RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

Jacob's Room

Virginia Woolf

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About the Book

Jacob’s Room is Virginia Woolf’s first truly experimental novel. It is a portrait of a young man, who is both representative and victim of the social values which led Edwardian society into war. Jacob’s life is traced from childhood, through his experiences at Cambridge University to his early adult life in artistic London. Jacob consistently yearns for something greater and, in an attempt to resuscitate his love of the classics, he embarks on a voyage to the Mediterranean before the war begins and his fate is forever altered.

About the Author

Virginia Woolf was born in London in 1882, the daughter of Sir Leslie Stephen, first editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography*. From 1915, when she published her first novel, *The Voyage Out*, Virginia Woolf maintained an astonishing output of fiction, literary criticism, essays and biography. In 1912 she married Leonard Woolf, and in 1917 they founded the Hogarth Press. Virginia Woolf suffered a series of mental breakdowns throughout her life, and on 28th March 1941 she committed suicide.

Also by Virginia Woolf

The Voyage Out
Night and Day
Mrs Dalloway
To the Lighthouse
Orlando
The Waves
The Years
Between the Acts

Virginia Woolf

JACOB'S ROOM

WITH INTRODUCTIONS BY
Lawrence Norfolk and
Elisabeth Bronfen

VINTAGE

The text of this edition of *Jacob's Room* is based on that of the original Hogarth Press edition, published by Leonard and Virginia Woolf on 27th October 1922.

Lawrence Norfolk on *Jacob’s Room*

Jacob’s Room is the distant third of three signal works published in 1922. *Ulysses* and *The Waste Land* between them would define what we now call High Literary Modernism and, by setting the terms for posterity’s evaluation, they effectively wrote their own futures. They exude the confidence of works that know what they will become. Not so *Jacob’s Room*.

Virginia Woolf’s novel is written out of a knowing and wilful blindness: to its own future as much as the outcome of the story it tells. The competing claims of what a work of art chooses to show out of all that it may know press at every point in writing tensed between futural and investigative gestures, and an authorial restraint which resists them. One way to read *Jacob’s Room* is as a holding-off from its own conclusion. Conversely, whatever is visible stands as a cipher for all which cannot be known so explicitly. Much is invisibly present in *Jacob’s Room*.

‘And why, if this and much more than this is true, why are we yet surprised in the window corner by a sudden vision that the young man in the chair is of all things in the world the most real, the most solid, the best known to us – why indeed? For the moment after we know nothing about him.’

Ironic, then, that the novel’s ‘sudden vision’ should be so intensely cinematic. More than two hundred characters flit between almost as many scenes, some of these people appearing only to disappear, others disclosing a physical trait here, a habit of speech there, a middle name, then a profession or a passion perhaps. Locales are shifted with similar abruptness. We are on a beach, then in a lodging house, then a graveyard. To read *Jacob's Room* casually is to feel chivvied and knocked about, picked up and dropped down in peremptory fashion, as if the novel were impelled only by Woolf's whims.

But the reverse is the case. *Jacob's Room* is radically democratic. Certainly, the narrative presence is easy to misunderstand as it veers hectically through time and space. More difficult yet is the tone, which can comprehend all in one scene and alienate itself from the next. Woolf seems to be triangulating her point of view from the elements with each scene (rather than imposing an ordering gaze from without) and synthesising her voice from the nature of those elements. The fleeting impressions, opinions, and descriptions which comprise the story supply the attributes of a succession of narrators. Put another way, the novel's elements narrate themselves and govern how they do so.

Accordingly, both Jacob's room and its eponymous novel accrete among many potential rooms to be viewed, and possible ways of viewing them. The complexity of this procedure (and the technical difficulty of achieving it) can hardly be overstressed. The novel realigns itself, however slightly, with every turn of the page and in consequence this onus falls upon the reader to *keep* reading *Jacob's Room*.

When the book opens, Jacob Flanders is a young child. He grows up with his brothers and widowed mother in Scarborough, is haphazardly schooled, and studies at Trinity College, Cambridge. Afterwards in London he runs with a fast set centred on the Slade School of Art. There are liaisons with women: Florinda, a clever flirt; Clara Durrant, the passive, enigmatic sister of Jacob's friend; careless, vulnerable Fanny Elmer, an artist's model; Sandra Wentworth Williams, a married romantic adventuress whose husband connives at her discreetly-managed affairs.

