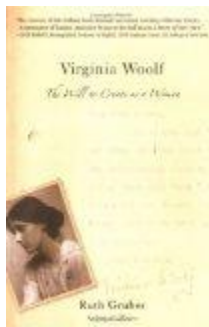


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FEATURES

A CIRCLE COMPLETED: RUTH GRUBER AND VIRGINIA WOOLF



Ruth Gruber was in her apartment overlooking Central Park West, finishing up volume three of her memoirs, *In Spite of Time: How to Live at 93*, when her research assistant came running from the other room.

"She was yelling, 'Look what I found!' And she held up the first letter," Gruber recalled.

The find was remarkable: three unpublished letters Virginia Woolf wrote to Gruber in the 1930s that suddenly emerged from behind a stack of tax returns in her files.

The letters had gone through a circuitous journey seventy years earlier, zigzagging the globe from Sussex, where Woolf and her husband, Leonard, maintained a home, to Brooklyn, Amsterdam, and again to Brooklyn, always missing the tireless and globetrotting Gruber by a hairsbreadth. In her latest book, *Virginia Woolf: The Will to Create as a Woman* Gruber tells the story behind the letters: how her doctoral dissertation on Woolf back in 1932 led to a correspondence and eventual meeting with one of the most influential feminist writers of the 20th century.

The book includes a reprinting of her dissertation, originally published in Germany in 1935, facsimiles of the Woolf letters, and the aptly titled introduction, "My hours with Virginia Woolf."

"We've already received a great deal of interest from notable academics around the world since this is the first major piece of feminist literature [on Woolf] and it was never published in the United States," said Philip Turner, editor-in-chief of Carrol & Graf, Gruber's longtime publisher. Gruber, who is 93 and the author of 17 books, is perhaps best known for secretly escorting 1,000 Holocaust refugees from Europe to America in 1944, told in her book, *Haven*, and more recently in the CBS mini-series starring Natasha Richardson as a taller, more patrician version of the feisty Brooklyn gal.

Her extensive career, beginning in the 1930s, includes voyages into Alaska, the Soviet Arctic, and war-torn Palestine and Europe where she was the only American journalist allowed to accompany the Jewish refugees back to Germany on board the ship *Exodus 1947*. Since then she has hardly slowed down, covering every wave of Jewish immigration to Israel for the Jewish press, including trekking out to Ethiopia when she was in her 70s to see firsthand the clandestine airlifting of thousands.

But before she was a reporter, Gruber made headlines in 1932 for being "the youngest Ph.D. in the world." She was barely 20 years old and her dissertation was on a little-known British author named Virginia Woolf.

"I hope people will recognize how original she was," said Jane Marcus, author of *Virginia Woolf and the Languages of Patriarchy*. "Ruth's book is a feminist interpretation of Woolf well before my group of feminists started reviving her in the seventies and eighties. But Ruth's work was never listed in any of the bibliographies I saw in any library and we did serious research. If we had this book to jump off from that would have saved us ten years of work. We could have just quoted Ruth."

Indeed, Woolf's work was not celebrated for its feminism until the second wave of the women's movement, according to Elizabeth Abel, author of *Virginia Woolf and the Fictions of Psychoanalysis*. For despite a readership during her lifetime, and an appreciation especially among her female readers for the feminist content of her work, early critical analysis centered on Woolf's writing style.

"To be writing a dissertation [on Woolf] in 1932 is pretty ahead of the times," said Abel, a professor of English at University of California, Berkeley.

A tiny woman, not quite 5 feet tall even in her sparkly silver pumps, with a splash of rouge on her cheeks and her hair pinned back in a minute chignon, Gruber has lived in her book-lined and memento-filled West Side apartment for over 50 years. Israel certainly plays a starring role in its decor, with photos of Golda Meir and David Ben-Gurion on the walls. Even the wallpaper in the foyer is a tribute to Zion. It's an ancient map of the Haifa harbor.

