

Virginia Woolf and the Book Society Limited

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“As people read more books they will read better books; they will also realize the pleasure of owning the books they read instead of borrowing them from a library”

(Virginia Woolf, “Are Too Many Books Written and Published”, July 1927, 243)

In her BBC radio debate with Leonard in July 1927, Virginia Woolf foresaw the appeal of what would shortly become the Book Society Ltd., a mail-order book club modelled on the American Book-of-the-Month Club established the preceding year. Woolf worked with the English Book Society and came into contact with its large, worldwide membership as both publisher and author, a perhaps unlikely relationship facilitated by her friendship with Hugh Walpole (Book Society chairman) and other members of its “distinguished” Selection Committee. *Flush* (1933) was a Book Society Choice; Woolf’s work appeared regularly amongst the club’s Recommended titles, and her name often featured as cultural touchstone in the monthly *Book Society News (BSN)*. Business correspondence in the archive of the Hogarth Press indicates the extent to which the Woolfs were willing to negotiate with the Book Society throughout the 1930s, and how much impact the Book Society’s demands could have on the production schedules, prices, and occasionally upon the material production of Hogarth Press texts.ⁱ

Bearing in mind the recent surge of academic interest in the so-called middlebrow and the continual push to re-read Woolf in various contexts, this paper seeks to re-position Virginia Woolf as a Book Society, book club author. For contemporary readers and paying members of the Book Society who received a selected text each month, Virginia Woolf’s titles sat amongst other volumes on the bookshelf by popular Book Society authors. In terms

Figure 1. Word cloud representing Book Society Choice (monthly) authors from 1929-41.

The Book Society: Midwives or Middlemen?

The English Book Society was set up in late 1928 and was the first mail-order book club to operate in Britain. It was established as what its advertisements in *The Times* called an “aid to the busy reader” (29 December 1928, 6) and operated by sending a new, full-price book to its members each month. Subscribers paid monthly, quarterly or annually upfront, and chose to either keep that month’s Book Society Choice or to return it in exchange for one of the other Recommended titles. There is an amusing description of this process in E. M. Delafield’s *Diary of a Provincial Lady* (1930), itself a Book Society Choice in December, 1930:

November 14th.—Arrival of Book of the Month choice, and am disappointed. History of a place I am not interested in, by an author I do not like. Put it back into its wrapper again, and make fresh choice from Recommended List. Find, on reading small literary bulletin enclosed with book, that exactly this course of procedure has been anticipated, and that it is described as being ‘the mistake of a lifetime’. Am much annoyed, although not so much at having made (possibly) mistake of a lifetime, as at depressing thought of our all being so much alike that intelligent writers can apparently predict our behaviour with perfect accuracy. (6)

Before World War II, the Book Society subscriber received a copy of the publisher’s edition of the chosen book, not a specially printed or bound edition (or, like some of the later book clubs that sprang up in the 1930s, a cheaper edition) and so books were announced as a “Book Society Choice” on the same day as publication of the ordinary first edition.

Contemporary publicity material sought to entice new members through the promise that

belonging to the Book Society meant forming their own first-edition library. As British publishers would regularly lament throughout the first half of the twentieth century, the British public were happy to patronise libraries (private or public) instead of buying the books that they read. Part of the reason why the Book Society was set up was to encourage greater book-buying as well as helping the work of new and unknown authors.

As in the United States, the Book Society's model of carefully guided taste-forming and collecting in book buying was highly successful, and by 1930 it had over 13,000 members living in more than 30 countries. By the mid-1930s this had increased to 30,000 subscribers. This figure was significant not only for the direct sales it represented to Book Society members, but the wider attention paid to its choices by the contemporary book world. As Harold Raymond of Chatto & Windus explained to Rosamond Lehmann on 28 May 1930, the selection of her second novel, *A Note in Music* (1930) as a Book Society Choice guaranteed a wider distribution:

The good news has come at last!