A brief scene (whose sympathy is ruptured by strange, sudden sexual disgust) witnesses Jacob's leavetaking of a prostitute. Jacob's social standing is imprecise. He rides to hounds ('after a fashion, for he hasn't a penny': regrettably, Woolf did not write the scene), sups with countesses, and yet lives in lodgings. His friends have more money than he (Woolf's notation of the consequent tiny psychological tremors are the book's quietest triumph) and only when a distant aunt leaves him a hundred pounds can he travel: to Paris, Patras on the gulf of Corinth, Athens, Constantinople. Back in London, the war which will consume him is a conversation-piece for society matrons, dreadful but distant. The final scenes are brief impressions of Jacob by those whose orbits have intersected with his own. They are anticipations of his end, or the materials from which final memories will be fashioned. Then, very suddenly, they are the memories themselves. Jacob's mother and his friend are rooting through the effects in Jacob's empty room, which is all that remains.

The novel contains only two dates: '1906', when Jacob goes to Cambridge, and 'November the sixth' when he walks down Haverstock Hill after a party. Woolf's brother Thoby died from typhoid in November 1906 and critics have seen in this book an elegy for him. A darker fraternal subcurrent (Woolf's being abused by her half-brother when aged thirteen) may be present in the book's occasional prurience and sexual repugnance. To say that Woolf wants to know what it is that Jacob does to girls would be unwarranted but unsatisfied sexual curiosity hangs about the novel. It is pornographic in that sense.

These deliberate inhibitions are registered in the prose, with its parentheses and reversed clauses. Verbs are often withheld till last when their appearance releases the syntax's pent energies in a rush. Several episodes enact similar chronological accelerations. After a long, near-eventless sojourn with a bumptious painter in Paris, Jacob is ‘unable to foresee how it fell out in the course of time that Cruttendon took to painting orchards’ nor (in his model’s far future) that ‘sometimes on spring nights, she makes the strangest confidences to shy young Englishmen’.

Such temporal gymnastics strain conventional grammar to the limit, but they are demanded and justified by the massive act of restraint at the novel’s heart. Jacob’s ‘inability to foresee’ contains horrible ironies of course. Woolf’s narrative vantage point hovers, swoops, circles, shoots back into the past and reconnoitres the future. The novel ‘foresees’ its own secret only too well.

For all the confidence evinced by her High Modernist rivals, Woolf knew from experience that literature cannot raise the dead. No recuperative elegy, but rather a recanting palinode, *Jacob’s Room* eschews both the suspenseful ignorance of a traditionally-organised plot, and the relativism of its author’s contemporaries. Its gaze is clear and its sadness, in consequence, unmitigated. Woolf does not shrink from that. *Jacob’s Room* is haunted by knowledge latent even in its title: the future it foresees, fears, and yet reaches towards is empty. There is no place in it for Jacob, and never was.

Lawrence Norfolk
January, 2000

Elisabeth Bronfen on *Jacob's Room*

In the letters Virginia Woolf wrote to her friends around the time *Jacob's Room* was published, she kept emphasising that it was nothing more than an experiment. Indeed, read with novels like *Mrs. Dalloway* or *To the Lighthouse* in mind, it is easy to imagine how writing this portrait of a young man with promise, who dies before he can become truly distinguished, was primarily an aesthetic *rite de passage* for her. Here Woolf was able to test what it might be like to create a 'character without realism'. The pleasure this disconnected rhapsody, as she called it, came to afford her, was anticipatory in nature. Though to her mind too light and airy, and 'not close enough to the facts', her first attempt at fleshing out a literary character by virtue of fragmentary impressions was perceived as a necessary step for her to have taken in finding her own authorial voice. Having accomplished this first break 'with complete representation,' as she explains to Strachey on October 9, 1922, she felt she could push further and bring off the perfect narrative the next time.

In this novel, which is as much a performance of breaking with conventions of narrative as it is the portrait of a war hero who died in action during the First World War, the protagonist Jacob Flanders is never explicitly described. Indeed, at one point the narrator interrupts her presentation of how various people respond to Jacob to explain, 'It seems that a profound, impartial, and absolutely just opinion of our fellow-creatures is utterly unknown.' What both astonishes and perplexes her is the fact that, even while we are only too aware that we can know nothing of another person, the sudden vision of a human being, sitting in a chair, should make him appear to be ‘of all things in the world the most real, the most solid, the best known to us.’ Seeking to perform precisely this ambivalence – the oscillation between gaining a full insight into the personality of another and recognizing that this can be nothing but a fleeting view – led Woolf to compose her portrait of Jacob Flanders as an unwieldy composite of different, even incommensurable brush strokes. ‘It is no use trying to sum people up,’ the narrator explains in another passage. ‘One must follow hints, not exactly what is said, nor yet entirely what is done.’ Indeed, we get a tangible sense of him only by virtue of the manner in which he perceives and judges the world, his sophomoric views on the classics, his confusion over the unsolvable antagonism that presents itself to him between sexual desire and a desire for knowledge. At the same time his personality comes to be fleshed out by the often contradictory opinions others have of him – the pride, the erotic desires, the anger or the disappointments he elicits in others, the manner in which his friends comment on their relation to him. Indeed, the vibrancy he takes on owes much of its force to the fact that he serves as the focal point that draws diverse figures together.

