

Woolfian Voyager



An Interview with *Marcia Butler*

Marcia Butler is a very funny writer of very serious fiction

and nonfiction. Her most recent book, the novel *Dear Virginia, Wait for Me* (Central Avenue, \$19), recounts the coming of age of Peppa Ryan, a brilliant twenty-year-old who hears a voice in her head that she believes is that of her favorite author, Virginia Woolf. Defying her parents' expectation that she will take over the family construction business in Queens, Peppa instead starts a job in finance in the World Trade Center at the turn of the new millennium. Soulful, funny, wise, and surprising, the novel follows Peppa as she finds friendship, love, and (with a little help from Virginia) a new sense of self.

Raised in rural Massachusetts, Butler moved to New York City at the age of seventeen to study music at the prestigious Mannes School of Music; she went on to work as a professional oboist, performing on stages around the world for almost thirty years until her retirement in 2008. She reflected on her experience as a musician and as a survivor of abuse in her acclaimed debut book, the memoir *The Skin Above My Knee* (Little, Brown, 2017), which the *Washington Post* cited as among the year's "top ten noteworthy moments in classical music." Since then, Butler has published three novels as well as numerous essays in venues from *The Kenyon Review* to *Psychology Today*. She now lives in New Mexico, where she writes full-time.



by E.J. Levy



E.J. Levy: Although *Dear Virginia, Wait For Me* is arguably a Bildungsroman with comic elements, it reminded me in some ways of your memoir, *The Skin Above My Knee* (Little, Brown, 2017), in that both books portray young women coming of age in Manhattan, reckoning with their extraordinary gifts and difficult families while laying claim to their power. In both, the initiation undergone is not primarily via romantic love, but via work and the reckoning with their own minds and particular genius. Did you intend your books to be feminist rebuttals of the more stereotypical version of female coming-of-age by means of romantic love?

Marcia Butler: Your observation that I've told these stories primarily through a lens of the empowerment of work, leaving romance to take second chair, is something I wasn't conscious of. So I'm grateful for your insight, as it is true!

Because I was brought up in such a way that I believed people were not to be trusted, my need for self-reliance was intuitively understood from a very young age. Music functioned as a do-or-die imperative,

and I viewed playing the oboe as the only thing that could save me from the desperate situations I endured. Though I've certainly loved deeply and have been loved in return, that emotional connection has always felt a bit secondary. Creativity served as a divining rod of sorts for locating the fulfilled life—one that I could always depend upon because it was *inside* of me and not reliant on a person. I'd like to think that this nurtured the lifelong internal pulse that has always informed the ways I've thrived through creativity—in music and design and now writing.

Circling back to the feminist question, I indeed have read many feminist thinkers and writers since the mid-'70s. I recently re-read Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* and was struck by how shockingly current and vital a thesis it is. I came away thinking if one had to choose a single book that described the state of being female in the world and what was needed to thrive as a writer, I would say look no further than Woolf's manifesto (despite it being written 100 years ago). Which brings me around to my protagonist Peppa Ryan, a breaker of familial obligations, a taster of love's potion, a seeker of true home, and above

all, my brave Woolfian (via Joyce) voyager. If *Dear Virginia* reads as a feminist rebuttal, I wouldn't disagree.

EJL: In a conversation with Richard Russo about your second novel, *Oslo, Maine* (Central Avenue, 2021), you described the seed of *Dear Virginia*: "I'm well into my third novel. As of this morning, it involves a twenty-year-old woman of Irish extraction, a financier from Belarus, and a washed-up British rock star. And a plumber." It's a hilarious list. And with the finished book including not only a plumber but a company called Straight Flush that produces waterless toilets, I have to ask: what's with plumbing in this book? How did all of this come to be?

MB: I'm a seat-of-my-pants writer: I don't plot out beforehand, and I'm not like Virginia, who based most of her characters on real people. My characters appear out of the blue, usually as a type of person, maybe with a particular quirk or physicality. But I'm not sure how that happens, and, to be honest, I don't want to know. This is something I absorbed as a musician: Regardless of what was decided in rehearsals, when I walked on stage I was prepared for the unexpected in performance. And if that did happen, it felt like nothing less than the will of the entire universe. Likewise, design at its core is a fluid process where frequent reconfiguring always yields superior results.

