

Episode 1.18 Straight Up Rebellion in *A Room of One's Own* with Maija

Angourie (host)

Before we begin, we would like to acknowledge the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation as the traditional custodians upon which this work was developed and is presented. We pay our respects to Elders past, present, and emerging.

[theme music]

Angourie (host)

Welcome back to The Community Library: a podcast, book club, and discussion space. I'm your host, Angourie Rice –

Maija (guest)

I'm Maija O'Keefe, a guest –

Angourie (host)

And welcome! Thank you so much for coming back on the podcast, Maija! If you remember, Maija featured on the third episode where we talked about *Pulp* by Robin Talley, and she's back and better than ever.

Maija (guest)

That was just too nice, I don't know what to say now. But yeah, thank you for having me back, I'm really excited. Yeah, it was really fun last time.

Angourie

So before we get into *A Room of One's Own*, can you tell us a little bit about yourself, Maija?

Maija

I study fine arts, I'm one of five kids, and I like dogs!

Angourie

That's exactly what you said last time! [laughing] But it's still all true!

Maija

It's a summary!

Angourie

Yeah! Maija and I were in literature class together last year in year 12, and we both studied *A Room of One's Own*, and I think for me it was my favourite text that we studied all year.

Maija

Yeah, nah, definitely. And it's actually one of the first pieces of literature I ever read, so it's got a little special place in my heart.

Angourie

Maija's a lot cooler than me – this was the first time I discovered Virginia Woolf, and the first time I read any of her work was last year. So Maija is like, the true fan who's like: "I knew her before she was cool," and I'm like, the fake fan.

Maija

[laughs] Before she was cool – she got cool in like, what, like, 2013, guys, come on!

Angourie

So, let's move on to our first segment, which is called Sparknotes Says. In this segment, we will give you a quick rundown of what the book is about. This was first published in 1929, and it's based on two speeches that Virginia Woolf gave at Newnham College and Girton College in 1928. And these colleges were the two women's colleges at Cambridge University. And she was told to give a lecture on women and fiction, and so her whole essay is exploring women and fiction, and it's a very broad topic, but I think she covers it pretty well.

Maija

The whole premise of the book is why women haven't been recognised for contributing a lot to society, and why patriarchal society is able to withstand is because women haven't been financially independent historically because of oppression, and they haven't been able to have the luxury of creating. And her idea is that you need a room of one's own, and a little bit of peace of quiet to create.

It's an essay, but it's also not an essay. Well, it kind of follows a narrative arc to make a very direct point. She uses examples to kind of prove her point, and it's a very feminine way of proving her point.

Angourie

Would you classify this as non-fiction?

Maija

That's the question. Honestly, I don't know. Um, it's kind of a genre of its own, really, and it kind of created a genre. So, it's neither non-fiction or fiction, its –

Angourie

It's Woolf.

Maija

Yeah. I feel like we should just read, like, the first sentence.

Angourie

Okay, do it. Can you please do a dramatic reading?

Maija

A dramatic reading?

Angourie

Yes!

Maija

Yeah, sure. “ ‘But,’ you may say, ‘We asked you to speak of women and fiction. What has that got to do with a room of one’s own?’ I will try to explain.” You can tell it was once a speech. It’s a very informal way of beginning, and it kind of – is kind of abrupt, it feels like it’s almost already part of a conversation. And that’s one of the things I love about Woolf, is there’s a certain level of intimacy you feel when you’re reading her book, because it’s almost like stream-of-consciousness, and so you get this very intimate interlook into how her brain works and her life.

Angourie

Yeah, it feels like you’ve just stumbled upon this conversation. It’s like when they cut to a scene in a movie and two people are yelling at each other, and you know that they’re in the middle of the fight, it’s not the start of it, because she starts it with “but”. I remember, you know, teachers saying: “Never start a sentence with ‘but’ or ‘because’.” And she just, like, goes ahead and does that. And so it makes us think: “Okay, well, what was the statement that she said before that caused the ‘but’?” We will never know.

Maija

She’s also breaking all of these grammar rules and conventions of writing that were created, um, to be very masculine and very patriarchal, and kind of actively exclude the feminine voice. I find that really, really interesting. And also it’s just like, it’s straight up rebellious, like she was such a bad bitch, you know?

Angourie

Because this is not really non-fiction or fiction, and it’s kind of hard to talk about setting, I thought we could instead talk about the historical context in which this work was created. So, as I mentioned before, it’s based on a speech that was made in 1928. Nine years earlier, white women in England had gotten the right to vote, and she mentions this in the book, and she mentions the Suffragette movement and the movement of feminism.

Maija

There’s this weird kind of parallel timeline where a lot of things are repeating, but I think what you said that’s very key to remember [is] that at this point only white women had the vote, and a lot of people kind of felt like this was the end of a fight for gender equality. And, you know, like: “You have the right to vote, what more could you want?” Which, you know, obviously wasn’t true because there’s still reproductive rights, there still wasn’t any women in parliament, and also people of colour still had very little rights. And that’s really important to consider when considering Virginia Woolf, is her feminism is flawed because it’s not intersectional, and although intersectional feminism wasn’t popularised then, it’s not an excuse.

