jakubowicz's conversations with Mark Hussey on Clive Bell, drawing on Hussey's biography of Bell; Dr. Angela Harris and Neil Bartlett on adapting *Orlando* for production as a play at the Garrick Theatre; and the installation of Laury Dizengremel's statue of Virginia Woolf in Richmond-on-Thames.

up to World War II. In 1933, the University of Manchester offered her an honorary degree, which she rejected. Woolf was featured on the cover of *Time* magazine on 12 April 1937. Her major novels had been published by that time – *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), *To the Lighthouse*, and *The Waves* (1931) as well as *Orlando* (1928), which sold very well as a fantasy at the same moment when Radclyffe Hall's controversial *The Well of Loneliness*, published the same year, was under scrutiny as an obscene work because it depicted lesbian desire too explicitly. *Flush* (1933) was a success. In the United States, it was an alternate choice for the Book-of-the-Month.

Woolf's two manifestos – *A Room of One's Own* (1929) and *Three Guineas* (1938) – were both received with great excitement by middle-class women readers who hated the constraints patriarchy imposed on their lives and saw their own experiences described in great detail in both of works where Woolf confronts patriarchy, first with wit and a degree of caution in *A Room* and later in *Three Guineas* with justified rage. Men readers did not respond enthusiastically to either work and *Three Guineas* even caused tension within Woolf's own intellectual community, the Bloomsbury Group.

However, after Woolf's death in 1941, her culture capital declined. Had not Leonard Woolf faithfully published her work in increments via the Hogarth Press, she may very well have been all but forgotten. Leonard kept Virginia in focus, and by the time he died in 1969, she had begun to make a comeback – in the United States and Canada, but not in the United Kingdom.

Second-Wave Feminism was the impetus for white, middle-class women USian activists, the majority of whom liberal or radical feminists, a factor that certainly had an impact on Woolf's status as a feminist icon in the US and Canada while women activists in the UK, France, and elsewhere in Europe, who tended to be socialist, Marxist, or materialist, viewed Woolf as a privileged elite indifferent to working class people. In the US, feminism had begun to gestate in academia, and as the Women's Liberation Movement surged, so did the academic activism of young women who were completing their doctoral degrees who were hired as assistant professors primarily in English programs. By 1980s, Women's Studies programs started to form, and Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* became a touchstone for feminists – an explication of women's right to privacy and autonomy, of their independence from men, and of their financial stability.

The launch of the *Virginia Woolf Miscellany* (1973) and the formation of the Virginia Woolf Society (now the International Virginia Woolf Society, a renaming orchestrated by Melba Cuddy-Keane, the first Canadian who served as President of the Society) with its direct affiliation to the Modern Language Society (1976) were

essential to the formation of the planetary Woolfian community that now exists across the globe with multiple publications including *The Edinburgh Companion to Virginia Woolf and Contemporary Global Literature*, which I co-edited with Jeanne Dubino, Paulina Pająk, Catherine W. Hollis, and Celiese Lypka. Also, Elisa Bolchi and Maria Rita Drumond Viana are working with other scholars as they compile their collection of essays for *World Wide Woolf* to be published by Edinburgh.

In 1991, Mark Hussey founded the Annual Conference on Virginia Woolf. He launched the *Selected Papers* from the first ten conferences (1992-2000) and also is responsible for the journal *Woolf Studies Annual* (1995). The first Annual Conference on Woolf held outside of the United States at the University of Bangor in Wales in 2001 (there have now been seven more conferences in the UK) and two of the conferences were held in Canada. These opportunities have steadily advanced the growth and expansion of Woolf Studies.

In 1998, the Virginia Woolf Society of Great Britain came to fruition and its activities started a significant shift in Woolf's reception in the UK and, to an extent, the Continent. Woolf societies have also been formed in Japan, South Korea, France, Italy, and, most recently, Turkey.

