

*Mrs. Dalloway*, Virginia Woolf (1925) (available in the Bellingham Public Library)

“Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself.” These are the first words of *Mrs. Dalloway*, possibly Virginia Woolf’s best loved novel, and if you’ve never read it, you’ve missed a beautifully written and moving story. These first words tell us that we’re in a comfortable upper-middle-class world, and we immediately learn that Clarissa Dalloway is preparing a large party for that evening in her London home. But what follows is a shimmering skein of thoughts and experiences that weaves from person to person throughout the day of the party. Woolf’s earlier novels were more conventional; here she’s become her modernist self, launching us on a chapterless flow of language where we may shift from one person’s thought to another’s in the middle of a paragraph. That said, it’s not hard to follow the narrative: the distinction between thoughts and happenings and whom they belong to is always clear.

The main people involved are, first of all, Clarissa, but also Peter Walsh, the man she refused to marry thirty years ago, who has returned to London from India, and the safer man she did marry, Richard Dalloway, a hard-working government official. We also follow Elizabeth, the Dalloways’ 17-year-old daughter, with Miss Kilman, her history tutor, an embittered born-again Anglican spinster in love with Elizabeth. In a counter-strand, we meet Septimus Smith, a WWI veteran suffering from extreme depression, and his loving and distressed Italian wife. The arrogant doctor indirectly responsible for Smith’s suicide that afternoon is a guest at Clarissa’s party in the evening, bringing the two stories together for a moment and making Clarissa confront the death which has been hovering over her thoughts all day.

What the novel so delicately explores is love, all kinds of love, and the way it’s involved in aging under the shadow of death. Partly because she knows Peter has returned, Clarissa keeps thinking of her girlhood, when Peter was her favored suitor while her closest friend—beloved?—was a woman named Sally Seton. Sally has long been married and Peter has become something of a Casanova, but he still resents Clarissa’s choice of Richard, who for his part translates his inarticulate love of Clarissa into roses. Septimus Smith has lost his dearest friend in the fighting in France, and with him, any joy in his life; his adoring wife is a stopgap for him, as he knows. Miss Kilman suppresses any understanding of her feeling for Elizabeth, but she and Clarissa recognize one another as rivals for Elizabeth’s affection. And Elizabeth stands on the threshold of life, not yet comfortable with herself, but close to her father.

It’s not that there’s any kind of lesson here. It’s more a recognition of how we live from moment to moment, experiencing, thinking, and remembering. We’re often told to live more mindfully, to be more conscious of our sensations and thoughts as they pass. This book is a wonderful guide and model.