Most crucially, however, Woolf avoids telling her story in such a manner that the death in battle, with which her portrait ends, is explicitly foreshadowed from the onset. This tragic fate is not inscribed into the chain of events that precede it. We are not called upon to read each episode in Jacob’s life in relation to his premature demise, nor even to see him in heroic light. Rather Woolf insists both on the ordinariness of the figure she has chosen to portray and on the arbitrariness of his fate. There is nothing in a life that indicates unequivocally what its outcome will be. While one is caught in the middle of an experience, it may be perceived as a significant moment. The actual meaning this particular episode will have had for one’s life as a whole, however, can only be defined retrospectively, once it is brought in relation to other events. And like the course of one’s life, which could take a different turn at any point, so, too, each significant moment can be read in conjunction with different sets of events, producing different narrative portraits of one and the same person.

Though a pattern of fatality does emerge in the end of *Jacob’s Room*, it can be discerned only in hindsight. While visiting the family of his friend Timothy, his mother Mrs. Durrant notes quietly to herself, ‘Poor Jacob…They’re going to make you act in their play.’ She will prove to be right, and her premonition could be linked back to the scene in the first chapter of the book, where Jacob finds a skull on the beach, and though traumatised by the sight of this dead body part, furiously clings to it. As a moment where the presence of death in life is rendered visible, this early scene could be connected to other moments celebrating transience and fallibility – the moment when owing to a quarrel between him and his friend Timothy, Jacob’s copy of Shakespeare is knocked overboard the ship they are sailing on, and we are asked to imagine him ‘floating merrily away, with all his pages ruffling innumerably; and then he went under.’ Or one could, with the end of Jacob’s life in mind, link the finding of the skull in the first chapter to the passage where Mrs. Flanders reflects on how, though she loses her garnet brooch in the grass, it is safely harboured by the moor.

But Woolf actually refuses to signal this trajectory of preordained fatality as her privileged narration and instead includes a second strand of voices that predict a different future. For example Evan Williams, the husband of the woman Jacob will fall in love with, who responds to the solid, direct and yet shy manner with which the young man accepts his invitation to go with them to Corinth, by noting ‘Here is a fellow who might do very well in politics.’ At the end of the novel the declaration of war encroaches upon the sentimental worries, fantasies and ambitions that colour the everyday life of Jacob and his friends. It offers a solution to the emotional confusion Jacob finds himself in – his youthful inability to solve the conflict between loving beauty in women and knowledge in men, rendering his sexual desire incommensurable with his intellectual one. But for the young boy about to leave home and go to college, for the youth who discovers the wisdom of antiquity at Cambridge and then travels to the continent to visit the sites described in the books he has read, as well as for the man who has not yet chosen between a life in parliament or one in an artist's studio, things could have gone differently.

By focusing on the details of ordinary life, which make for both the beauty and the perplexity of everyday life, Woolf performs a poignant gesture of contingency, of the accident of choice. In the second chapter, for example, she describes different fragments of the life in the village Jacob is about to leave on the day that Captain Barfoot and his mother decide to send him to Cambridge. We hear the voices of the neighbours, commenting on the solitude of the widow and the weekly visits of the captain. We are given a glimpse of the sadness his old Latin teacher Mr. Floyd felt at being rejected by his mother while we simultaneously hear the firmness with which Betty Flanders decides against marriage of any kind. We are given an impression of Jacob wandering around outside his mother's house, exploring the magic world of insects, while the clergyman's wife wanders sadly on the moor, longing for something to change the monotony of her life. Each individual impression is momentarily brought into focus, because at this point, every single one could prove to have been significant later on, depending on the course events will take. Read a second time, with the outcome of the decisions made that day in mind, these sequences can be transformed into a coherent narrative. While for some, like the clergyman's wife or Betty Flanders, nothing changes, this pastoral evening will have made all the difference for others. Jacob goes to Cambridge in October 1906 and a new world opens to him that will end with his death in the trenches. But it is up to us to construct this particular reading.

