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Virginia Woolf's Nose: Essays on Biography

By Hermione Lee



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What choices must a biographer make when stitching the pieces of a life into one coherent whole? How do we best create an accurate likeness of a private life from the few articles that linger after death? How do we choose what gets left out? This intriguing and witty collection of essays by an internationally acclaimed biographer looks at how biography deals with myths and legends, what goes missing and what can't be proved in the story of a life. *Virginia Woolf's Nose* presents a variety of case-studies, in which literary biographers are faced with gaps and absences, unprovable stories and ambiguities surrounding their subjects. By looking at stories about Percy Bysshe Shelley's shriveled, burnt heart found pressed between the pages of a book, Jane Austen's fainting spell, Samuel Pepys's lobsters, and the varied versions of Virginia Woolf's life and death, preeminent biographer Hermione Lee considers how biographers deal with and often utilize these missing body parts, myths, and contested data to "fill in the gaps" of a life story.

In "Shelley's Heart and Pepys's Lobsters," an essay dealing with missing parts and biographical legends, Hermione Lee discusses one of the most complicated and emotionally charged examples of the contested use of biographical sources. "Jane Austen Faints" takes five competing versions of the same dramatic moment in the writer's life to ask how biography deals with the private lives of famous women. "Virginia Woolf's Nose" looks at the way this legendary author's life has been translated through successive transformations, from biography to fiction to film, and suggests there can be no such thing as a definitive version of a life. Finally, "How to End It All" analyzes the changing treatment of deathbed scenes in biography to show how biographical conventions have shifted, and asks why the narrators and readers of life-stories feel the need to give special meaning and emphasis to endings.

Virginia Woolf's Nose sheds new light on the way biographers bring their subjects to life as physical beings, and offers captivating new insights into the drama of "life-writing".

Virginia Woolf's Nose is a witty, eloquent, and funny text by a renowned biographer whose sensitivity to the art of telling a story about a human life is unparalleled--and in creating it, Lee articulates and redefines the parameters of her craft.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

The author of an important biography of Virginia Woolf and one of Willa Cather, Lee is well versed in the challenges the genre poses. Where should biographers start, and how do they know where to stop? Where do the facts of someone's life end and its fictions begin? Biographies, Lee writes, are made up of "contested objects--relics, testimonies, versions, correspondences, the unverifiable." In four pithy, accessible and philosophical essays, Lee scrutinizes some notable case studies while emphasizing biography's inherent instability. She dredges up "eyewitness" accounts of the burial of Romantic poet Shelley's drowned corpse, comparing and contrasting them to reveal mythmaking embellishments. She analyzes some of the choices made by biographers of Samuel Pepys, whose densely detailed diaries cover only a finite period of his life, outside of which biographers must hypothesize. And she strikes a rich vein of cultural criticism when she examines the complex "creative translation" of Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* into the novel *The Hours* by Michael Cunningham and the 2003 film of the same name. Lamenting aspects of how the film represents Woolf, and in particular her suicide, Lee summarizes and explores the film's reception among Woolf scholars and lay readers alike. Lee's immensely enjoyable study will energize debate among thoughtful readers and should become essential reading for aficionados of literary biography.

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Review

"Lee's immensely enjoyable study will energize debate among thoughtful readers and should become essential reading for aficionados of literary biography."--**Publishers Weekly**

"Lee's tales of the battles of the biographers are gripping and vivid. There is a lightness of touch for stories of story-making that are often funny. . . . The nose is a funny thing anyway; stick it on to 'Virginia Woolf' or any other of the illustrious names Lee discusses, and you are bound to bring them down a peg. All part of the biographer's power to make or unmake, sniff out or sniff at, which Lee so engagingly shows us."--**Rachel Bowlby, *Financial Times***

"Hermione Lee, biographer of Woolf and Willa Cather, acknowledges the 'messy, often contradictory' nature of the craft of biography. . . . Lee concedes [that] Woolf--as any subject--will continue to be reinvented; any life, protean and elusive, refuses to be owned."--**Linda Simon, *Biography***

"Lee is able to give the reader an authoritative glimpse of the difficulties that must be overcome when tackling a literary biography. . . . Well written, insightful, and enjoyable."--**Library Journal**

"So many fine literary biographers are practicing that the genre itself is the subject of books with surprising frequency. The most alluring, eccentric and thoughtful example I've come across recently is *Virginia Woolf's Nose: Essays on Biography* by Dame Hermione Lee."--**George Fatherling, *Books in Canada***

"Monumental and long-needed. . . . So much is here for future scholars to use and appreciate from this tremendous and substantive quarry of Stracheyan biographical material."--**Jay Dickson, *Woolf Studies Annual***

"The four essays are the equivalent of listening to a smart, kind and personable professor holding forth on her favorite subject. . . . These essays are everywhere informed by the fact that Lee is such an accomplished biographer, a writer who knows the ropes."--**Julia Keller, *Chicago Tribune***

"For proof of Hermione Lee's expertise in biography (or, to use the technical term, 'life-writing'), one need only consider her massive and important *Virginia Woolf*. [There] is a lot to like about this book: for reminding us that Woolf herself was no apologist for the ceremony of death, which she studiously avoids in her fictions; ... and, for writing an accessible and literate treatment of life-writing. For this and for demystifying the genre for a post-modern audience, we can thank Hermione Lee."--**Karen Levenback, *Virginia Woolf Miscellany***

From the Inside Flap

"This book shows why Hermione Lee is a star among British biographers. Generous, witty, provocative, and blissfully free of academic jargon, it takes us into the heart of the current debate about the nature and value of life writing. Lee's meticulous readings constantly give rise to the largest, most challenging questions about the genre. Playful but always wonderfully erudite, this is a superb collection that will prove immensely influential."--Richard Holmes, author of "Shelley: The Pursuit"

"Hermione Lee, a biographer justly noted for her scrupulous erudition, tact, and grace of expression, is expert at sifting the telling, resonant detail from the litter of evidence that might overwhelm less observant and meticulous minds. These concise and witty essays enrich our understanding of what, either by necessity or choice, may go into and what may be left out of the writing of any life. Yet even when warning us of how much is missing or guessed at in any biography, Lee doesn't let much worth knowing get by her."--Maria DiBattista, Princeton University

"Lee has the rare ability to combine scrupulously careful scholarship with writing that is clear, imaginative, witty, and simply a delight to read. In these wide-ranging essays on various aspects of "life-writing," she takes readers behind the scenes of the biographical process, reflecting on the inevitable gaps and absences of evidence, on the human need for stories, on the film of "The Hours," on death--as the end of a life and the end of a Life--with singular brilliance and insight."--Jean Strouse, Director, Center for Scholars and Writers at the New York Public Library

"Lee's immensely enjoyable study will energize debate among thoughtful readers and should become essential reading for aficionados of literary biography."--"Publishers Weekly"

Users Review

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