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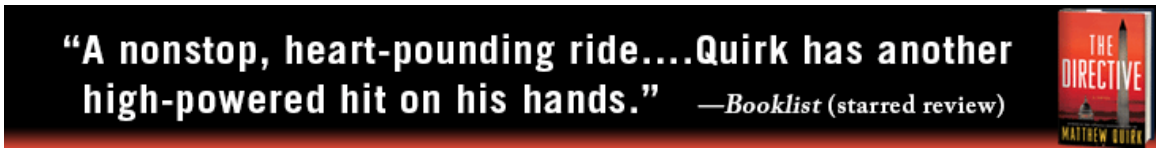

Vita and Violet: The Greatest Bloomsbury Love Story

By TONI BENTLEY
Published: August 4, 2011

Correction Appended

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"Heaven preserve us from all the sleek and dowdy virtues, such as punctuality, conscientiousness, fidelity and smugness!" So wrote Violet Keppel in her unruly call to arms to the great ruling passion of her life, Vita Sackville-West. "What great man was ever constant? What great queen was ever faithful? Novelty is the very essence of genius and always will be. If I were to die tomorrow, think how I should have lived!" And indeed, how this woman, this "unexploded bomb," as Vita called her, "lived!"

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Leanne Shapton

A BOOK OF SECRETS
Illegitimate Daughters, Absent Fathers

By Michael Holroyd

Illustrated. 258 pp. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. $26.

Multimedia

Sir Michael De Courcy Fraser Holroyd, biographer supreme of Lytton Strachey, George Bernard Shaw and the painter Augustus John, among others, tells the much-told tale of Violet and Vita yet again, in "A Book of Secrets: Illegitimate Daughters, Absent Fathers," but with more depth and context than anyone has before. And he tells us oh so much more besides the fascinating story of "the three V's" of Bloomsbury — for wherever go the glamorous and flamboyant Violet and Vita, Virginia, in her blue stockings, ambles nearby, pen at hand.

From the first page "A Book of Secrets" casts the spell of a time long gone, of loves endured and lost, expectations dashed on the rocks of reality, of inner desires forever stilled, casting their shadows into history. It is written with the kind of elegance, ease and simplicity possible only from a master craftsman who has flown far beyond any learning curve and is relishing his free fall. He carries us as if on a magic carpet from one character to the next, and one time period to the next, with consummate grace. Holroyd is a kind of Fred Astaire on the page, his many steps becoming one grand, profound design.

The book evokes a haunted world of unsung women — a dead wife, a jilted fiancée, an illegitimate daughter, a possible granddaughter and some seriously headstrong lesbians — and links them in an elaborate web of intrigue to, alas, a

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man, though one of little importance, named Ernest.

Ernest Beckett, on whom Part I of the book centers, became the second Lord Grimthorpe in 1905, when his uncle, who designed the clock mechanism for Big Ben, died, on time, one presumes. Belying his, er, grim appellation, the good lord's "last urgent words" to his wife, Holroyd says, "were reported as being 'We are low on marmalade.' " Thus the tone was set for his nephew's less than distinguished career of a little of this and quite a lot of that.

"A man of swiftly changing enthusiasms," Holroyd writes, "a dilettante, philanderer, gambler and opportunist. He changed his name, his career, his interests and his mistresses quite regularly." The novelist George Moore informed Lady Cunard that Beckett was undoubtedly "London's greatest lover," constantly distracted "by the sight of pretty girls." Like his uncle, Ernest liked his jam jar brimming.

Hold on, it's going to be a bumpy ride. A few years after his American wife's death following childbirth in 1891, Beckett's South African bombshell of a mistress, José (for Josephine) Brink, gave birth to Ernest's illegitimate son, Lancelot Ernest Cecil, a child burdened with somewhat conflicting literary references.

José had become the rake's mistress at 19, explaining, "So much in love were we with each other that . . . I let him unclothe me." Love has been known, on occasion, to lead to nudity. After Lancelot's birth, Ernest saw no point in marrying José as he had promised. Two years before her son's birth, momentarily fed up with Ernest, she took a twirl on the stage in a bit part in a touring production of Oscar Wilde's "Woman of No Importance." (I am not making this up.)

Less than nine months before Lancelot's arrival, across town, in rather more genteel circumstances — the mother was at least married, though not to her progeny's father — the beautiful Alice Keppel gave birth to Ernest's daughter Violet, only three years after marrying look-the-other-way George Keppel. Violet, apparently, was never sure of her paternal lineage: "Who was my father? A faun undoubtedly!" she wrote to Vita, not too far off the mark. "A faun who contracted a mésalliance with a witch." A few years after Violet's birth, the ambitious Alice moved far beyond Ernest and became "La Favorita," mistress to the Prince of Wales, later King Edward VII. (Got it? If not, reread, and make a chart. I did.) We are now full circle to Violet again, where all roads in Holroyd's book lead.