Angourie

It’s so fascinating to me to read it and to think how far we’ve come, but also how not far that we have come –

Maija

Yep, yep, yeah –

Angourie

On the one hand, I think: Wow, this is a product of its time, you know, this is white, able-bodied feminism at its peak, really. It is interesting, because she does this thing where I feel like she's reaching out to the generations that came after this book. Like, reading it, I think: "Oh my gosh, yes, this is what I've been thinking about, this is so relevant to today!" But at the same time, I do view it as this point in history, and a lot has changed since then. But, do you think that we can still apply what she argues for in today's time? Do you think it still has the same effect? Is it still needed?

Maija

Nah, I reckon one hundred percent it's still relevant, it's just that we can extend her idea more. There's a certain level of privilege in being able to create art and to create literature, and that's why it's been so much more accessible for men. And you can extend this thought that Virginia Woolf had from just, like, white able-bodied women, and you can extend it to people who have disabilities and people of colour, so she's kind of created a basis, and then we can push it.

Angourie

I do wanna read out something that I think is very relevant to this. I was doing some research for this episode. I was looking on Wikipedia, as you do, and I know it's not the most reliable source, but I saw this and I thought it was very interesting. In 1983, Alice Walker, who wrote *The Colour Purple*, published a collection of essays titled *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*. And she writes, quote: "Virginia Woolf, in her book, *A Room of One's Own*, wrote that in order for a woman to write fiction, she must have two things, certainly: a room of her own, with key and lock, and enough money to support herself. What, then, are we to make of Phillis Wheatley, a slave, who owned not even herself? This sickly, frail black girl who required a servant of her own at times, her health was so precarious, and who, had she been white, would have easily been considered the intellectual superior of all the women and most of the men the society of her day." End quote. When we consider all the ways in which women in 1928 were oppressed and had been oppressed for decades, then, if you add on more levels of oppression, like because of race, or because of a disability, then it becomes almost impossible to create, and when you do create, it's impossible to get that work recognised.

Maija

People can be incredibly strong and can fight so much, and I always find it, like, especially amazing when someone who's not white, and who's not a man, and who's not straight, has such, like, success, 'cause I'm like: "Damn, you had to fight through so much bullshit, and you made it. You've had to walk so many extra miles, and it was all uphill, while, like, Shakespeare got to walk, like, ten metres, and it was all downhill." You know? That's a bad metaphor, but you know –

Angourie

No, it's a great metaphor!

Maija

You know what I mean!

[laughing]

Angourie

In terms of historical context and when this was written, do you think it is still true that one needs a room of one's own with key and lock and money in order to create?

Maija

Yeah, I do. I'm doing a fine arts degree, and when I look around, everyone around me is, you know, they're fairly wealthy, they're able to support themselves, they're able to spend money on equipment for art. While, like, say if you were working full-time at multiple jobs and you had kids, you just – you physically wouldn't have enough time to write, and there's some amazing women and people who have just overcome that and they've made time, but it's like you have all the forces in the world against you. It's really, really hard. I know people who go to my university who, um, their parents completely pay for all of their accommodation, all of their food and all of their needs, and they live out of home, and they're able to go to art school. It's such a big privilege to be able to study something that isn't necessarily practical, you know? Like, I feel so privileged to be able to go to uni and study something that's much more for fun rather than for getting a career. Um, and so it's one hundred percent a privilege to create, yeah. And you still do need to have financial stability and all of these privileges, but you still can make art without those things, you just have to be really tough.

Angourie

I think it's still true for anything, really. I think if you're gonna succeed in the world as it is now, you do need money and you need space, and historically, just in terms of inheritance and generations and history, straight white men have had that. They've had that for years, and I think we do see it changing, and we see people fighting back, and this mould and this structure slowly changing. But, at the same time, you know, it is so heavily engrained in our culture that for hundreds and hundreds of years, certain people have not been given time, space, and money to create things, and to be successful, and to do what they want to do.

Do we want to move on to talking about the characters? As we've mentioned before, this is a weird genre of book. It's not quite non-fiction, but it's also not quite fiction, and the way that Virginia Woolf really blends these two categories is through her use of character, I believe. Because what she does is the book follows her researching this topic of women and fiction in the days leading up to her giving the speech. So she takes us through this journey of the thought forming in her head, what she decided to do with that, how she researched it, how she came across certain stories and certain statistics and things like that. One of the ways that she explains things and makes points, is that she creates characters. And I think the first character that I think is important to bring up are the four Marys. At the beginning of the book Virginia Woolf says: "When I say 'I', I don't mean myself, I mean whoever you want me to mean. I'm not a real person. Call me Mary Beton, Mary Seton, Mary Charmichael if you like." So these three Marys were all ladies in waiting to Mary Queen of Scots.

Maija

But it's also – Mary is important because it's like Mary Magdalene, Mary Mother of God, and all of that. Mary, historically, has just been a name of women who have been noticed, but not necessarily fully appreciated within society.

Angourie

I – I think it's interesting that she takes on this persona of Mary, and Mary Beton, Mary Seton and Mary Charmichael are all used as names in place of women.

Maija

Yep.

Angourie

So, when she talks about women, she says: "Say, I was talking to Mary Seton," or, "I'm talking about Mary Beton's mother," or "this book was written by Mary Charmichael." So I think it's interesting that she gives all of these female characters this kind of anonymity, but also at the same time, community.

Maija

Yep. Well, 'cause Mary was one of the most common names for women at the time.