We tell stories, as Slavoj Zizek notes in his *The Plague of Fantasies* (1997), 'in order to resolve some fundamental antagonism by rearranging its terms into a temporal succession. It is thus the very form of narrative which bears witness to some repressed antagonism. The price one pays for the narrative resolution is the *petitio principii* of the temporal loop – the narrative silently presupposes as already given what it purports to reproduce.' Woolf's experiment traces this need to resolve the antagonism produced by virtue of the fact that another person always remains unknown to us to such a degree that we can never fully assimilate various perspectives into one unified vision. At the same time, by foregrounding a fractured mode of representation, far from silently presupposing the repression of this antagonism, she explicitly turns it into her aesthetic project. Because a story must be told and because we can't help but read for coherent meaning, the unknowability of the other inevitably escapes narrative representation. Yet by refusing to repress the incommensurability of individual experiences she forces us to acknowledge the temporal loop we would normally take for granted. We are given a collection of random events, many of which will have no further consequences, as we are introduced to a motley group of characters, some of whom appear only once, or reappear only sporadically. Caught in the force of the present, Jacob experiences each of the scenes depicted as a risky moment. That for him at least, the outcome is uncertain, makes for both his extraordinary excitement at the beauty of the ordinary he feels, as well as for his gloom at being unable to formulate it in precise words. And it explains his despair at being incapable of finding clean solutions for the conflictual desires that rule his fantasies and his actions.

Yet early on in the narrative a temporal loop is actually directly named. In the second chapter, as the narrative moves from Mrs. Flanders's thoughts on the impossibility of marriage for her, to Mr. Floyd's response to her letter of rejection, a temporal shift imperceptibly occurs. For a brief moment we have jumped to the time period at the end of the novel. Mr. Floyd, who has displaced the letter in question, recalls how he met Jacob in Piccadilly lately and recognised him after three seconds, 'But Jacob had grown such a fine young man that Mr. Floyd did not like to stop him in the street.' In the penultimate chapter of her novel, Woolf returns to precisely this scene of a failed meeting, now offering it as an embellished vignette. Recognizing the face of the stranger to be Jacob Flanders, Mr. Floyd muses, 'But he was so tall; so unconscious; such a fine young fellow. "I gave him Byron's works."' We are then told that he 'started forward, as Jacob crossed the road; but hesitated, and let the moment pass, and lost the opportunity.' The fact that, returning to this scene, Woolf offers a different mode of representation, namely the stream of consciousness of a man, hesitating to act, is significant. The continuity afforded by the fact that what was foreshadowed at the beginning has become the present, is precisely not one that allows for a repression of antagonisms. On the contrary, what returns is the sense of futility, of the failure to connect with another, of the manner in which the other, who was so real at one point, proves to be nothing but a shadow, of whom one knows nothing, indeed whom one dare not even approach. As such, this poignant moment of failed contact serves as a frame for the many other scenes in the novel where Jacob cannot convey himself to others, not least of all because he is himself uncertain about his own desires. Yet precisely the sense that something which can never be imparted to a second person tinges all forms of communication is also what determines human desire for self-expression. To search for modes of representation that capture not a false unity of life, but rather the contradictory pieces that make up its wholeness, fruitfully feeds off the knowledge that something will always escape any representational gesture.

For Woolf the rich fullness of each moment, and the fact that it is fleeting, are two sides of the same coin. The shattered narratorial voice she experiments with in *Jacob's Room* not only serves to thematise the crisis of representation so endemic to modernism. More importantly, it also seeks to perform her fascination with the failure inevitably written into her own aesthetic project. While the 'streets of London have their map,' her narrator suggests at one point, 'our passions are uncharted' and though the nature of life 'must have been apparent to every one for hundreds of years, no one has left any adequate account of it.' But precisely the idea that there could be an adequate account becomes a problem once one factors in the question of capturing life's contingencies. Embellishing on the trope that one could chart passions like the streets of London, Woolf's narrator explains that 'frequent as street corners in Holborn' there are chasms in the narratives we tell, roads we choose not to take, doors we decide not to enter. As lost opportunities, as paths not taken, they nevertheless resonate, like repressed nodes of possibilities, beneath the chosen narrative route. Though we choose not to make the connections they offer, in virtuality at least they continue to exist.

