

Verbundkatalog Kalliope

In: The Chicago Sun Book Week. 1.11.1942, S. 10, 29

Virginia Woolf's Posthumous Essays. The Death of the Moth and other Essays.

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1942-11-01

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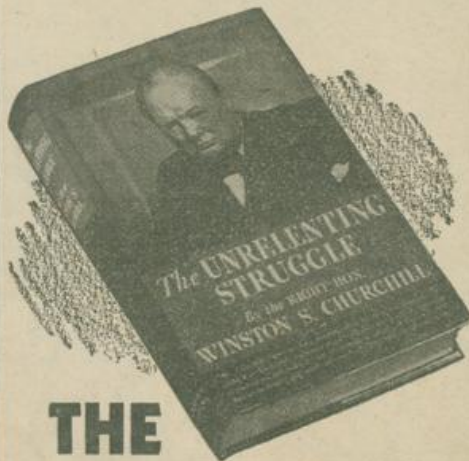
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Virginia Woolf's Posthumous Essays

Reviewed by
Klaus Mann

THE DEATH OF THE MOTH AND OTHER ESSAYS. By Virginia Woolf. Harcourt, Brace. \$3.

A NEW book by Virginia Woolf! Is it really for the last time that we shall ever open an article with these words? Is this slim volume of critical studies and impressionistic sketches indeed her final gift, her farewell?

It is an enchanting book and also a very sad one. The nostalgia it exhales and evokes may spring in part from our knowledge of Virginia Woolf's tragic end—her Ophelia-like disappearance in the waves of an English river. But, then, the wistful connotations have always been an integral element of her message and melody. At times she may have seemed talkative and almost frivolous. What did she try to conceal from us, under the disguise of her flippancy? Now we can discern, everywhere in her writings, the traces of past afflictions and the forebodings of an ultimate struggle.

She had to reveal the substance of her being, whether she wanted to or not. Her integrity and her genius compelled her to imbue everything she wrote with the unmistakable flavor of her personality. It is always her smile, her discreet lament, her sensitivity, her iridescent charm—in her novels, short stories, letters, apocrypha, and in her beautiful essays.

There are several volumes of essays by Virginia Woolf; the last one, "The Second Common Reader," appeared 10 years ago. At the time of her death she was already engaged in gathering material for a further collection, as Mr. Woolf informs us in an editorial note preceding "The Death of the Moth." "If she had lived," he says, "there is no doubt that she would have made large alterations and revisions in nearly all these essays before allowing them to appear in volume form." She might have even omitted one or the other of the more casual contributions we find now included. The book would lose nothing of its diverse and informal character if one removed so incidental a piece as the one called "Middlebrow"—a polemic letter Mrs. Woolf jotted down for *The New Testament*, but then chose to withhold. The volume contains such a profusion of significant material that we would not mind missing some of the trivia.

The scope of Virginia Woolf's insights and interests reaches from the tiniest to the greatest: her description of an insect's agony is as intense and suggestive as is her discussion of Shakespeare. Every subject she touches—even the humblest one—becomes for one creative moment the focus of all her affections and anxieties. Her imagination seems completely seized, whether she analyzes the intricacies of Henry James or remembers an old woman, Mrs. Grey, who sits on a hard chair in the corner looking—"but at what? Apparently at nothing."

AGILE as a spectre and observant as only a clever woman can be, she wanders through the centuries—equally intimate with Horace Walpole and Shelley, Gibbon



Drawn by Don Chitcote, Sun Staff.

VIRGINIA WOOLF

and Coleridge. She appears detached and merciless when appraising the works of her contemporary friends, Lytton Strachey or E. M. Forster; but when dealing with the Rev. William Cole, who lived about 200 years ago, she makes a minor slip and talks to him as to an old acquaintance: "My dear William, in my opinion you are keeping something back..." We must not blame her for such inconsequential mistakes. The author of "Orlando" has the right to be a little airy and oblivious; how, otherwise, could she have described the adventures of her bisexual hero in so many different epochs and masquerades?

The writing of letters seems an ideal form of communication for Virginia Woolf. Discreet and reserved as she is, she would not want us to read her diary. But letters are not necessarily confessions—just informal and cordial messages to the outside world. Some of the finest essays in "The Death of the Moth" are devoted to classical collections of correspondence; there is an extensive paper about the Yale edition of Horace Walpole's letters to Cole; and a piece about that "immense mass of quivering matter" which is Coleridge's correspondence (to him, letter-writing was in its way a substitute for opium). Among the three studies on Henry James, the one about his letters is the most profound and most revealing.

But the most striking item of the whole collection is the brief essay on Mme. de Sevigne, the great letter-writer and gossip chronicler of the late 17th century. No doubt, these six pages of superb, savory prose rank among the master essays in modern literature, comparable only to the most distinguished achievements of men like Paul Valery, Andre Gide and Hugo von Hofmannsthal.