Angourie

Do we want to talk about the character Judith Shakespeare? Judith Shakespeare is my favourite ever. Do you want to introduce her?

Maija

Okay. So, Virginia creates this hypothetical that Shakespeare has a sister called Judith Shakespeare, and she's just as brilliant as him, but doesn't have his privilege to be able to use her brilliant ability.

Angourie

Virginia introduces us to the character of Judith Shakespeare, and this is all in response to a scholar – a male scholar – saying women could never write the plays of Shakespeare. And Virginia Woolf does this little sike where she's like: "I agree", and everyone's like "what?" And then she makes her point by creating this character of Judith Shakespeare, saying: let's imagine that she existed, let's imagine that she had the same gift and talent as her brother. What would have happened to her? She would have been mocked, she would have been tortured, she would have been laughed at. She wouldn't have gone to school, she might have been illiterate, unless she'd taught herself how to read. She would have been engaged at the age of sixteen. Say, she didn't want to be, so she ran away. She went to London, she wanted to become an actress. They wouldn't let her, because women were not allowed on stage. She eventually was driven crazy by the fact that she was a genius, and killed herself. Then, Virginia Woolf makes her point by saying: no woman in that time could have been in the same headspace and had the same opportunity to write Shakespeare's plays. She might have had the same genius, she might have had the same ideas, but she would have never been given that opportunity, and that opportunity is all that matters.

Maija

So the name Judith obviously has Biblical origins. I think it's so interesting how much the Bible is kind of brought up, because I think, like, the Western world lives in such, like, [a] Christianity-dominant society, and historically the Bible has been so patriarchal, and I think it's really interesting how she's kind of referencing these almost forgotten women in the bible.

Angourie

Could you tell me the story of Judith in the Bible?

Maija

It's a Biblical passage and it's very famously recreated by this artist Artemisia Gentileschi. So, basically, this evil guy called Holofernes, and she has to, for God, slit his throat, and she's really scared to and she does it anyway, and it's kind of about feminine strength. Judith kills him really, really, kind of graphically by slitting his throat, and historically it was painted as kind of like, Holofernes being kind of, like – I'm pronouncing his name wrong but ah, well – being this massive man and really, really grotesque. And then Judith being really, really dainty and very, very gently kind of, slitting his neck. But then Artemisia Gentileschi painted this, like, awesome painting where she actually painted the guy who assaulted her as Holofernes, and then herself as Judith. She's like slitting his throat and it's really, really graphic, and she looks really, really strong. And so, historically, Judith kind of becomes this feminist symbol of rebellion and kind of like, not taking any bullshit, um –

Angourie

We love that.

Maija

Yeah! It's just been really glossed over historically in the Bible, and the church never really spends that much attention on it, and kind of focusses on how this patriarchal symbol of God gives her the power to do it, rather than her having the power in herself.

Angourie

And do we know much about the artist herself? Like how she became a painter in that time? Because it would have been really difficult.

Maija

Her dad was a really famous painter, like Caravaggio or whatever – I'm sorry ... He was a master painter, and – and because of that privilege of her dad being a master painter, she was able to paint. But then everyone kind of wrote her off because she was a woman ... Historically, she would have her ideas stolen, um, she wasn't respected. And then she – when she was really young, she was really awfully and violently sexually assaulted by one of her dad's friends. Um, and she went to court about it. And what they did to kind of prove that she was assaulted was they put her hands in a wrangler, and kind of pushed over, like a – like a concrete cylinder, breaking her fingers. And she was a painter, so that was ruining her livelihood. So, if that's not the most patriarchal bullshit you've ever heard, I don't know what is. And so, you know, her hands healed, and she continued painting, but just that systematic silencing of women where it's like: "Oh, you wanna make an accusation against a man? Here, let's destroy your hands, destroy your painting." This is kind of how she rebelled. And so I reckon it was really, really deliberate that Virginia referenced Judith, 'cause when you google "Judith", what comes up is Artemisia Gentileschi, she really is the one who made that story so famous. So that's just a little bit of art history.

Angourie

The thing that fascinates me so much about the Judith Shakespeare section is that she goes on to talk about all of these nameless women. And there's a particular passage that I just wanna read out. This is a quote that I've used so many times and it's underlines so heavily because I love it so much. So it's after the Judith Shakespeare passage, and she's talking about how genius must have existed in that time in women, but it was just never expressed because terrible things happened to these women, and they didn't have power, really. So she says, quote: "When, however, one reads

of a witch being ducked, of a woman possessed by devils, of a wise woman selling herbs, or even of a very remarkable man who had a mother, then I think we are on the track of a lost novelist, a suppressed poet, of some mute and inglorious Jane Austen, some Emily Brontë who dashed her brains out on the moor, or mopped and mowed about the highways crazed with the torture that her gift had put her to. Indeed, I would venture to guess that Anon, who wrote so many poems without signing them, was often a woman." End quote.