But first, another detour, for what must surely be one of the most touching cameos in the history of abandoned brides, featuring the lovely, aptly named Eve Fairfax, who played, it was said, "an aggressive game of croquet."

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Excerpt: 'A Book of Secrets' (August 4, 2011)

Books of The Times: 'A Book of Secrets ' by Michael Holroyd (August 5, 2011)

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"What great queen was ever faithful?" wrote Violet Keppel Trefusis.

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Enamored of a dream: Ernest Beckett at Villa Cimbrone, circa 1910.

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Eve became Ernest's new fiancée in 1901, and he promptly dispatched her to sit for Rodin in Paris, commissioning a bust he never paid for. The sittings went on for over eight years, involving hundreds of letters and numerous studies — there are 10 alone at the Musée Rodin in Paris — resulting in a platonic *amitié amoureuse* between artist and model that Holroyd says was "the most lasting and tender experience of her life."

In 1907 Rodin gave Eve a cast of the sculpture, and after Ernest disposed of her before marrying her, the bust became her only asset — but at least it had been forged in marble by one of the great artists of the century. Destitute, Eve had to sell her sculpture, but the money did not last long. She spent the rest of her life unmarried, a wanderer to her dying day.

In 1909 Lady Diana Manners (later Cooper) gave Eve a large blank tome intended as a diary. On the title page it read: "Eve Fairfax. Her Book." But instead of writing in it herself, Eve had everyone she knew write in it, "the reverse of a visitors' book," Holroyd says, "guests pinned like butterflies to its pages." As the years accumulated, Her Book became a colossal collection, bulging with added inserts, photos and notes, and Eve carried this evidence of her existence, "her pride and her penance," for more than 50 years, ever homeless, depending on the kindness of friends and strangers. "Like an extraordinary tramp," Holroyd writes, "she traveled the country between Castles, Halls, Granges, Manors, Priories, Abbeys weighed down by its heavy load like a figure from 'The Pilgrim's Progress.' "

Eve died at 106 in 1978, but Her Book remains, and Holroyd, he tells us, has held it, bringing her close. Most chilling of all the hundreds of entries are lines by Swinburne, transcribed by one Ernest Beckett, the man who left her at the altar, rendering Her Book her life:

> *For the Crown of our life as it closes*
> *Is darkness, the fruit thereof dust;*
> *No thorns go so deep as the roses*
> *And love is more cruel than lust —*
> *Time turns the old days to derision*
> *Our loves into corpses or wives,*
> *And marriage and death and division*
> *Makes barren our lives —*

Ernest had deserted Eve when he fell in love yet again, this time not with a woman but with a dream, a place, a villa, a vision high upon a cliff in Ravello, on the Amalfi Coast. He bought the exquisite Villa Cimbrone around 1905 and spent his remaining years, and his fortune, expanding it, decorating it, eccentrically, and, stupendously, adding numerous "statuosities"; it is where his ashes reside. The Bloomsbury crowd frequently gathered there, and it has recently become a hotel. So you can now, for a steep price (after a steep drive), stay at the place that Gore Vidal once wrote was the most beautiful spot on earth, specifically the view from the belvedere that Ernest built, the Terrace of Infinity: "The sky and the sea were each so vividly blue that it was not possible to tell one from the other."

Coiling back in from the site of cerulean infinity, Part II of "A Book of Secrets" explores the Violet-Vita story and its bodice-ripping affair — though Vita liked to dress as "Julian" when they checked into hotels as husband and wife. "I felt like a person translated, or reborn," she wrote of her transvestite forays. Theirs was a *liaison dangereuse* if ever there was one, complete with all the operatic melodrama of "Tosca," the vituperation of Edward Albee — though here, no one is afraid of Virginia Woolf — all culminating in a Feydeau farce, complete with gender-bending, cross-dressing, occasionally bisexual lesbians, their

bewildered husbands, their outraged mothers and one small rented airplane. The plot contains such frequent scenes of sex, confrontation, cruelty and humiliation, set across Europe, from Cornwall and London to Paris and Monte Carlo (for gambling, dancing and novelizing), that it suggests some Hollywood executive has been sleeping on the job — or has succumbed to sequel-itis — in not turning their story into a film. Their passion makes Henry and June look lame, and, in the role of chronicler, Anaïs Nin *should* be afraid of Virginia Woolf.