A great essay, like a great novel or a great poem, is not conceivable without autobiographic intimations and confessional undertones. Virginia Woolf's inspired portrait of Mme. de Sevigne is indeed an indirect self-portrait. What she

says in reference to the intellectual grande dame of 1670 might be said about her, the most sophisticated woman of 1940: "She was a born critic, and a critic whose judgments were inborn, unhesitating. She is always referring her impressions to a standard—hence the incisiveness, the depth and the comedy that make those spontaneous statements so illuminating. There is nothing naive about her. She is by no means a simple spectator. Maxims fall from her pen. She sums up; she judges. But it is done effortlessly. She has inherited the standard and accepts it without effort. She is heir to a tradition, which stands guardian and gives proportion. The gaiety, the color, the many movements of the figures in the foreground have a background."

The double meaning of this characterization is all the more significant if unintentional. Whether deliberately or unwittingly, Virginia Woolf has described herself in depicting Mme. de Sevigne, "this great lady, who in our age would probably have been one of the great novelists." There is only one word in the quoted lines that would have to be changed or omitted if the character in question were not the classical letter-writer but Virginia Woolf—the word "gaiety." Less robust and less self-assured than Mme. de Sevigne, Virginia Woolf can be serene and contemplative, nervously capricious, most amusingly catty. But she can never be gay. There is always a tinge of darkness and apprehension, even in her most lucid and most spirited words. The things she loves and describes are fleeting and perishable, and she is always aware of their fragility and of hers.

THE great ponds at Sheffield Place at the right season of the year are bordered with red, white and purple reflections, for rhododendrons are massed upon the banks and when the wind passes over the real flowers the water

(See Virginia Woolf, Page 29.)

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SLEUTHS AND SLAYERS

By Elizabeth Bullock

DAILY living moves at such a pace these days that many of the things we mean to do—the books we mean to read, the movies we mean to see, the art exhibits we mean to go have a look at, and so on—never get done. Remember the old Chinese proverb about having only two pennies, one to be spent on bread and the other to feed your soul? These days it's very easy to spend the one for bread, and a little later to spend the other one on bread.

However, this column has to do with a small and sometimes frivolous part of the soul—the part that seeks to escape from the confines of daily living or heavy thinking into a world that's more exciting and sometimes seemingly gay.

And that's important and necessary today. It comes under the heading of morale, that indefinable something we're supposed to keep up while we do our hard jobs efficiently.

Here, then, is a resume of some of the good mystery stories which you may not have spent your soul pennies on in the last four or five months, but which you may want to get around to now:

First on the list is "The Complete Dashiell Hammett," a reprint of five of Hammett's stories (Knopf, \$2.50) — "The Thin Man," "The Glass Key," "The Maltese Falcon," "The Dain Curse" and "Red Harvest." This remains one of the great buys of all time. If you meant to get it and didn't, then hurry along.

"Center of the Web," by Katharine Roberts (Crime Club, \$2), is a story of the underground movement in the Belgium of today. Last summer, some of the things Miss Roberts had to say about a Nazi spy school sounded preposterous; they sound less so now. And you'll get no more heart-warming picture of how the oppressed peoples in Europe work for freedom.

"To a Blindfold Lady," by Joseph Purtell (Reynal & Hitchcock, \$2), is an adult mystery of sex and crime. It's based, I think, on the Jake Lingle case of not so very long ago. It's about newspapers, and gals, and the underworld. And very sly and wise.

"No Coffin for the Corpse," by Clayton Rawson (Little, Brown, \$2), presents the Great Merlini sifting out trick from true magic at an estate on Long Island. A long tale, but swiftly moving and fine for leisurely reading.

"The Spectral Bride," by Joseph Shearing (Smith & Durrell, \$2), is a slow but fascinating story in which the finger of doom from the Victorian past finally comes to rest inevitably on a present-day Englishman.

"Her Heart in Her Throat," by Ethel Lina White (Harpers, \$2), while it may not be the best of Miss White's suspense-and-terror books, upholds her tradition admirably.

"You Can't Ignore Murder," by Ruth and Walter Teague (Putnam, \$2), is a literate story about a group of people on a house party who are faced with murder and figure their own way out.

These are by no means all of the good mystery stories that came out this summer and fall, but they're

among the best. And now for a look at the recent ones:

DEEP LAY THE DEAD. By Frederick C. Davis. Crime Club. \$2.

HERE'S a good one, with an up-to-the minute plot. It's built around an indecipherable cipher that's being concocted for the use of our State and War Departments. Since this comes out within the first 50 pages of the book, I guess it's safe to tell you about it now.

Dr. Chandler, the cipher's creator, lives with his wife and charming daughter in a remote country place in Pennsylvania. Rigby Webb, his assistant-to-be, arrives at the house in a heavy blizzard to find, almost immediately, that the place is now isolated by the storm and that Chandler's wife has on hand a semi-casual society bunch of house guests—including a dance team, and a radio gossip hound. Hard work with the doctor and hit-or-miss social contact with the house guests become at once the two major factors in Webb's life.