A lot of the time, I think this common argument that I see that comes up even today, in 2019, people saying: "Well, you know, it's just that women aren't as good, or they don't work as hard, you know? If women were as good as men, then there would be more women in parliament, but they're just not, you know, we can't – we've gotta hire the people who are best for the job." And I think that this happened in history, as well. We don't learn about famous women in history, and people say, well, you know: "Women didn't do anything of any importance." What I think Virginia Woolf is saying is that genius women have been there the whole time –

Maija

Yeah –

Angourie

Just nobody was paying attention. It makes me so upset to think about all those lost stories. And she talks about it as well, when she's talking about the day-to-day life. 'Cause she's looking through history and she says: "Okay, you know, we – we have a famous Queen there, we have a famous wife there, but what I wanna know is what did her day-to-day life look like? What did she do when she woke up, and what did she think about?" There's no record of that. And it makes me really sad, actually, just thinking about all those women who have lived and whose stories were never told because history was focussing on other people, and I'm still interested, and I kind of wanna reach out to these past generations of women and say: "I'm interested," you know, "I care. We care about what happened to you and we care about your story," but it's just unfortunate that it's too late now. I just hope that we learn from this and that we don't do this again in the future. And this is an opportunity to listen to women, to listen to people of colour, to listen to LGBTQ stories, to listen to people with disabilities. We should listen to those stories and put them out there because we don't wanna make that same mistake again.

Do we want to talk about the Beadle, which I think is another important character?

Maija

Yep –

Angourie

The first character that we encounter, other than the speaker herself, is the beadle. I think this is a very important character, because it's an embodiment of interruption – of male interruption, especially. So what happens is Virginia Woolf, or Mary Seton, or Mary Beton, or Mary Charmichael, is sitting on a bank of a river in Oxbridge, thinking about women and fiction, and thinking: "Well, okay, what am I gonna write my speech on?" You know, "What am I going to talk about?" And she has an idea, and she thinks: "Oh, great, I have this idea, now I'm gonna go to the library and think about it some more and research it." And so she gets up, she makes her way to the library. She can either walk on the path – on the gravel path – or on the grass. So she starts walking on the grass, and then she comes across a beadle. So, a beadle is an official person who takes part in church or university ceremonies, and he's obviously a very important person at the university. And he makes

a face at her, and she doesn't realise. It dawns on her, "Oh, I'm walking on the grass, and I'm not allowed to." Only the people who go to the university, i.e. the men, are allowed to walk on the grass, and she has to walk on the gravel. After this encounter happens, she forgets what she thought –

Maija

Yeah –

Angourie

She forgets what she was going to write about and what she was going to research, and I think that that is such an important moment, and that's why I think the beadle is such an important character, because this idea of male interruption comes up a lot – not only in the character of the beadle, but in other instances in the book.

Maija

But I think that's really, really interesting because it's such a direct metaphor because the grass is softer, it's a quicker way to get to the library, while the gravel is harsher and harder, and it hurts your feet. Um, and it's longer to get to the library, and that's like, literally just – that's the book summed up in a metaphor. Where it's like, men get the easy path while women get the hard, difficult path. Yeah.

Angourie

Do you wanna talk a little bit about the other beadle, which isn't called a beadle, but I think of it as a beadle? And that's the man who stops her from getting into the library.

Maija

Well, again, it's just the patriarchy getting in the way. It's important that he remains nameless. It's again, like the Mary Seton, Mary Beton kind of thing, where he can then be any man. He can be your father, he can be your teacher.

Angourie

And I love the quote when she describes how the man blocked her way into the library – do you want to read it out?

Maija

"I must have opened it, for instantly there issued, like a guardian angel barring the way with a flutter of black gown instead of white wings, a deprecating, silvery, kindly gentleman who regretted in a low voice as he waved me back that ladies are only admitted to the library if accompanied by a fellow of the college, or furnished with a letter of introduction." So, like, that's a direct – she's not allowed in because she doesn't have a man with her. A lot of the creatives, historically, who were women, were supported financially by their husbands and were able to write because of that. So I guess it's kind of alluding to, maybe with patriarchal guidance, some women were able to slip through the kind of "not allowed to be able to write" kind of thing? But then also, I think, like, how he's described as an angel and then has these big, black, kind of scary robes is really, really interesting. Because it's kind of this symbol of authority, but also, like, he's – he's said to be an angel, but then he doesn't look like an angel, he looks more like a devil with his black robes, and kind of this symbol of, you know, destruction and death. It's a good metaphor.

Angourie

Is there anything else we wanna discuss in terms of Virginia Woolf's characters and her writing style?

Maija

Would now be a good chance to talk about how, it's like, she's using abstract examples that are obviously drawn from personal experience to prove a point in an essay? And how that breaks every single convention ever?

Angourie

Yeah. Did you want to use the example of endometriosis, like you were talking about before we started recording?

Maija

Yeah.

Angourie

So, endometriosis is a disease that affects the uterus, and it happens when tissue grows on the outside of a uterus. A lot of the symptoms are similar to those that women experience during their periods, just a lot more severe. So, historically, doctors didn't believe women when they said: "I'm in a lot of pain and I think something's wrong."

Maija

It wouldn't be investigated, it wouldn't be researched because it was labelled as female hysteria. And then there was no evidence that it existed because men wouldn't believe what women were saying, and then wouldn't do, like, tests, and scientific exploration on, like, this illness that affected so many women and was really, really, like awful to deal with. Um, and so I think Virginia really subverts this notion that for something to be real it has to be scientifically investigated. Because, historically, things that are scientifically investigated are only investigated by men for the, like, benefit of men. And so she kind of uses anecdotal evidence. Anecdotal evidence has not been taken seriously, like, in general in science. And so she purposefully uses it and creates – she doesn't even use examples that she's experienced, she creates abstract experiences so they can become more universal to prove her point, which is basically just like, massive middle finger to this idea that you have to have very scientific evidence, and you have to have a very formal structure, and you have to – you know, you say things in very masculine ways, and you have to use correct grammar. Because, ultimately, that has rendered literature and art inaccessible to women, and people of colour, and people from disadvantaged beginnings, because they weren't given the education and the access to all of these, kind of, patriarchal rules of intelligence, or what is deemed to be intelligent. And I really loved how she just said such a clear "fuck you", by kind of, just, writing it in her own erratic style with her running sentences, and her characters that kind of were made up, and how she just created a new genre. So, once again, the conclusion is that she's a bad bitch.

