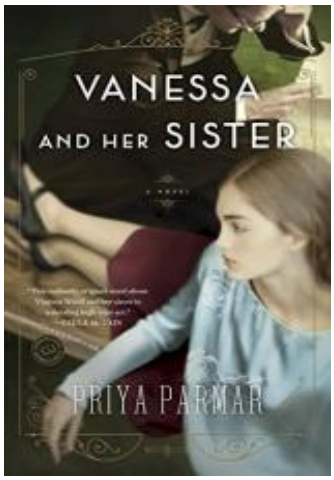
Vanessa and Her Sister

by Priya Parmar



About the Book

For fans of THE PARIS WIFE and LOVING FRANK comes a captivating novel that offers an intimate glimpse into the lives of Vanessa Bell, her sister Virginia Woolf and the controversial and popular circle of intellectuals known as the Bloomsbury Group.

London, 1905: The city is alight with change, and the Stephen siblings are at the forefront. Vanessa, Virginia, Thoby and Adrian are leaving behind their childhood home and taking a house in the leafy heart of avant-garde Bloomsbury. There they bring together a glittering circle of bright, outrageous artistic friends who will grow into legend and come to be known as the Bloomsbury Group. And at the center of this charmed circle are the devoted, gifted sisters: Vanessa, the painter, and Virginia, the writer.

Each member of the group will go on to earn fame and success, but so far Vanessa Bell has never sold a painting. Virginia Woolf?s book review has just been turned down by *The Times*. Lytton Strachey has not published anything. E. M. Forster has finished his first novel but does not like the title. Leonard Woolf is still a civil servant in Ceylon, and John Maynard Keynes is looking for a job. Together, this sparkling coterie of artists and intellectuals throw away convention and embrace the wild freedom of being young, single bohemians in London.

But the landscape shifts when Vanessa unexpectedly falls in love and her sister feels dangerously abandoned. Eerily possessive, charismatic, manipulative and brilliant, Virginia has always lived in the shelter of Vanessa?s constant attention and encouragement. Without it, she careens toward self-destruction and madness. As tragedy and betrayal threaten to destroy the family, Vanessa must decide if it is finally time to protect her own happiness above all else.

The work of exciting young newcomer Priya Parmar, VANESSA AND HER SISTER exquisitely captures the champagne-heady days of prewar London and the extraordinary lives of sisters Vanessa Bell and Virginia Woolf.

Discussion Guide

1. When the novel opens, their father has died and the Stephen siblings have moved from their childhood home in Kensington to bohemian Bloomsbury. Why do you think Vanessa chose to uproot her siblings and move to such a radically different part of town? What sort of change is she trying to bring about for her family?

2. Vanessa tells us that her family value words and books over painting and visual arts. How do you think growing up in such a family affected Vanessa's view of herself as an artist? Would you rather be a writer or a painter?

3. Vanessa has always protected and supported Virginia, and has excused much of her difficult and unsocial behavior. Do you think Vanessa's tolerance gives Virginia permission to behave in the way that she does?

4. What is your opinion of Virginia and Vanessa?s relationship? Before Vanessa?s betrayal, did you find them to be legitimate friends, or do you feel something was missing between them even before Vanessa married Clive? How does Vanessa?s view of her sister change after she marries?

5. Vanessa turns down several proposals from Clive, but decides to accept him after Thoby dies. Do you feel that if Thoby had lived, Vanessa might have chosen a different path? Or that Virginia might not have behaved as she did? Do you think Vanessa and Clive are well-suited to each other?

6. Virginia feels contempt for Clive and thinks him an unsuitable husband for her sister. Why does she seek to ?find a place? in Vanessa's marriage? What do you think Virginia hopes to achieve?

7. We often think of the early 20th century as being a time of almost Victorian restraint, yet the Bloomsbury Group were open about both homosexual and heterosexual love. Do you think they were utterly unique? Do you believe such openness was actually more common at the time than we traditionally believe?

8. The Bloomsbury Group not only challenged the norms of the time, but challenged each other during their numerous discussions about art, writing, philosophy, economics and even love. Vanessa at times feels she is out of her depth, and marvels at Virginia?s brilliance. Do you agree with her assessment of herself? How difficult do you feel it would have been to be a part of such a talented and intelligent circle?

9. At one point Vanessa reflects, ?If Virginia were not my sister, we would be a pedestrian cliché. Instead, we are a bohemian nightmare.? How do you feel the ideals of the Bloomsbury Group influenced Vanessa?s reaction to not only Clive?s affair with Virginia, but his choice to resume physical relations with Mrs. Raven Hill? If you had been in her shoes, do you feel you would have responded differently?

10. The story opens with a letter from Virginia to Vanessa stating, ?What happened cannot break us. It is impossible. Someday you will love and forgive me. Someday we will begin again.? How did this letter color your reading of the rest of the novel? Did you expect Vanessa to forgive Virginia at any point? Do you think it is fair to say that Vanessa still loves her sister, despite that fact that she ultimately decides she cannot forgive her? Do you agree with Vanessa?s decision?

11. VANESSA AND HER SISTER is told largely through excerpts from Vanessa?s diary and her letters, with snippets

of correspondence between her family and friends. What did you think of this narrative style? Was there any one person whose perspective you wished to see more often? How objective did you feel Vanessa?s portrayal of the story was?

12. Of the two sisters, Virginia is undoubtedly the more famous. Were you surprised by anything you learned about her in this novel? Did it challenge any previous ideas you had about her?

13. At the end of the novel, the author gives a brief description of what became of the members of the Bloomsbury Group. Was there anything in there you found unexpected? Disappointing? Particularly satisfying?

Author Bio

Priya Parmar is the author of the novels EXIT THE ACTRESS, VANESSA AND HER SISTER (a *New York Times* Notable Book) and THE ORIGINAL. The coauthor of the musical *Sylvia* (London Old Vic), she lives between London and Connecticut with her family and four rescue dogs.

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