This is really splendid tidings and I warmly congratulate you. It means not only a definite extra sale of 9000 copies to the members, but also the best possible publicity for sale through the ordinary channels. It means, too, that the Great Five have the good taste to like the book: Walpole, Professor Gordon, Clemence Dane, Sylvia Lynd, and Priestley. The Book Society purchase at a discount vastly greater than the ordinary bookseller; in fact, they pay only a little above 3/-, according to the actual number which they purchase. Sales to them therefore involve a special rate of royalty. ... but you can take it that this Book Society sale will mean at the least an extra £250 to you. We shall almost certainly print a first edition of 25,000 copies. (UoR/CW A/128)

How to assess the literary choices of the Book Society? On the one hand it was readily seen as a champion of the middlebrow. Its readers (and we recall Delafield's affluent, servant-keeping provincial lady) were described in the *Bookseller* as "the great novel-reading middle-brow public – the Book Society, Observer and Sunday Times public" (13 January 1937). In literary history, the Book Society is best remembered as a well-known scourge for Q. D. Leavis's contempt as one of the most notorious of the new "Middlemen" of the interwar period. Her dismissal in *Fiction and the Reading Public* (1932) is categorical:

by conferring authority on a taste for the second-rate (to the Book Society the publication of *A Modern Comedy* is 'a real event in the story of modern English literature') a middlebrow standard of values has been set up; second, that middlebrow taste has thus been organised. (34)

Yet on the other hand, the Book Society's Choices indicate an alternative version of literary history, one that stresses popular reading patterns, pleasure and the readable text. Bestselling novelist Hugh Walpole, the Society's affable, charismatic Chairman, relished rhetorical gambits like that of Leavis's, preferring in columns and reviews for the *Book Society News* to celebrate a different type of reading experience:

It would be amusing suddenly to defend a statement that the half-dozen best living novelists in England are not the well-known and customary names, Woolf, Huxley, Maugham and so on, but rather, Forrest Reid, Charles Marriott, L. H. Myers, Elizabeth Bowen, C. S. Forester and Helen Simpson (*BSN*, November 1938, 9).

Walpole's well-known views on the form of the novel and the reasons why, as he put it, "the novel of the new school in England has not all the readers that it ought to have" (1932, 14) were a source of much debate between him and Virginia Woolf and were published by the Woolf's in his *Letter to a Modern Novelist* for the Hogarth Press.ⁱⁱ

In their monthly Choices and Recommendations, the Book Society's Selection Committee followed Walpole's lead in celebrating the invention of character and what he dubbed "the genius for story-telling" (1932, 18). This is from the poet Sylvia Lynd's review of Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* (a hotly debated Book Society Choice for August 1938):

It is not with the critic's cherished masterpieces that we sit up all night. It is not fine English or wit or poetry or characterisation that keeps us standing at the dressing-table. These things are may be present in a sensational novel, or in any novel. But they are not the essential quality that holds us.

This, simply, is the art of story-telling, of infecting the reader with a devouring curiosity to know what happens. Of compelling him to share the author's moods and see what he sees in his imagination. (*BSN*, August 1938, 5-6)

The "art of story-telling" is a broad, highly subjective definition of taste and form, and one that does not necessarily deny complex or more experimental works either. The formal and thematic variety represented by the two other Hogarth Press texts to be chosen by the Book Society in addition to *Flush* – Vita Sackville West's *The Edwardians* (1930) and William Plomer's *The Case is Altered* (1932) – gestures towards the variety of works that the Book Selection Committee sought to sponsor and to bring to their readers' attention.

"The Gipsies, I say: not Hugh Walpole and Priestley— no" (D4, 19 Dec 1932, 133)

Virginia Woolf's association with the Book Society and its "Great Five" on the Selection Committee was neither easy nor obvious, and we can chart, through her diaries, her ambiguous relationships with what she called the "professional scribblers" – the Walpoles, the Priestleys, the Lynds. On the one hand, on a personal and intellectual level, Woolf dismissed the kind of professional respectability and public networks that the "second rate" journalists of the Selection Committee signified. In a diary entry from 27 March 1926, for instance, after an evening out at Rose Macaulay's "pothouse", Woolf reflects:

There were 10 second rate writers in second rate dress clothes, Lynds, Goulds, o'Donovan: [...] Then the pitter patter began; the old yard was scratched over by these baldnecked chickens. [...] What d'you think of the Hawthornden prize? Sylvias & Gerald's & Roberts & Roses chimed & tinkled round the table (*D3*, 27 March 1926, 70-1).

