



Virginia Woolf was still finding her voice when she wrote three short stories published last year as *The Life of Violet*. Her struggle should confirm that writing is hard work, and excellence rarely comes easily. This portrait of Woolf was painted by her friend Roger Fry.

Like many writers, I live in a home crowded with books. They spill from every corner, and though I'd like to claim that all of them are great, my private library includes quite a few volumes I'd classify as *not-so-great*. I keep them around because their limitations can sometimes teach me as much about the writing craft as the titles I'd consider masterpieces.

I'm looking right now at three shelves crammed with the work of Virginia Woolf, a writer who's one of my heroes. There are many things to love about her genius, but I'm struck most by her great capacity to look not only at a subject but *through* it. Woolf had a quality of attention that seemed to pierce whatever it fell upon. When most of us see a city street, we might casually note

the pavement and a few passing cars. But here's what Woolf discerns in her essay

"Street Haunting":  
*How beautiful a London street is then, with its islands of light, and its long groves of darkness, and on one side of it perhaps some tree-sprinkled, grass-grown space where night is folding herself to sleep naturally and, as one passes the iron railing, one hears these little cracklings and stirrings of leaf and twig which seem to suppose the silence of fields all round them, an owl hooting, and far away the rattle of a train in the valley.*

What a beautiful sentence — so alive to life, just like its author. The other miracle I notice in reading it is its length, which should make it much too big to fly. But surprisingly, the sentence soars. Woolf has stitched it together so deftly that its gossamer wings lift it off the page.

As you can see, I'm fairly smitten by Virginia Woolf, which is why I was excited to read *The Life of Violet* when it was published last year. The slender work includes a finished

## EVEN GOOD WRITERS MUST WORK AT THEIR CRAFT

BY DANNY HEITMAN, FORUM EDITOR

version of three early Woolf stories that scholar Urmila Seshagiri discovered in 2022. Woolf fans anticipated reading something new from a literary giant who had died in 1941.

But after reading *The Life of Violet*, I wasn't surprised that it had been overlooked all these years. The stories create a fantastical narrative about a giant named Violet, a spoof of Woolf's friend Mary Violet Dickinson. Woolf was 25 when she wrote this fiction and still trying to find her voice. *The Life of Violet* can be cloying and precious. Virginia Woolf's husband, Leonard, her tireless champion, had read drafts of the stories and declared them "a kind of private joke, and not very good."

Why do I keep *The Life of Violet* on my shelf? Like other not-so-great books, it points to a useful truth. Writing is hard work, and even wonderful writers can struggle to achieve a stellar result, sometimes falling short.

Remembering that idea gives me courage when I tackle my own work.



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