Of course, in the end, the dominance of the war narrative, dictated by politicians, comes to produce precisely the compulsive coherence, which the display of the fragmentary sentiments that make up the ordinary complexities of everyday life refuses; 'and then the sixteen gentlemen, lifting their pens or turning perhaps rather wearily in their chairs, decreed that the course of history should shape itself this way or that way, being manfully determined, as their faces showed, to impose some coherency upon Rajahs and Kaisers…to control the course of events.' This surge towards a controlling narrative brings the real of death concretely into play that was only obliquely gestured towards in the scenes celebrating moments of fragility and transience. And yet, Woolf refracts even this momentous occasion, which will not only determine the outcome of Jacob's life but that of his entire generation. In one of the most poignant moments of the novel, rumours about the explosive political climate are interwoven with brief vignettes of what different people, connected to Jacob did, while the members of parliament decided to declare war – Timothy Durrant, from his window in the Admiralty, looking at the passersby on the street; Jacob in Hyde Park, tearing his ticket to pieces, annoyed with the letter the married woman he adores has written him; his mother, writing about her son to a friend in Singapore. The political drama is counterbalanced by the banality of the everyday in which it is embedded. Only in retrospect will those surviving the war remember this ordinary moment as a significant one.

As many critics have noted, one of the most ingenious aspects of this experimental text is that Woolf's protagonist's death at the front is eclipsed, just as her narrator can find no language to describe the declaration of love between her protagonist and Sandra Wentworth Williams, and instead foregrounds the importance of things one doesn't say. In the end we have only the traces Jacob left behind in his room, 'Nothing arranged. All his letters strewn about for any one to read,' as his friend Bonamy notes, 'What did he expect? Did he think he would come back?' One last celebrated instance of contingency flashes up in Woolf's experiment. Jacob was convinced to the end that things could take on an as of yet uncharted route. There was no need to arrange things into a predetermined pattern. Anything could still happen. Death emerges as the traumatic kernel subtending the sentimental stories about ambition and desire revolving around Jacob Flanders. It renders the limits of representation, most visible. For his stream of consciousness while dying or the description of his corpse, the narrator can find no adequate description. But – and that is where Woolf most radically anticipates the postmodern avant garde – even death is not a privileged moment of authority. It, like all other significant moments, is part of the counterpunctual play between the momentary experience of plenitude and the recognition that in the next moment what was so tangible is nothing other than a fleeting shadow, never really grasped.

In a letter, dated 25 December 1922, Woolf agrees with Gerald Brenan that probably nothing will be achieved by her generation of writers. Yet the force behind her aesthetic project, she explains, is the desire to celebrate the fact that, far from being able to see the human soul in its entirety, one can only catch a glimpse of a part of the body; one can only obliquely perceive the gesture of someone turning away. Because the character one seeks to portray is perpetually in motion. The refusal to produce a complete picture proves to be concomitant with her conviction that the desire for self-destruction that inhabited her psychic life was also the force that brought her to repeatedly accept life with new rapture. The knowledge that life is perpetually threatened, a fragile gift, came to propel her desire to grasp it as precisely as possible; its value heightened by the threat of transience. As though as an afterthought, she adds in her postscript, ‘I think I mean that beauty, which you say I sometimes achieve, is only got by the failure to get it; by grinding all the flints together; by facing what must be humiliation - the things one can’t do.’

The success of *Jacob's Room*, one might speculate, consists in a splendid performance of precisely this gesture of acknowledged failure. The fragility of life emerges not only as its theme, nor the futility of fully capturing the portrait of a character merely as its central philosophical thesis. Rather, the insensate struggle over beauty which knows it can neither be fully nor finally achieved, produces an atmosphere of the significant that defies sentimentality and instead celebrates the transitory, the incomplete and the imperfect. Accepting the inevitable failure of narrative representation was for Woolf, however, always a source of hope, because it allowed her to project the achievement of a unified whole as a utopic vision. 'Though we fail everytime,' she concludes, 'surely we do not fail so completely as we should have failed if we were not in the beginning, prepared to attack the whole.' In the novels she was to write after *Jacob's Room*, she succeeded in moving away from a radically fragmented presentation of her fictional world, organising her narratives around one consciousness, either refracted into different characters (*Mrs Dalloway*), or passing from one generation to the next (*To the Lighthouse*). Though perhaps less pleasurable to read, because a radical break with strict representation and the absence of clear marks for narratorial control can be very unsettling, *Jacob's Room* nevertheless has its own unique place in her oeuvre. It continues to reverberate with such compelling force precisely because, in this instance, Woolf so radically refused any totalizing gesture, privileging the experimental power of failure over aesthetic success.

Elisabeth Bronfen
January, 2000