Yet on the other hand, for Woolf as writer and publisher the opinions of the Selection Committee could not be cast aside so easily – there were the young poets Edmund Blunden and Cecil Day Lewis on there to consider (both published by the Hogarth Press) – and Woolf was close friends with Hugh Walpole, its chairman throughout the 1930s. Rejection letters from the Book Society in the Hogarth Press archive also indicate that Leonard was persistent in submitting Hogarth Press manuscripts to the Selection Committee. After Woolf found to much dismay that Leonard had sent off the proofs of *The Waves* to the Book Society she wrote in her diary, "I have come up here, trembling under the sense of complete failure—I mean *The Waves*—I mean Hugh Walpole doesn't like it." She added later, "This was true: Hugh wrote to say he thinks it 'unreal'. It beats him." (*D4*, 15 September 1931, 43).

Despite Woolf's cutting assessment in private of the writer, publisher's reader, and literary hostess Sylvia Lynd (married to newspaper editor, Robert Lynd), it was Lynd who was the champion for Woolf's work on the Selection Committee. She wrote to Walpole on 14 October 1931, "My dear Hugh, We must recommend 'The Waves'. If you get past the first page or two ... the convention, the affectation won't worry you. It's really a beautiful book. We mustn't miss it" (HR/HW). Though the Selection Committee struggled to nominate Woolf's works as a Choice selection they were keen to recommend her to their readers (Recommended titles were the alternative books reviewed in the monthly journal that could be exchanged by the reader in place of the Book Society Choice). In terms of Recommended titles, *The Waves*, *A Room of One's Own*, *The Years* and *Three Guineas* were all selected and reviewed by the Book Society. The Woolf reviews are written by Lynd who seems to have been the most interested in women writers and particularly in more experimental women writers. In November 1938 for instance, Lynd celebrates a new collected edition of Dorothy Richardson's *Pilgrimage* novels, declaring: "Richardson has never had a popular reputation, but she has always been regarded by readers who are conscious of literature as well as of books as a pioneer in her generation" (*BSN*, November 1938, 17). The call to "readers who are conscious of literature" is an important reminder that the Book Society was part of a complex interwar project to cultivate tastes and rooted in social, material and literary aspiration and education. In her reviews of Woolf, Lynd tackles the resistant reader, addressing the question of how to read a complex author? In her discussion of *The Years* for instance, we find the following admonishment: "In a picture gallery we do not demand a point, we ask for the pleasure that comes with looking. It is just this pleasure that we get from Mrs Woolf" (*BSN*, April 1937, 6).

Woolf's Book Society Reading and Rosamond Lehmann

How did Virginia Woolf respond to the Book Society's chosen books of the month? Though she may have sympathised with the democratic principle behind the formation of the Book Society and its endeavour to educate and aid the distribution of literature, its didactic aspect was some way from her common reader's "active, intelligent reading practice" (Cuddy-Keane, 117). Its more conventional choices and titles of the bestselling ilk could certainly raise her heckles. As Hugh Walpole, writing in his diary on 26 February 1932 after "tea with Virginia" wrote: "We fought over [Charles] Morgan's 'Fountain' [that month's Book Society Choice] which she said made her sick. We laughed a great deal" (HR/HW). Similarly with Enid Bagnold's *National Velvet* (Book Society Choice in 1935), Woolf records in her diary: "I have now Enid Bagnold's rather (I suspect) meretricious & much applauded book to read. Whats wrong with it? My nose is sniffing already" (D4, 2 April 1935, 295). Such comments betray complex markers of taste and cultural literacy, recalling Woolf's ambiguous attitude toward the compulsive yet ephemeral bestseller. As she wrote to Vita Sackville-West on 17 September 1929 of Walpole's *Hans Frost* (1929): "The truth is its a day dream, unreal, all spangles, like a Christmas tree, and to me rather exhilarating for that reason—all shivers to violet powder. . . . and thats the trick—thats the glamour and the illusion and the spangle: thats why he sells, and why nothing is left but a little dent." (L4, 88)

This language is similar to Woolf's characterisation of the writing of Rosamond Lehmann. Lehmann was in many ways a darling of the Book Society and had four of her novels chosen overall. In Woolf's life-time this comprised *A Note in Music* (Book Society Choice for August 1930) and *The Weather in the Streets* (July 1936); later the *Ballad and the Source* was a Choice (September 1944) as was *The Echoing Grove* (April 1953). Lehmann was popular in America, where she had huge sales. Her first novel, *A Dusty Answer* (1927) was chosen as an American Book-of-the-Month, as was her 1932 *Invitation to the Waltz*. Lehmann was also successful in Europe and particularly in France, where she was translated

by Jean Talva (who had previously translated *Jacob's Room*) and was compared favourably to Woolf and Marcel Proust (Pollard, 44-5).