But Germany was Gruber's first love.

"I had fallen in love with German music and language and wanted to know about the culture that produced Bach," said Gruber, who recalls everything, down to the last umlaut, about her yearlong fellowship at the University of Cologne.

She was barely in Germany a month, taking courses in the humanities, when the head of the English department, Professor Herbert Schoffler, called her into his office.

"Ruth, we've been watching you and we'd like you to work on your Ph.D.," Gruber remembered him saying. But there was a catch: she had to finish her dissertation and pass her orals in just one year. "It's never been done before, but maybe you can do it," Schoffler said.

And then he gave her the topic. "I love Virginia Woolf," he told Gruber, "but she's not well known in Germany and my students don't speak English well."

"I had barely heard of her," Gruber admitted.

In 1932, Woolf had already published ten books, including *A Room of One's Own* and *To the Lighthouse*. According to Woolf Scholar Abel, Woolf's books were selling reasonably well in England in the 1920s, but her first major breakthrough in America didn't happen until the late '30s with the paired publication of *Three Guineas* and *The Years*.

In the end, Gruber passed her orals and wrote her dissertation in a year. *Virginia Woolf: A Study* was written in 1932, and was published in 1935 as a book by the Tauchnitz press in Leipzig, which published classics like Austen and Dickens for English speaking tourists visiting Germany.

Influenced by Friedrich Nietzsche and schooled in a Germany that was still considered the hub of arts and culture, Gruber's analysis of Woolf centers around her will to seek a way to speak and write as a woman outside of the male realm. To do this, the critique delves into Woolf's original style and tries to reconcile what the author means by calling for the emancipation of women writers.

"The psychic consciousness of woman is her imperative medium. Her struggle for the 'true' style and philosophy is determined not only by her own feminine impulses, but by her inheritance from the creative women who have preceded her," writes Gruber.

These literary foremothers include Emily Bronte, Katherine Mansfield, and especially Jane Austen.

Ultimately, Woolf is a true seeker, "...struggling to prepare the world for a woman Shakespeare, a woman Rembrandt, even a woman Christ. She is the transitional link between the past which produced a Jane Austen and the future yet to produce the great 'Shakespeareanna,'" writes Gruber.

To Marcus, distinguished professor of English, CUNY Graduate Center, City College of New York, what makes Gruber's dissertation ahead of its time was her honing in on Woolf's drive for power.

"Ruth saw her as she was: a tiger," said Marcus.

When Gruber returned to America, the press met her at her ship like a movie star. "I was sure Mary Pickford was there and I was waiting for her to come down and suddenly they surrounded me," she said. But Gruber was the story: the "attractive, young Brooklyn girl -- the youngest Ph.D. in the world."

Since it was the Depression, all the press she received didn't produce any jobs. So Gruber won another fellowship -- this time through Guggenheim to study women under fascism, communism and democracy in England, France, Germany, Holland and the Soviet Union. Before she left on her travels, she sent Woolf her published book, with a note, from her parents' home in Brooklyn.

Woolf wrote Gruber back and her mother, Gussie, stashed the letter for safekeeping.

That first letter, dated June 21, 1935, on letterhead imprinted with the Monks' House, Sussex, address, began by thanking Ruth for sending her book. Unfortunately, Woolf confessed, she didn't actually read it, not out of "laziness or a lack of interest in the subject .. but the fact is that I try to avoid reading about my own writing when I am actually writing. I find that it makes me self-conscious and for some reason distracts me from my work." (Woolf was writing *The Years* at the time.)

She went on to assure Gruber that she did give it to a "friend... an excellent critic," who "read it and told me you have written a most sympathetic and acute study of my books."

Woolf's diary suggests otherwise. In an entry dated May 31, 1935, she writes that "some good German woman sen[t] me a pamphlet on me into which I couldn't resist looking."

