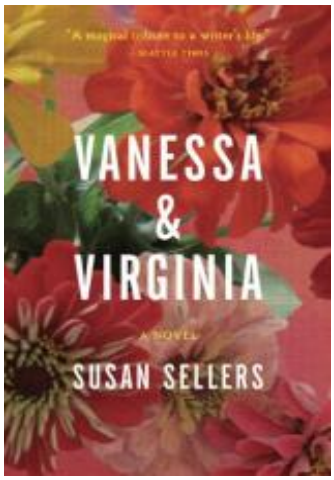
Vanessa and Virginia

by Susan Sellers



About the Book

You see, even after all these years, I wonder if you really loved me.

Vanessa and Virginia are sisters, best friends, bitter rivals and artistic collaborators. As children, they fight for the attention of their overextended mother, their brilliant but difficult father, and their adored brother, Thoby. As young women, they support each other through a series of devastating deaths, then emerge in bohemian Bloomsbury, bent on creating new lives and groundbreaking works of art. Through everything --- marriage, lovers, loss, madness, children, success and failure --- the sisters remain the closest of co-conspirators. But they also betray each other.

In this lyrical, impressionistic account, written as a love letter and an elegy from Vanessa to Virginia, Sellers imagines her way into the heart of the lifelong relationship between the writer Virginia Woolf and the painter Vanessa Bell. With sensitivity and fidelity to what is known of both lives, Sellers has created a powerful portrait of sibling rivalry.

Discussion Guide

1. In the novel?s opening pages, Vanessa writes, ?You are my natural ally in my dealings with the world? (p. 5). What do we consider ?natural? between siblings? How are sibling alliances different from those between friends, parents, or spouses? Think about your relationship with your siblings, if you have any. Do you feel that they are your natural allies? Why or why not? If you don?t have any siblings, are you envious of the sibling bond?

2. Early in the novel, Virginia asks Vanessa whom she prefers, her mother or her father. Is this a shocking question? What do the two daughters? preferences say about them? How do the figures of the mother and father recur throughout the book and the lives of Virginia and Vanessa?

3. On page 7, Virginia comes to Vanessa?s rescue, as she puts it, during their lesson. How does Virginia?s ?saving?

Vanessa simultaneously undermine her? Can you find examples of similar actions between the sisters elsewhere in the book?

4. Although they had older half-siblings, Vanessa and Virginia?s closest sibling was their brother, Thoby. What kind of boy was he? How did he function in Virginia and Vanessa?s relationship with each other? How did their relationship change when they went off to school?

5. Vanessa sees Stella?s marriage as her act of liberation from the family. Was it that? How are the marriages in this book liberating? How are they confining?

6. There are implications of incest, some more explicit than others, throughout the novel, beginning when Vanessa walks in to find George in Virginia?s room at night (pp. 32?33). What do you make of the various kinds and degrees of sexual interaction among the siblings?

7. ?For all your affected disdain, it is my art that is showing you the way? (p. 56). What does Vanessa mean by this?

8. When Vanessa reads Virginia?s first novel, she feels violated: ?This is not literature; it is mere journalism.? How much license should writers have to write about their friends and family? What do you think of Vanessa?s evaluation of **The Voyage Out**, Virginia Woolf?s first novel?

9. Vanessa and Virginia are almost yoked to each other, emotionally and psychologically, throughout the book. Is their devotion to each other essentially narcissistic?

10. Does motherhood change Vanessa? What is Virginia?s reaction to Vanessa?s children?

11. What role does mental illness play in the novel and in the lives of these women? Do you believe their ?madness? or depression (are they the same thing?) is hereditary? How do their mental illnesses manifest differently? Some people think there is a link between artistic ability and madness; do you agree?

12. When Vanessa is bemoaning the ?mess? of her adult life, Virginia says, ?You hold the light. Then there are lonely moths like me circling the lamp, searching for a way in? (p. 166). What do you think of this characterization of Vanessa and Virginia? If what Virginia says is true, does the book seem to favor one kind of personality over the other? Does it imply that one kind of personality is better at making art?

13. At the end of the book, Vanessa has turned her artistic eye to the very house she lives in, painting the walls and floors with murals. What does this merging of her art and her domesticity imply to you?

14. ?The world is a work of art?and though there is no God, we are parts of the design? (p. 199). Does this make sense to you? Do you find it comforting?

15. On page 205, Vanessa says, ?I have to tell you that I cannot be held to a promise I made when the circumstances of my life were very different.? What promise is she referring to? Do you agree with her statement? Can our promises change with the circumstances?

16. Virginia implies that she and Leonard are prepared to commit suicide if Germany invades England. Is suicide ever an acceptable act? When Virginia does kill herself, Germany has not invaded, and she does it alone. Do you find her suicide to be a betrayal?

17. What is the final book that Vanessa drowns in the river? What is the significance of that act? Is it undermined by the book?s last sentence?

Author Bio

Susan Sellers is a professor of English at St. Andrews University in Scotland and co-editor of the Cambridge University Press edition of Virginia Woolf's works. She is a past recipient of the Canongate Prize for New Writing and is the author of many short stories and nonfiction books. This is her first novel. Learn more at http://www.houghtonmifflinbooks.com/catalog/titledetail.cfm?titleNumber=1406034

Critical Praise

"A simple and yet magical tribute to a writer's life."

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Publication Date: April 12, 2010
Paperback: 224 pages
Publisher: Mariner Books
ISBN-10: 0547263384
ISBN-13: 9780547263380