And that life isn't simplified in any way when it becomes apparent that there are enemy agents after the cipher—it's either one of the house guests or someone living in the vicinity. What happens, and how, makes darned good reading.

HANGED FOR A SHEEP. By Frances and Richard Lockridge. Lippincott. \$2.

HERE are those nice Norths, Pam and Jerry, again. And Lt. Wiegand and Sgt. Mullins of the homicide squad, too. They make up a first-rate foursome—or, rather, three-and-a-half-some, since Mullins does well only when someone draws a diagram of what he's to do.

This time the scene of the crime is the house of Pam's Aunt Flora, who, over a lifetime, has had four husbands, as well as children and grandchildren. There are, in fact, more resident relatives in this case than you'd think it possible for any one person to have. But, then, Aunt Flora (who is a great deal heavier than air and loves blonde wigs and

red dresses) is no ordinary person.

To begin with, someone tries to poison Aunt Flora by giving her arsenic, which, naturally, makes her very sick. Aunt Flora recognizes indigestion when she has it, and this is considerably more than that, so she has the necessary analyses made—just to be sure.

Pam, with Jerry out of town temporarily, arrives about then to spend a few quiet, peaceful days with her aunt. After a restful night, she comes down a little too early to breakfast, sinks into one of the chairs ranged neatly along the dining table, puts her hand down—only to have it touch hair on a head which will never know or care whether it's touched again. So there, for a start, are both poison and murder.

Yes, Jerry comes back. Yes, there's plenty of Lt. Wiegand and Mullins. Yes, there are cats. And yes, indeed, you'll like it. One of the Lockridge's best.

THE MOVING FINGER. By Agatha Christie. Dodd, Mead. \$2.

WHILE this isn't one of the Christie masterpieces, it's an engrossing tale about a busy poison pen in a quiet, English village. Jerry Burton, recuperating from a bad plane crash, and his sister, Joanna, go down to the little village of Lymstock for a few weeks of peace and rest. A few days after they arrive, Jerry receives an anonymous letter implying that he and Joanna are not brother and sister and, when he mentions this to the local doctor, he learns that other people have received equally scurrilous notes about their own private lives.

Then one day a woman receives one of the letters and commits suicide. Shortly thereafter another woman is murdered.

It is known that the writer of the letters is a literate and cultured person. Since there aren't many people like that in the town, this creates a nasty situation, with each person suspecting all the others in the small circle. Finally someone thinks to call in Miss Marple, that deceptively mild and spinsterish old lady, who fits things together very neatly indeed. It's mild, but nice.



A Brilliant Chicago Poet Comes of Age with the publication of "PASSAGES OF REFUGE"

Selwyn S. Schwartz, author of "Passages of Refuge," attracted wide-spread comment with the publication earlier this year of his first book, "The Poet in Blue Minor," about which Van Wyck Brooks has written:

"Your poems have great vitality and, what is more, lucidity, and I appreciate this. I felt sure that I understood your poems, and I am sure that this lucidity, which so many poets seem not to value, is the result of sincere and really strong feeling. Then you have a great variety of moods and also great boldness of imagery. The book as a whole has made a strong impression on me."

If you do not know the work of this exciting Chicago poet, get acquainted with his new collection, "Passages of Refuge," which we will publish in mid-November in a deluxe, autographed edition of limited copies. 72 pages, handsomely printed from hand-set type, bound in full cloth. Two dollars and fifty cents—from any bookseller, or from the publishers:

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Virginia Woolf's Essays

(Continued from Page 10.)

flowers shake and break into each other." With this splendid sentence she opens an essay on Gibbon, "Reflections at Sheffield Place." How much is this like her!—the real flowers caressed by the wind; the water flowers shaking and breaking into each other; and the word "reflections" used in its twofold meaning.

Yes, her noble and sensitive mind, saturated with the essence of English-European culture, reflects the restlessness and the uncertainty of our epoch, along with the promises and the hopes. Both elements are present in "The Death of the Moth," but the sombre vein prevails. The tone of the volume seems set by the introductory piece describing the last convulsions of the little hay-colored creature. The doggedly and heroically as any hu-

moth struggles against death, as man being. But finally it lies still, "most decently and uncomplainingly composed. O, yes, he seemed to say, death is stronger than I am."

The book that begins with this miniature drama ends with "Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid," written in August, 1940, for an American symposium on current matters concerning women. But at that point Virginia Woolf was already under the spell of death. She seems somewhat absent-minded when she has to talk about worldly affairs—professions for women, for example. Her speech—judicious and candid, if a little weary—concludes, somewhat abruptly: "Willingly would I stay and discuss those questions and answers—but not tonight. My time is up; and I must cease."



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