

VIRGINIA WOOLF



A  
Room  
of  
One's  
Own

How to run your  
own book club

a collaboration between  
The Feminist Bookshop  
and Brighton CCA

# How to run your own book club

## Part of COMMUNAL Online: Passages of Time

A Room of One's Own' by Virginia Woolf  
Notes by Ruth, founder of The Feminist Bookshop  
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### Background

Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) was a twentieth century writer perhaps best known for her novels Mrs Dalloway and To the Lighthouse. She was also a prolific writer of essays, diaries, letters and biographies and a central figure in 'The Bloomsbury Group', an informal collective of artists and writers with a significant influence on early twentieth century British culture. She refused patriarchal honours like the Companion of Honour (1935) and honorary degrees from Manchester and Liverpool; and wrote critical works about the position of women in society.

In October 1928 she was invited to deliver lectures on 'Women and Fiction' at the two women's colleges at Cambridge. These talks formed the basis of 'A Room of One's Own', published in 1929.

We selected this as the first title for the book club as it is a highly influential piece of feminist literary criticism. It seemed fitting to visit this text as we reflect back on our historical roots. Here Virginia Woolf emphatically highlights the importance of favourable historical and contextual circumstances for women to have the freedom to thrive, both in the literary world and more widely.

### General Impressions

- What did you think of Virginia Woolf's essay? Did you enjoy reading it?
- Did your impressions change as you progressed through the chapters?
- What did you think of Virginia Woolf's stream of consciousness style? Did it help or hinder the delivery of her message?
- Thinking back on the essay, what struck you as some of the key themes running through the narrative?

### Themes

Here are some of the themes that came up for us on our reading: sexism, patriarchy, financial freedom, and women in literary history. Feel free to explore whichever of these you are drawn to.

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## Sexism

“The professor was made to look very angry and very ugly in my sketch as he wrote his great book upon the mental, moral and physical inferiority of women”

- How did you feel reading Woolf’s descriptions of sexist views and practices in society?
- What do you think of Woolf’s argument that sexism is driven by fears of inadequacy, that “he was concerned not with their own inferiority, but with his own superiority?”

## Patriarchy

“Why did men drink wine and women water?”

- What did you think of Woolf’s comparison between the men and women’s colleges at the beginning of the essay? Did you think it helped to identify some of the roots of inequality in wider society?

## Financial Freedom

“Of the two – the vote and the money – the money, I own, seemed infinitely more important”

- How do you feel about Woolf’s statement about gaining the right vote?
- Would you see obtaining financial freedom as the best way for women to evade patriarchy and sexism or are there other types of freedom that are more important?

## Women in Literary History

“It would have been impossible, completely and entirely, for any woman to have written the plays of Shakespeare in the age of Shakespeare”

- What did you think of Woolf’s musings on what Shakespeare’s hypothetical sister “Judith’ could have achieved?
- Would you agree with the argument that women’s writing is inherently different from men’s and that we need both types of voices in our culture?
- How do you think Woolf’s arguments about men and women’s storytelling, and their recognition in literary history, compare with Ursula Le Guin’s in her “Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction”? (Text available at <https://brightoncca.art/exhibition/communal/>)

## Activity

Imagine you are set the same task as Virginia Woolf: to talk to a group of students about the topic of ‘women and fiction’.

- What are the first thoughts that spring to mind?
- Following your stream of consciousness where does this lead you? Try spending 5 minutes writing your thoughts exactly as they come. (Don’t worry about what you write, just jot your thoughts down as quickly as you can.) Then read back what you have written, what do you notice?
- On reflection, what are the key messages you would want the students to take away?

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## Conclusions

“In a hundred years...[women] will take part in all the activities and exertions that were once denied them”

- Do you think that our society has made the progress that Woolf was expecting in the last century?

“A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction.”

- Do you think Virginia Woolf’s arguments are helpful for women to read today? Why/why not?

## Suggested Further Reading

- Also by Virginia Woolf: Orlando; Three Guineas; Mrs Dalloway; To The Lighthouse; The Waves;
- By her contemporaries: Testament of Youth – Vera Brittain; Well of Loneliness – Radclyffe Hall; The Collected Short Stories of Katherine Mansfield
- Biography and literary criticism: Virginia Woolf – Hermione Lee; Virginia Woolf : Twenty-First-Century Approaches – Dubino et al.

ENJOY!

The Feminist Bookshop is an independent bookshop based in central Brighton, currently online and delivering. The shop opened in November 2019 following a successful crowdfunding campaign. The bookshop stocks a range of books written by and about women, hosts events celebrating female artists and provides space for dialogue, discussion and debate. Visit the online shop on their website [thefeministbookshop.com](http://thefeministbookshop.com) and follow them @thefeministbookshop

COMMUNAL Online: Passages of Time is a three-part programme examining alternative understandings of our social narratives and the models of organisation which reflect them. The book club discussion notes follow the online programme structure: the first part considers the historical roots of our discourse, the second how these are manifested in the present and the third how we can effect change.

Get in touch with Brighton CCA via [brightoncca.art](http://brightoncca.art) or @brightoncca

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