As a consequence of these experiences, I've come to understand that "knowing" is like a narrow tunnel, and "not knowing" offers the broadest landscape imaginable, particularly with regard to storytelling.

All that said, in this novel the plumber is different—he's real and I'd been thinking about him for a long time. When I was a designer in New York City I worked with an Irish construction crew for many of the renovations I supervised. The plumber was well read and quite the philosopher. While he was on his hands and knees plumbing bathrooms, I'd occasionally sit on the edge of the tub and we'd have conversations about Oscar Wilde and James Joyce and Seamus Heaney and Frank O'Hara, and the power of water and the miracle of modern plumbing. So when I was writing *Dear Virginia*, I liked the idea of a plumber as Peppa's love interest, and that he would share her passion for Virginia Woolf. Of course, toilets then became a recurring trope and it all kind of flowed. Sorry.

EJL: Speaking of Peppa, your twenty-year-old protagonist hears the voice of Virginia Woolf throughout the novel as she leaves her cloistered home in Queens to work on Wall Street in Manhattan. I love the idea of Peppa's ongoing, imaginary conversation with a literary and feminist icon. But near the novel's end, we get hints that perhaps the voice Peppa hears is not simply imagined, but may be something more miraculous, a spirit guide of sorts. Can you talk about that ambiguity? Was it always Woolf's voice that the character heard? And what's your own relationship to guides or inner voices?

MB: This is a tender subject. I don't hear voices, but I'm very aware



photo by Jay Potter

that my mind's incessant chatter, though a normal occurrence for everyone, causes me to at times respond out loud, usually when I take my daily walk. It's been going on for years and can be embarrassing. People stare. Or they may ask if I'm okay. And I assure them I am fine, just a weirdo. Then they nod warily, but sometimes they smile.

What Peppa hears is quite different. It is a single benevolent voice, and because she is a Woolf devotee Peppa has imposed the personae of Virginia, complete with British accent, onto this voice. That's how the single voice developed in middle drafts. But in first draft the idea began as a cluster of unreliable voices, working as a kind of Greek chorus. They offered guidance to Peppa but often contradicted themselves. Then, when they started to be mean to her, I tossed them to the curb. (You may now wonder who's in control. Clearly, not me.)

So Virginia took over, guiding Peppa with her sensible, though at times cryptic, advice. And because she is actually coming from Peppa's own mind, Virginia knows only what Peppa knows. Once that was firmly established, I began to consider Peppa's unconscious mind, which is when I gave myself license to go kind of woo-woo toward the end of the book.

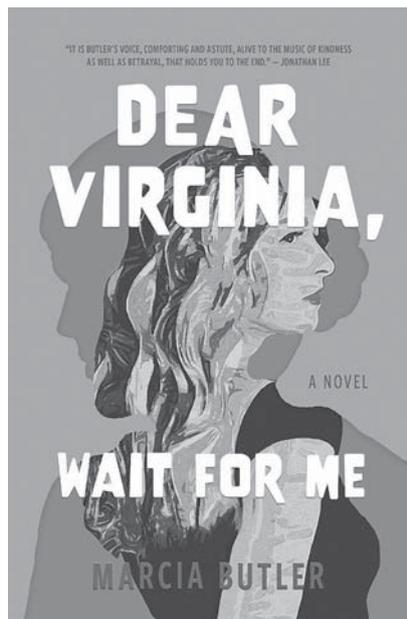
EJL: You make masterful use of point of view in each of your four books. In your memoir, you shift between second person and first

person; in your first novel you divide point of view between three people and begin each chapter with an omniscient prologue on some aspect of New York City; in your second novel you employed an omniscient point of view to remarkable effect by entering the consciousness of a moose, and then limited third-person point of view for the humans. What made you choose a close third-person point of view for this book? Are these technical challenges you set yourself?

MB: It is true that with each book I've consciously used different craft devices. I wanted to challenge myself by assembling as many colors and textures as possible for my writing palette and thereby grow as a writer. Though I'll admit that using close third-person point of view for *Dear Virginia* felt like a heavy lift. Every single thing that happens has to be experienced—seen, heard, felt—through Peppa. I found myself frequently asking *what does Peppa actually know?* As an example, for many drafts I had her observing a room and making note of “flocked” wallpaper and a “lipstick red” ceiling. Then it dawned on me that with her limited life experience, there's no way she would know such a term for wallpaper or that ceilings would be likened to glossy lipstick. I know that stuff, not Peppa! On the other hand, I had a lot of fun pressing pause on the action so that Peppa could have a silent mental rant. At first doing so felt indulgent, for lack of a better word. But then I realized that this is actually what people do: think all manner of thoughts while things are happening simultaneously. Such is the mind that cannot be controlled.