Both Vita and Violet themselves, however, were also industrious scribblers, and in their respective romans à clef they even provided, between them, the script. Vita wrote "Challenge" during their affair, with considerable input from Violet, and the characters were named Julian and Eve. Vita's mother paid the British publisher to cancel the book for fear of scandal, and it first appeared in print in America in 1924, not receiving a British release until 50 years later. Violet in turn wrote, in French, the delightfully vengeful "Broderie Anglaise" ("English Embroidery"), in which Vita is Lord Shorne, Violet is Anne Lindell, and Virginia Woolf — who had since become Vita's other, more famous lover — is the acidic Alexa Harrowby Quince, "one of those women," Violet writes, "who, having no bloom to lose, improve with age." Ouch! The book was published in France in 1935 but not translated into English until 1985. And of course Virginia wrote the spectacular "Orlando," with Orlando as Vita and Sasha, a Russian princess, as Violet. How ironic that the most sexually reticent lady of the three should write not only the best book, but the one that dares to explore most deeply the profound subject of amorphous gender. These three very different novels provide a fascinating "Rashomon" of the Violet-Vita affair.

The real-life story, that mystery called the truth, which Holroyd narrates so expertly, stars two brilliant, young, beautiful, rich, hypersexed lesbians. The film, of course, would adhere strictly to the truth — please, no Portman-Kunis off-with-her-panties scenes; this coupling requires some actual ardor. And Nicole Kidman could don her Cyrano proboscis again for a vital cameo, composing at her desk while the girls gallivant across the Continent providing her with scandalous copy.

Violet and Vita met as children, and already the fire was lit, though it came to full blaze six years after Vita married the distinguished, mostly homosexual Harold Nicolson (Colin Firth, slam dunk), while Violet was forced into a marriage with poor, handsome Denys Trefusis (Hugh Grant) in the midst of their affair. The question of conjugal consummation was out of the question — until it became the answer. Vita, right on cue, arrived in Paris during Violet's honeymoon and whisked her away: "I treated her savagely, I made love to her, I had her, I didn't care, I only wanted to hurt Denys."

Denys had apparently, until his honeymoon, not "heard of lesbianism," so he got a quick, hands-off lesson. Eventually, sadly, he destroyed Vita's letters to Violet, but not before reading every one. "He can have no illusions left," Violet wrote. But Vita kept Violet's letters, more than 500, and one biographer wrote of them, "For sheer ruthless, persistent passion I have never come upon their equal."

"I revel in your beauty, your beauty of form and feature," Violet wrote. "I exult in my surrender. . . . I love belonging to you — I glory in it, that you alone . . . have bent me to your will, shattered my self-possession, robbed me of my mystery, made me yours, *yours*." Vita wrote insightfully of Violet's sexual yielding: "I hadn't dreamt of such an art of love. . . . She let herself go entirely limp and passive in my arms. (I shudder to think of the experience that lay behind her abandonment.)"

Out of the bedroom and into reality we find the mothers — Lady Sackville and Alice Keppel — an unstoppable pair of doyennes (calling Vanessa Redgrave and Maggie Smith),

banding together and wrangling their wayward daughters to the ground, re-establishing respectability and the matriarchal order. But not before their girls — their mothers' daughters to the core — put up the fight of their lives for each other, a fight that defined their lives, especially Violet's.

Never has such a cast of beauty, brains and female potency been assembled: Lady Sackville, an aristocratic charmer who, like Eve Fairfax, sat for Rodin "fully décolleté," and wrote of the experience, "He keeps saying I am so beautiful, and yet the bust is perfectly hideous up to now." She referred to her son-in-law as "little Harold" and lectured Vita on Violet's "sexual perversion," neatly sidestepping her own daughter's "perversion."

Alice Keppel "was shocked by the appalling weakness of the two husbands," Holroyd writes, and told her daughter that if she were her "she would have killed herself long ago!" Keppel brought the drama to a head, hiring a plane to send "little Harold" and tubercular, "What is a lesbian?" Denys to the hotel in Amiens where their wives had eloped for the umpteenth time. The confrontation was, Holroyd says, "truly dreadful," dominated by Violet's vitriol to Denys, whom she humiliated beyond even Vita's belief. Any power Harold might have had as cuckolded husband No. 2 was somewhat compromised by his own recent fling with the couturier Edward Molyneux.

"At this point, reader, I throw up my hands in despair at any of these characters behaving with proper consideration for their biographers," our beloved biographer writes. "A tragic love story — for this is what it is — has been made chaotic and incredible by the tumult of contradictions." Suffice it to say that the negotiations came to an end only when Harold whispered to his wife what Denys had told him on their flight over: the Trefusis marriage had, in fact, been consummated. Vita went "half mad with pain" and was pulled away from a clinging Violet by Denys. Harold then dutifully "guarded" his quarry. In a final fillip, Denys proceeded to perjure himself to the suffering Vita on the trip back to England by telling her that he had *not* slept with his wife. (Got it? No? Make another chart.)