In all of her private references to Gruber, Woolf mistakenly identifies her as German, even though Gruber, Brooklyn born, originally identified herself as an American studying abroad.

Unaware that Woolf had written her back, Gruber sent another note to the author -- this time from Amsterdam -- asking if she might be able to meet Woolf in person and interview her for her study on women in democracy when she visited London in a few months. Woolf wrote her back, declining the interview. "I should of course be glad to do anything I can to help you in your work; and will arrange to see you if possible, but as I am not a politician... I fear that it would probably only be a waste of your time." The letter was dated October 12, 1935 and sent from her London home at 52 Tavistock Square. Gruber's host in Amsterdam forwarded the letter to her home in Brooklyn.

Without knowledge of Woolf's letter, when she arrived in London, she called the Hogarth Press. To her surprise, a meeting was arranged. On October 15, Gruber rang the bell at the four-story home in Bloomsbury and was ushered up a narrow staircase to the first floor. There she stayed for half an hour with Leonard and Virginia, who remained stretched out by the fireplace.

Virginia asked Gruber about her travels and occasionally drifted off into her own thoughts.

"I had an incredible time with her," Gruber said. "She was elegant and graceful and really very attractive. So why did they put Nicole Kidman in that fake nose and those dowdy clothes in *The Hours*? There was no need!"

What Gruber didn't know was the day before their meeting, Woolf wrote to her nephew, Julian Bell, complaining that she had to see an "importunate and unfortunate Gerwoman who thinks I can help her with the facts about Women under Democracy -- little she knows." And in her diary, scribbled right before Gruber was due to arrive, Woolf wrote, "...couldn't write this morning; & must go up & receive Miss Grueber... a pure have yer."

Gruber only discovered Woolf's unflattering portrait of herself while combing through her letters and diaries a few years ago in the Berg collection of the New York Public Library.

When no one could tell her what a "pure have yer" meant, she turned to Nigel Nicolson, who edited many of Woolf's letters and diaries. "A pure have yer... [is] a task forced upon one which needs to be done," wrote Nicolson, who went on to say, "I fear that you may have been hurt by her references to you, but she was like that in her diaries and letters, though perfectly courteous in conversation... That is one of the things I

deplore about Virginia, her cattiness, contempt for almost anyone who were not her friends, an occasional touch of anti-Semitism, her snobbishness and jealousy.”
Soon after the meeting, she sent Woolf a thank-you note. Woolf’s third and final letter to Gruber, dated January 10, 1936, is considered by Gruber to be the “most significant of all.”

She apparently typed it herself, Gruber concluded, because of the 18 handwritten corrections and popping letters.

In it she said work continued to prevent her from reading Gruber’s book.

“It is true that Christmas has come and gone and I had hoped to have done with my book. But I was optimistic; and it won’t be off my hands till March I fear... therefore I shall not attempt to read your study until my mind is free from this drudgery. Many thanks for sending me the pamphlet. I am glad to know that you have been so successful.”

“She was so sick at the time,” said Gruber. Indeed, not only did Woolf suffer from depression and mental illness, but by all accounts she was struggling with the completion of *The Years*. In his autobiography, Leonard wrote, “We had a terrifying time with *The Years* in 1936. [Virginia] was much nearer a complete breakdown than she had ever been since 1913.”

And only five years later, in 1941, Woolf committed suicide at the age of 59 by walking into the river Ouse, her pockets weighed down with rocks.
These days Gruber is busy working on a retrospective of the photos she took from her assignments and explorations, including her famous shot of the refugees on the Exodus raising the Union Jack on which they had painted a Swastika. The book, tentatively called, *Witness*, which will be published by Schocken in the fall.

Yet, it’s the Woolf book that brings her full circle.

With the sun streaming through the glass doors of her balcony, Gruber cradles the letters in her hands.

“The photographic book excites me, but the Virginia Woolf book is like having a circle completed from 70 years ago,” she said.