Angourie

Do you think that she might have had no choice but to do it that way? When she's talking about all these ... She says, "We have to suppose that she would have done this, or we have to suppose that this would have happened to her," because there's no record of it. Even if she had this scientific

database, saying like, you know: “The average age for a woman to marry was this,” she – she didn’t have that.

Maija

Yeah, exactly.

Angourie

And because she didn’t have access to that type of learning and that type of evidence that the patriarchy accepts, she kind of took what to the patriarchy doesn’t accept and flipped it on its head. I mean she’s taking this idea of female hysteria and actually owning it, rather than trying to conform to how patriarchy wants her to present her argument. So, she’s presenting in a very, very feminine way, which I think is really cool.

Maija

Nah, that’s exactly the point. The fact that women didn’t have that resource was used to silence them, but she just said: “Fuck you, I’m using my evidence anyway.”

Angourie

Yeah.

I wanna talk about food for a second, because I think that this is a theme. There’s a moment in the book where Virginia Woolf says: “There’s this idea that writers are not supposed to write about food ’cause it’s boring, but I don’t believe that so I’m gonna tell you exactly what we had for lunch.” Not only is this, again, amazing, ’cause she’s subverting all of these ideas –

Maija

Yep –

Angourie

And she’s making up her own way of telling the story, but she also uses food as an example to prove her point. When she talks about what she had for lunch at the male college, it’s some sort of small bird that I hadn’t heard of – [laughing] – but like, you know, some nice, small bird poached in something, and potatoes that are sliced as thin as coins, and wine. Then, she goes home and she has dinner at the ladies’ college, and they just have, like, steak, vegetables, and then prunes and custard for dessert, and she’s really rude about the prunes and custard. It makes her question: “Okay, well, why are women so poor?” We see this discrepancy between these two meals, and she uses an example of a scientific experiment that was done, which is interesting –

Maija

Yeah –

Angourie

And it was done on rats. And this scientist put two rats in a cage, one was given, like, really nice, best milk to drink, or whatever, and the other one was given not good milk to drink. One rat was big and fat and confidence and shiny, and then the other rat was small and timid and shy and not confident at all. Just in that, you know, one paragraph, talking about rats and food, she basically just, exposes history, and is like: “This is what you have done.” You know, “How – how can women

create when they're actually both literally and metaphorically not given the means to be healthy and happy and be put in that headspace of creating.

Maija

Jameela Jamil – who, if you're listening, I love you – [laughing] – you're really cool! She says that an obsession with female thinness is actually an obsession with, um, female obedience. You know, like, women are told they have to be tiny, and they have to be pretty all the time, and they have to present in a certain way and they can't go strolling along the grass, they have to walk along the path to kind of distract, and stop, and literally interrupt, you know, women's pursuit of greatness.

Angourie

I think this leads us into the theme of money and poverty, and this is something that Virginia Woolf talks about a lot. And it's in her main thesis: that you need a room of your own, and – the exact phrase that she uses is “five-hundred a year”, and that means five-hundred pounds a year. So, this idea of poverty and money and how this is explored in the text ... First of all she proves that women are the poorer sex, she proves that in talking about the food, in talking about how Girton college had to scrape together twenty-thousand pounds to make their college, and they have the bare necessities. So she proves their poverty, and then she asks the question, “Why? Why have women always been poor?”

Maija

So, the idea of why women have historically been poorer is because there's this expectation that women should look after kids, and men can go off to work when women are stuck at home with domestic responsibilities. That expectation has limited women from working and limited women from earning their own money.

Angourie

There's a point where Virginia Woolf has realised that women are poor, and she goes off on this kind of tangent, saying, “Okay, well, why are we poor?” And she gets really angry and annoyed, and she becomes the argument that I mentioned before, of people saying, “Well, women just haven't been working hard enough.” But she kind of debunks that as soon as she introduces it. So I just wanna read this paragraph here, and this is in reference to the women having to work really, really hard to scrape together thirty-thousand pounds to start their college. Quote: “At the thought of all those women working year after year, and finding it hard to get two thousand pounds together, and as much as they could do to get thirty thousand pounds, we burst out in scorn at the reprehensible poverty of our sex. What had our mothers been doing then that they had no wealth to leave us? Powdering their noses? Looking in at shop windows? Flaunting in the sun at Monte Carlo? There were some photographs on the mantelpiece. Mary's mother – if that was her picture – may have been a wastrel in her spare time (she had thirteen children by a minister of the church), but if so her gay and dissipated life had left too few traces of its pleasure on her face. [...] Now if she had gone into business; had become a manufacturer of artificial silk or a magnate on the Stock Exchange; if she had left two or three hundred thousand pounds to Fernham, we could have been sitting at our ease tonight and the subject of our talk might have been archaeology, botany, anthropology, physics, the nature of the atom, mathematics, astronomy, relativity, geography.” End quote.