EJL: One of the things I love about the novel is what I'd call its “queer sensibility.” The protagonist Peppa is straight, but her boss Ivan is gay and there's a sense throughout of transformative love that is not heteronormative; you write of how friendship and mentorship as well as the ardent pursuit of work can save us, heal our broken hearts and spirits. I especially appreciate the image of chosen family in the novel, as a redemptive alternative to the failures of a family of origin and in contrast to state-sanctioned marriage. Can you talk about how you, as a straight woman, wrote gay characters with such sensitivity?

MB: This novel brings to life three people from Ireland, one from England, one from Belarus, two who are wealthy, a few who live marginally, one who is likely neurodiverse, and four who are straight. Also, two who happen to be gay. I'm honored that you think I've handled Ivan and GoGo, in particular, with sensitivity—they aren't based on specific people I know, but I feel like I've known them all my life. Now that I've entered my seventh decade and met God knows how many people along the way, I've assembled a swath of friends who range from straight, gay, bi, and trans. And it has been this way since 1974 when I arrived in New York to study music and one of my chums at conservatory took me down to the Ninth Circle on Christopher Street for Sunday brunch. It was packed and I was the only girl there. I remember thinking, “Oh. Hello world.” Or something to that effect.



When Peppa meets her boss, Ivan, he doesn't read on the page as gay—more like a European who was educated at Cambridge and for some reason has adopted a newscaster-like accent. When GoGo, the British rock star, shows up behaving like a semi-hysteric dressed in a Lagerfeld leather jumpsuit, he is seeking Ivan's expertise to extract himself financially from a very bad boyfriend. After no small amount of resistance, they eventually become a loving couple and are able to drop their facades. When Peppa faces a crisis about the plumber and about the very nature of love, she seeks advice from Ivan and GoGo, who she recognizes as two people who love each other authentically. I am like Peppa in that regard—neither of us judge who people choose to love.

EJL: There's a balance of gravity and rom-com elements in the novel—it's like a really literary season of *Will & Grace*. Even as our heroine

Peppa struggles with some truly harrowing circumstances, the narrative never loses tenderness and humor. Can you talk about that balancing act?

MB: In general, I'm not inclined to seek humor in books or TV programs. I've never seen a single episode of *Seinfeld* or *South Park* and rarely watch *Saturday Night Live*—though, I admit to binging on *Scared Straight* sketches on YouTube. Very little in life makes me laugh out loud like that, but I'm pretty sure I don't appear as a gloomy person. One of Samuel Beckett's early characters (Belacqua Shuah in *More Kicks Than Pricks*, 1934) says: “Was it to be laughter or tears? It came to the same thing.” I believe this to be true, because the one thing laughter and tears have in common is that they both dissolve pretense. Once the masks are removed, we are all pared down to our core. Professional comedians often declare themselves the most depressed individuals on the planet. It's the Pagliacci effect: Make them laugh while you're on stage, but step into the wings and begin to sob.

In *Dear Virginia* the situations and characters I've created tend to be peculiar, or unexpected, and sometimes bizarre. Peppa's never eaten a lobster and is utterly aghast at the whole proposition. Her boss Ivan genuflects to the great French chef Jacques Pépin and swoons, as if a lover, over his deboning technique. GoGo heartily approves of Ivan's office décor, likening the color to *Pyramid Beige*. Peppa's dad (a man who renovates homes for a living) believes that his own house, a storm away from being blown off its foundation, is perfectly fine. Peppa's mom is fond of throwing soiled underwear at her husband's head when she's fed up with his stubborn nature. And the poor plumber! He lives in a room above his uncle's garage and literally doesn't have a toilet to piss in. All of them are more or less without artifice, and except for GoGo, they report their lot in life with almost dry observation. But I'm not going for a laugh. My instinct is to create reactions and dialogue that either acknowledge the absurdities or deflect them. I'd like to think the reader's reactions are then purely their own. They may laugh, or it is equally plausible that they might cry. 📖