"I feel it is something legendary," Vita wrote of the "bond which unites me to Violet, Violet to me." Violet was the more passionate dreamer of the two, the romantic idealist with a gypsy heart and thick, wild hair to match. Her letters charge through time, slicing convention open like a sword, rendering, indeed, her love "legendary."

In their letters, Vita was "Mitya," and Violet was the lush "Lushka": "My poor Mitya, they've taken you and they've burnt your caravan. . . . They've pulled down your sleeves and buttoned up your collar! They've forced you to sleep beneath a self-respecting roof with no chinks to let the stars through. . . . Come away, Mitya, come away. . . . I'll wait for you at the crossroads. . . . Ah, Beloved!"

Violet loved Vita — her whole life long, she claimed — so above and beyond what society allowed that she was deemed crazy, as are most women who are obsessively, wildly in love. Today Violet would be on a Lexapro cocktail with an Abilify chaser, Ritalin with some Ativan on the side for particularly fiery outbursts, while attending daily meetings of Sex Addicts Anonymous after a few weeks of inpatient therapy with Dr. Drew at Almost-a-Celebrity Rehab. But instead of all this to rein in her emotional anarchy, she had the old-fashioned cure, a formidable mother.

But even Alice Keppel could not prevent her daughter's writing, the great outlet, the great revenge, and Violet wrote at least nine books and numerous columns, though her Wikipedia page has yet to know it. "Her novels," writes Holroyd, who has read them, "were the negotiations she made between this love and the rest of her life."

Explaining, in part, why Violet has always taken the supporting role to Vita, Holroyd offers

a friendly — but cutting — jab at the "Vita camp" of people who have insisted both directly and through sometimes brutal insinuation that Violet was simply nuts. Nigel Nicolson, Vita's son, laid the groundwork in his famous "Portrait of a Marriage," and Harold Acton (who Holroyd says was "remorselessly hostile" to Violet), Nancy Mitford and even Victoria Glendinning, Vita's great biographer, all did much to paint Violet as dismissible, certifiable, secondary.

"Whatever vessel set hesitantly out from the Trefusis harbor," Holroyd writes, "appeared to her enthusiasts to be immediately captured by the enemy." He suggests kindly — though his intrinsic authority demands — that "a reassessment" of her work is in order, so that "a legitimate place" may yet be found "in European literature for the name Violet Trefusis."

Holroyd will be 76 on Aug. 27, having survived several years of aggressive cancer treatment that has left him, he says, "ludicrously pragmatic." "Now, as in a film," he writes toward the end, "I can bring back the characters who occupy the pages of this, my last book." And so he announces, with infinite poise and quiet humility, his retirement. Our loss.

"This has been my exit from myself," Holroyd has said of his life's work as a biographer. "I seek invisibility," he writes, "behind the subjects I am trying to bring alive on the page." But in this he fails miserably: his heart and humor bounce in vibrant rays off every hot-blooded, lovelorn, crazy, jealous and joyous woman — and what enlightened being would have any woman be otherwise? — in his book. Through his "exit" Holroyd is well found.

"A Book of Secrets" is a book of magic, a sleight of hand by a master conjurer singing his swan song, sweetly, softly, with piercing wit and overwhelming compassion, his poetry in prose evoking a time past, with all its outrageous obsessions, its illegal passions, its melancholy perfume. It is the scent, I believe, of violets that rises from these intoxicating pages.

Holroyd likes this poem by Violet Trefusis, a woman he elevates from feisty sidekick to contender:

> *My heart was more disgraceful, more alone*
> *And more courageous than the world has known.*
> *O passer-by my heart was like your own.*

And in this final offering, this small book bursting with the tremendous generosity of its author, one feels that courage. Sir Michael, I curtsy before you.

Toni Bentley is the author of five books, including "Winter Season: A Dancer's Journal" and "The Surrender: An Erotic Memoir."

Correction: August 28, 2011

The cover review on Aug. 7, about "A Book of Secrets," by Michael Holroyd, together with a drawing that accompanied the review, misattributed the following poem: "My heart was more disgraceful, more alone, / And more courageous than the world has known. / O passer-by, my heart was like your own." The poem, "Epitaph for Everyman," is by Frances Cornford; it was not written by Violet Trefusis, one of the subjects of the book, though it is attributed to her there.

A version of this review appeared in print on August 7, 2011, on page BR1 of the Sunday Book Review with the headline: Women In Love.

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