She entertains this idea: okay, so, if she had gone into business, then we would have had, you know, all of this great stuff, and it would have been awesome ... and then she hits a snag in the

argument, and she goes: “Oh, wait a second, but then she wouldn’t have had Mary. She wouldn’t have had kids. Because that took up her whole entire life, and now it’s too late for her to work.”

Maija

This makes me think of ... there was this dude in our class – he had a really, really interesting perspective where he kind of believed that the best art comes from tragedy, sadness and suffering. There’s a certain level of privilege where he was able to say that, because the point is, you know, like, great art does come from a certain level of, you know, like, a different perspective, a certain level of suffering, like a need to make art, a need to kind of escape the normalities. However, to make art, you need to be able to make art, as in be financially stable enough, have enough time, have enough space to make art.

Angourie

Virginia Woolf does address that argument. I think it is a valid argument to say, “Well, you know, art is great when artists suffer for it.” You know, what is art without a bit of suffering? So, I don’t love this theory myself. I believe that you can be happy and still create good art; you don’t have to mentally make yourself unhappy to create good art.

Maija

Um, it makes me think of something that Hannah Gadsby said in *Nanette*, where, um, after one of her shows, this man came up to her and he goes: “Well, you know, if, ah, Vincent Van Gogh wasn’t depressed, we wouldn’t have his sunflowers.” It’s a lot funnier when Hannah Gadsby does it – [laughing] Um, and Hannah Gadsby’s whole point is that, um, actually, we would have a lot more sunflowers, and we would have a lot more art if Vincent Van Gogh had, you know, had access to modern medicine, and had been treated, and had been looked after, because he wouldn’t have killed himself. And we romanticise this idea of the depressed, desperate artist, when in reality, like, Vincent Van Gogh, one of the reasons why he painted so much yellow and why he painted sunflowers was because when he was anti-depressants – which was when he was painting the most, and when he was at his happiest – the medication he was on kind of made the colour yellow stand out in everything. So actually, the reason why we have the sunflowers is because Vincent Van Gogh was medicated for his depression. Statistically, he also painted the most when he was at his mentally healthiest. And, Hannah Gadsby’s whole point is, at the end, the reason why Vincent Van Gogh was able to create was because his brother financially supported him and loved him.

Angourie

But, Virginia Woolf does address this argument, and she addresses it with a quote from a professor of literature at the university. And I won’t read out the whole quote, because it’s – it’s very long. I’ll just read the beginning of it. He says, quote: “What are the great poetical names of the last hundred years or so? Coleridge, Wordsworth, Byron, Shelley, Landor, Keats, Tennyson, Browning, Arnold, Morris, Rossetti, Swinburne – we may stop there. Of these, all but Keats, Browning, Rossetti were university men; and of these three, Keats, who died young, cut off in his prime, was the only one not fairly well-to-do.” End quote. Virginia Woolf herself makes this point – sums it up in three sentences, basically. She says, “Intellectual freedom depends upon material things. Poetry depends upon intellectual freedom. And women have always been poor, not for two hundred years merely, but from the beginning of time.” And I’m just like, “Ah, damn!” ‘Cause that’s the thing, you know I think, you know, in his defence, his argument is quite optimistic, actually. Saying, “Well, anyone can

create art, you don't have to be rich and privileged to create art," and that's true, you don't. But, the opportunity to do it depends on being rich and having your own space.

Also, Virginia Woolf brings that up with herself. She says, "The reason that I am able to create, the reason that I've been able to write is because my aunt died and left me everything, and I have five-hundred a year because she died and because we shared the same name, she gave me her inheritance." So she is an example that proves what she's trying to prove. She saying, like: "I wouldn't be able to do this if I didn't have this financial security that my aunt gave me."

Do we want to talk about androgyny and queer theory?

Maija

Yes, we do – yes. Yeah.

Angourie

Okay. When we were studying *A Room of One's Own*, there were lots of readings that you can take. Queer theory was one of them. Virginia Woolf basically comes to the conclusion in chapter six. She says, quote: "It is fatal for anyone who writes to think of their sex." End quote. And this seems to be the conclusion that she comes to. She says people write best when they forget that they're a woman or a man. They write their most brilliant work when they're actually not thinking about their sex. And she believes that the mind has to be androgynous in order to create the best art they possibly can. I wonder if we can consider this feminist? Because does this argue for equality? Or does this argue for the eradication of gender? And if so, would that result in equality? I think specifically for me, if someone told me: "Okay, you're gonna write your best work when you forget that you're a woman," I'd be like: "What are you talking about? That is so engrained in who I am; my experiences as a female person in this world, that is my identity and I can't separate myself from my identity when I write." I don't know, what are your thoughts on that? Do you think it's – it's feminist and arguing for equality? Big questions –

Maija

Yeah ... I think Virginia Woolf contradicts herself, because she's so conscious that she's a woman, and she's so conscious of the feminine experience when she writes *A Room of One's Own* that she doesn't actually have the androgynous mind that she's seeking. And, like, she's talking in a hypothetical, like; "Oh, we'll reach peak art when everyone has an androgynous mind." I think what she actually means, or what she's idealising, is that if there is no gender there will be equality, and thus everyone will be able to have, like, a fair shot at writing. When in reality, it would be ideal if people were allowed to have, you know, their gender identities, and everyone was just cool with it. You know, equality doesn't happen when we eradicate all difference, it happens when we embrace, and celebrate, and allow differences to occur. Um –

Angourie

Oh my god. Oh my god, Maija!