Lehmann was much closer to Bloomsbury than many of the other Book Society authors I have mentioned and she was on friendly, admiring terms with Woolf (there were Hogarth Press connections through her brother John of course, and Rosamond was close friends with Lytton Strachey, E. M. Forester, and Elizabeth Bowen. She also had a prominent affair with Cecil Day Lewis). As critics were wont to point out, sometimes unkindly, Woolf was an important influence on the younger Lehmann. Vera Brittain noted in her review of Lehmann's lyrical *A Letter to a Sister* (published as the third Hogarth Letter in 1931), that the author "has become a little uncertain whether she is Virginia Woolf or herself" (Hastings, 133).

Lehmann's texts are characterised by complex, questioning and anxious protagonists; shifting narrative and temporal perspectives; lyrical prose; and heightened "moments of being" – or, what the narrator of *The Weather in the Streets* calls in one such scene of recognition and illumination: "a transfiguring light" (320). Her writing shows an intense interest in exploring Woolf's ideas on "Modern Fiction", often with a note of self-depreciation. We see this particularly in Lehmann's second novel, *A Note in Music* (where the influence of *Mrs Dalloway* is profound) through the haunting depiction of the lonely protagonist, Grace Fairfax, and the narrative's sensitive portraits of the ebbing and flowing of familial identity:

Only to-night she hated the active life, wanted to have rest from this perpetual crumbling of the edges, this shredding out of one's personality upon minute obligations and responsibilities. She wanted, even for a few moments, to feel her own

identity peacefully floating apart from them all, confined and dissolved within a shell upon which other people's sensibilities made no impression. But this was not possible, never for a second, in one's own home. (52-3)

Woolf read *A Note in Music* with "some interest & admiration":

she has a clear hard mind, beating up now & again to poetry; but I am as usual appalled by the machinery of fiction: its much work for little result. Yet I see no other outlets for her gifts. And these books don't matter—they flash a clear light here & there; but I suppose no more. But she has all the gifts (I suppose) that I lack; can give story & development & character & so on. (D3, 28 August 1930, 314-5)

Within this context, it is illuminating to read Lehmann as a more approachable Woolf, gifted with Lynd's "art of story-telling."

How does the context in which we read or discover a work of art influence our interpretations of it? What does it mean to re-situate Virginia Woolf amidst other Book Society authors? If for instance we read *Flush* not directly after *The Waves*, but as a member of the Book Society would have done: alongside other Book Society Choices of 1933 which includes David Garnett's *Pocahontas*, Margaret Irwin's *Royal Flush*, Helen Simpson's *The Woman on the Beast* or Dorothy Whipple's *Greenbanks*? Re-casting the web of Virginia Woolf and her female contemporaries to include those women writers nominated by the Book Society and the influential literary women on its Selection Committee allows us to view Virginia Woolf and her work in another cultural context, one characterised by popular

reading patterns and new models of book distribution, branding and cultural authority in the interwar period. The series of relationships and textual connections between Woolf and her Book Society counterparts, including Rosamond Lehmann, Sylvia Lynd, Ann Bridge and Margaret Irwin is a rich and revealing web. Perhaps it is time to re-classify the books on the shelf?

Note

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Archives

UoR/CW University of Reading. Chatto & Windus Archive.

HR/HW Austin, TX. Harry Ransom Center. Hugh Walpole Collection.

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ⁱ See Nicola Wilson, "Virginia Woolf, Hugh Walpole, the Hogarth Press and the Book Society", *English Literary History*, vol. 79,1 (2012), 237-60.

ⁱⁱ I discuss this relationship further in my *ELH* article. See also Stephen Barkway, "A Letter from Virginia," *Virginia Woolf Bulletin*, vol. 21 (2006), 4-7.