A pivotal moment in Woolfian reception occurred when Brenda Silver's trade book *Virginia Woolf Icon* was published by the University of Chicago Press in 1999 on the cusp of the century. The volume explores the multiple ways that Woolf had infiltrated popular culture at that point, and Woolf's presence in academia and beyond has continued to shift, morph, expand, and evolve. Approaches to Woolf's oeuvre and life have multiplied into fictional works such as Michael Cunningham's *The Hours*, which has morphed into a movie (2002) and, most recently, an opera. There are also various autofictional and graphic novels based on Woolf's life. There are films ranging from *To the Lighthouse* (1983) to *Orlando* (1992) and *Mrs. Dalloway* (1997). Plays that were performed for the larger public audience include *Vita and Virginia* by Eileen Atkins, first performed in 1992 and made into a film in 2018. Atkins also performed in a version of *A Room of One's Own*, adapted as a play and produced by Patrick Garland in 1989. *Orlando* by Sarah Ruhl was first performed in 2010 (<https://www.sarahruhlplaywright.com/plays/view/ORLANDO-adapted-from-the-original-by-Virginia-Woolf/>). *Septimus and Clarissa* by Ellen McLaughlin was first performed in 2011. Many plays as well as dance and musical performances drawn from Woolf's oeuvre and life were featured at Woolf conferences. *Woolf Works*, choreographed by Wayne McGregor and composed by Max Richter, is a full-length ballet that was first performed in 2015 and was also streamed during the pandemic. So too was a version of *The Waves*, a play that was cancelled by the Berkeley Repertory Theatre due to the



lockdown and then shifted into an extraordinary six-part video performance – *The Waves in Quarantine* – featuring the six actors who alternate between their real-life constraints during at the peak of COVID-19 and also perform passages of the script.

During the pandemic, Woolfians began to rely on Zoom and its ilk (and revere the on-screen platforms as they provided connections and opportunities to communicate face to face during a time of isolation, loneliness, and loss). When Ben Hagen's *Woolf: Profession and Performance*, the 30<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference on Virginia Woolf that was originally scheduled to be held at the University of South Dakota but was cancelled due to the lockdown, Elisa Sparks organized the first of many online Woolfian gatherings to honor Ben and to commemorate what would have been the opening day of the event. Elisa then decided to continue to use the informal online meeting – the “Woolf Drop-In” – to invite Woolfians to gather and mingle on a screen every month or so. Soon after, the very popular and inspiring online Woolf Salon was founded by Ben, Shilo McGill, Amy Smith, and Drew Shannon (and the 23<sup>rd</sup> event will be hosted this week). The Virginia Woolf Society of Great Britain also began to offer online lectures that feature highly respected scholars who present their work in a style that is more formal than the Woolf Salons.

In 2021, the 30<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference on Virginia Woolf, was held as a virtual event. More than 300 participants joined from all over the world. The 31<sup>st</sup> Annual Conference was also virtual. Organized by Amy Smith, *Woolf and Ethics* was an online gathering again that attracted a multitude of Woolfians from every corner of the globe. This year, the 32<sup>nd</sup> conference – *Woolf and Ecologies*, hosted by Laci Mattison, will be held in person on the ground in Fort Myers, Florida. Many Woolfians are yearning for this opportunity to meet and hug and reconnect but there is also a sadness for those who cannot afford to travel or cannot travel at all.

The International Virginia Woolf Society always has one guaranteed panel at the annual MLA convention. In 2021, the convention was entirely virtual while in 2022 MLA hosted the in-person convention in Washington, DC and also offered virtual events as it did this year in San Francisco.

I cannot predict the future of Woolf studies but I can say that I am certain that Woolf will continue to be deeply valued and will be the focal point for innumerable approaches as differing perspectives and interests that not only build on what has already been established but also on what the *Zeitgeist* of the moment is. In the early stages of Woolf's reception, such topics as her representation of characters, her use of stream-of-consciousness, and her distinctively and shockingly modernist style were focal points. When Second Wave feminism embraced Woolf, her politics came to the fore in ways that her own community had claimed were nonexistent.

Leonard Woolf is notorious for claiming that Virginia was “the least political animal that has lived since Aristotle invented the description.” Jane Marcus differed with that viewpoint fiercely as did many other passionate USian feminists. Much more recently, research and scholarship on Woolf have evolved into such approaches as Monica Latham, Caroline Marie, and Anne-Laure Rigeade’s rich collection of essays titled *Recycling Woolf in Contemporary Art and Literature* (2022), emphasizing the ways that Woolf’s work is repurposed and reinterpreted. Anne Fernald’s volume, mentioned above, offers commentaries on diverse topics including disability studies and Woolf’s own impact on filmmaking. Jane deGay’s forthcoming collection, *Virginia Woolf, Modernism and Religion* (2024), will focus on such topics as the secular and the sacred in Woolf’s cultural setting as well as pacifism, and religious viewpoints such as Quakerism and Judaism.

Woolf is now truly regarded as an icon. She is recognized as one of the most extraordinary figures of the twentieth century. No longer viewed solely as a British woman author and modernist writer, Woolf has been embraced by scholars, common readers, and fiction writers hailing from every continent, and she is a source of inspiration for filmmakers, painters, sculptors, playwrights, musicians, and choreographers as well as feminists of all stripes and political activists.