[laughing]

Angourie

That just gave me life. Incredible. Keep talking.

Maija

Um, yeah, so I guess, like – she says it wrong, but I can really, really relate to it, because ultimately, I think it would be great if the art I make is not considered “feminist art”, but considered “art”, full stop. And you know, it’s funny, because Virginia Woolf is, like, a feminist symbol, but she doesn’t really like being labelled as a feminist. And Louise Bourgeois – yeah, the French chic – um, who makes the spiders, um, she had the same thing. She was like, an absolute pioneer when the Guerrilla Girls were first emerging, and all of these feminist artists who were emerging kind of flocked to her. And she kept on telling them to piss off, because she didn’t want to make “feminist art”, she just wanted to make “art”. So I can completely understand her point, but I also think, like, we should just celebrate being a woman and how dope it is. And then that kind of, like, brings me to another question. Angourie, do you think that men can write accurate female characters?

Angourie

Ooh! That is a loaded question. I think it can be done really well, but I do think it’s different, I’m not gonna lie, I think it is different – it’s a different experience to read a female character written by a man than to read a female character written by a woman, I think it’s very different. And I think it’s about, also, questioning why you’re telling that story from a female perspective. It’s thinking about; is this your story to tell? Because as Virginia Woolf proves to us in *A Room of One’s Own*, men do have a better opportunity to write and to get their work published. So if we take the argument that their work is gonna be published anyway, it is a good thing that they have a strong female lead. But at the same time, I think it’s worth asking the question: Why should their work be published anyway? Like, is the female experience really their story to tell when women have been trying to tell their stories for ages but no one’s been listening? So, I think instead of listening to male voices telling female stories, we could make space for female voices telling female stories in the literary world.

Maija

I think when men write women characters, a lot of the time – this is a big generalisation – but a lot of the time they write women characters as a prop to the male ego. They serve as love interests, they serve as characters who die, and then kind of cause the male protagonist great pain, and then kind of propel them forward in their own kind of character arc and self-development, and I think that’s the wrong way to write women characters. I’ve read very few books written by men where I’ve found the women characters to be engaging and relatable and realistic. However, um, this comic artist I like called Daniel Clowes, he writes women in this extraordinary way, and it’s ‘cause he writes them as a whole person as complex as the men. And they don’t serve a role, they’re not there to, you know – they’re – first off, they’re usually the protagonists, as well. Um, but even when they’re not the protagonists they don’t, kind of, serve men. They don’t kind of propel, you know, the male tragedy story forward. They are just people, and that’s the key to men writing women. They’ve got to view women as people rather than objects and sidekicks to their main show.

Angourie

So, talking about men writing women, this is something that Virginia Woolf actually brings up in *A Room of One’s Own*. She talks about how, quote: “Women have burnt like beacons in all the works of all the poets from the beginning of time.” End quote. And she brings up characters like Antigone, Cleopatra, Lady Macbeth, Rosalind, then Becky Sharp, Anna Karenina, Madame Bovary. These characters are not lacking in personality or character, you know, they’re interesting, they have character arcs, they are in depth. But at the same time, she highlights this, in this quote, which I think is amazing, I’m just gonna read it out for you now, quote: “A very queer, composite being thus

emerges. Imaginatively she is of the highest importance; practically she is completely insignificant. She pervades poetry from cover to cover; she is all but absent from history. She dominates the lives of kings and conquerors in fiction; in fact she was the slave of any boy whose parents forced a ring on her finger. Some of the most inspired words fall from her lips; in real life she could hardly read, could scarcely spell, and was the property of her husband.” End quote.

So I think Virginia Woolf points something out really interesting here. When we’re talking about Shakespeare in Elizabethan times, we’re talking about his – just, as an example, his female characters. You know, he’s got some great ones; Lady Macbeth, she’s interesting. Viola and Olivia, they’re interesting. But, at that time, women had no rights, they had no voice, they were illiterate, they couldn’t say all of these beautiful words that he came up with. I think what she’s saying is that male writers of that time will only allow women to be three dimensional and interesting if they can create them, and if they can control them.

Maija

I mean, to a point, especially with Lady Macbeth, you know, lots of people really, really hate her, and it kind of becomes this idea of gender coding, where men write women that are terrific, but also very easy for men to dislike. And it kind of becomes proof that we shouldn’t educate or give power to women, because ultimately they will do something bad with it.

Angourie

Yeah, exactly. And it happens again in *Medea* by Euripides, which we also studied at school in year 12. How this is a play about an interesting, dynamic female character, but everybody hates her. so you’re right, sometimes it totally is about creating these female characters that are really fascinating, but they’re also the villains. Like, they’re not the ones you want to see succeed, they’re the ones you want to be punished. And I think villainising powerful women in literature is quite harmful.

This next segment is my favourite, and it is called Feminist or Nah. In this segment, we ask ourselves, “Is *A Room of One’s Own* by Virginia Woolf feminist or nah?”

Maija

Yes.

Angourie

I would say yes with an asterisk on it.

Maija

Same.

Angourie

Please explain your asterisk.

Maija

My asterisk is: she is a pioneer of the feminist movement, she informed so much feminist theory, she was so important to the feminist movement, and it’s important to acknowledge that history. But I think ultimately, she is a white able-bodied feminist. She doesn’t acknowledge that there’s intersecting systems of oppression that overlap to affect those most marginalised. She doesn’t speak [about] or even mention women of colour, or women with disabilities. She just kind of

glosses over it, and talks about, you know, the white Suffragette woman. Um, and I think that means that she can't be fully loved and appreciated as a fully feminist text, because in contemporary days we like intersectional feminism. Yay!

Angourie

I agree with everything you just said, and you said it so brilliantly. In the 1920s, this was peak radical feminism. Now, we have to stretch it and extend it, and include trans women, women of colour, women with disabilities, and that is important. And I think we can apply those ideas as well to intersectional feminism today, but she didn't, and that's the important thing. She actually didn't do that. So we can interpret it however we want and use that information, but she didn't do that in the time.

So, this is the epilogue! This is where we give our final rating of the book and any final thoughts. So, Maija, what's your final rating?

Maija

Out of ten, I give this book an eight. Pretty damn high, and that's just because I like rating things highly. But also, just, like, Virginia Woolf and *A Room of One's Own* was really important to me personally because it's one of the first pieces of literature I read and it was when I first got into feminist theory. And it kind of – it was like this epiphany moment where I'd had all these doubts, where I was like, "Yeah, well if women are cool, why don't they ever do anything?" [laughing] So my conclusion is that although I love her for personal reasons, I think ultimately she hasn't aged well. [laughing]

Angourie

Oooh! [laughing]

Maija

Um, that was a bad way of putting it! Virginia Woolf doesn't fit well into contemporary times because her feminism was so limited, which was just really [a] product of her time, but still not an excuse. So, yeah, she doesn't get a full ten, but she still gets, like, an eight.

Angourie

So, I like to do my rating out of five. Ah, I'm gonna be super annoying and give it two different ratings. But, you know, it's my podcast so I can do what I want [laughing] – So, for my personal emotional attachment to Virginia Woolf and this book, it's a five out of five stars. More critically, it's a four, because I realise its flaws, I realise the things that I don't agree with, and I realise that it's flawed, it's flawed feminism, it's not intersectional. So, in my mind, I kind of have two different feelings about it, um, but ultimately, I still really love it. So, I guess on average, it would be a four point five. I could have just said that. Ugh, anyway. You get what I mean.

Maija

I have a question for you, Angourie –

Angourie

Yeah?

Maija

Do you think Virginia Woolf would be an intersectional feminist if she was here today?

Angourie

Oof, that is a really good question. I hope so. Well, 'cause she already had this relationship with this women and she – she mentions it in the text, I hope that she would apply all of the theories that she had in terms of feminism, and all that radical and like, smart and logical activism, I would hope that she would apply that to intersectional feminism today. So, optimistically, yes. What about you?

Maija

I agree with you ... yeah, I reckon she'd be pretty dope. And I reckon in today she'd be a massive advocate for mental health awareness, which I think would be rad. Yeah, 'cause she already kinda was talking about how like, female hysteria is a myth, and how it's just another way of men silencing women, and so I think that would be really interesting.

Angourie

So, I think that's it. Is there anything else you want to say on the book?

Maija

No –

Angourie

We've said it all. No, we haven't [laughing] – We've said all we have time for and all we have the energy for, 'cause I'm now very hungry. Oh, is there anything you wanna plug?

Maija

My sister. She's pretty cool. Um, go buy, um, her merch from Places to Be.

Angourie

I would like to plug Maija. Maija has a ceramics Instagram account that is amazing – it's @maiya.kotoa, I'll put it in the show notes.

One more thing before we go – the next discussion pick is *Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief* by Rick Riordan, so I hope you read along, I'm very excited for this one. That episode will be coming out in two weeks' time, so you have two weeks to read it, and it will be episode twenty, which is the final episode of season one! I am very excited to wrap up this season, and, yes, there will definitely be a season two, but I'll have more details on that in the next few episodes and on my Instagram.

[theme music]

Angourie

Thank you so much for listening! If you enjoyed it, you can subscribe on iTunes so that you never miss an episode. You can also rate and review on your podcast platform of choice. You can follow The Community Library on Instagram @the_community_library, and you can use the hashtag #thecommunitylibrary on Instagram or Twitter. The podcast artwork is designed by Ashley Ronning. You can look at more of her work at ashleyronning.com, or you can go to helio-press.com, that's dash the symbol. Once again, thank you for listening, thanks for hanging out with me, Maija!

Maija

Thank you for hanging out with me, Angourie! Thanks for listening!

Angourie

And, I will talk to you next week. Bye!

Maija

Read more, kids.

[theme music]

Maija

Oh, I just saw Love Island –

Angourie

Oh, yeah! [laughing]

Maija

Should we bring Love Island into it?

Angourie

Let's all talk about Love Island for a second, um – ah, I'm trash. Talking about – yeah, pretending to be cool talking about Virginia Woolf while also Love Island is open on my computer!

Maija

Our conclusion is, Virginia Woolf was, you know, she was an alright writer! You know, she – she could write, she knew what she was doing. Yeah – [laughing] I'm so glad we discovered her!

[laughing]