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Mark Haddon Picks ‘To the Lighthouse’ for WSJ Book Club

Mark Haddon, author of the best-selling ‘The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time,’ chooses Virginia Woolf



Mark Haddon PHOTO: DYLAN THOMAS FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

By **LUCY FELDMAN**

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A critic once described Mark Haddon’s third novel, “The Red House,” as Virginia Woolf with cellphones. The comparison delighted the 53-year-old author, who calls Woolf’s “To the Lighthouse” his favorite novel.

Mr. Haddon, the next host of the WSJ Book Club, discovered Woolf’s classic when he was 16 or 17 and has revisited it countless times. Published in 1927, Woolf’s novel starts with

a discordant family spending the summer at the beach. The premise returns in “The Red House,” which also is about a discordant family spending the summer at the beach.

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“To the Lighthouse” follows Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay, he an academic insecure about his achievements, she the devoted mother of a brood including six-year-old James, who desperately wants to sail to the lighthouse near their home. The family members clash and evolve over the book’s three parts, while the point of view shifts among their perspectives.

Virginia Woolf “is a genius at sentence-making,” Mr. Haddon said. “I think the sheer density of sentences, which completely lift clear of the runway and soar, is higher for me in Woolf than in any other writer.” The English author, who lives in Oxford, has dog-eared at least two copies of “To the Lighthouse” through years of re-reading and scribbling in the margins.

Mr.

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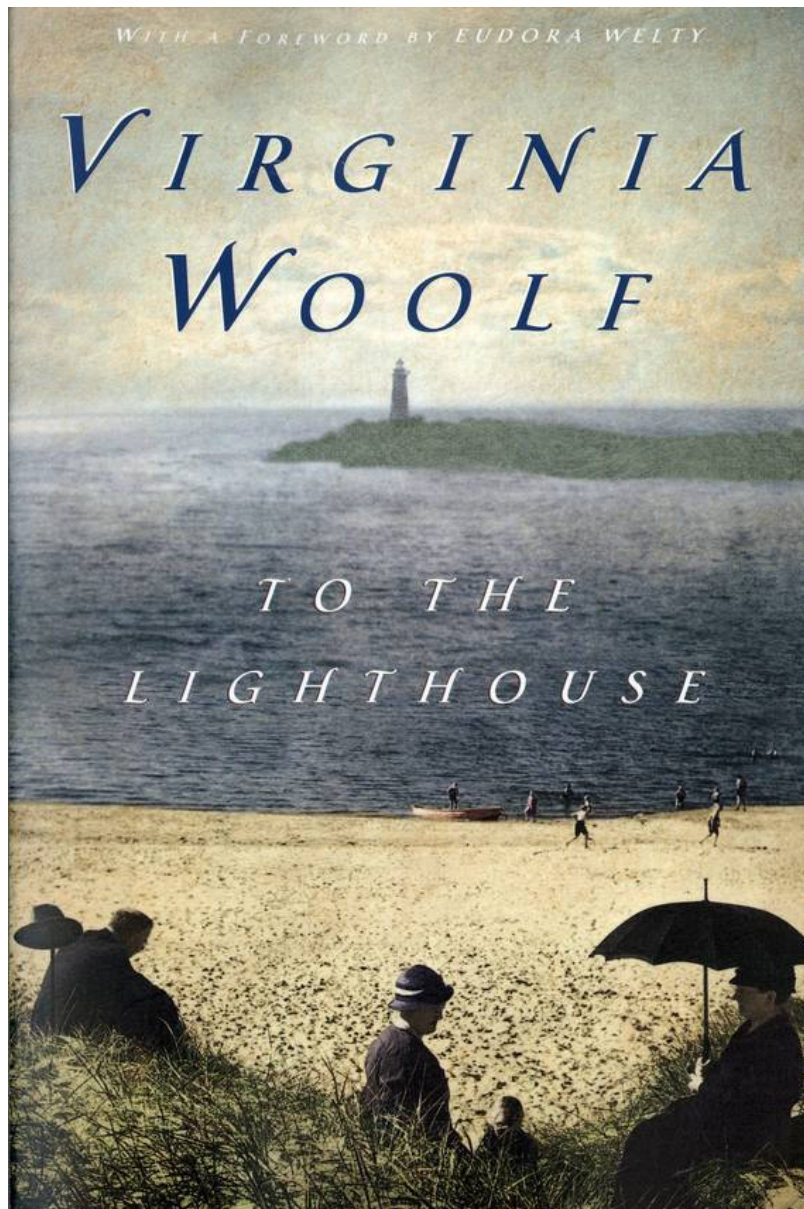
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Haddon, who also writes children’s books, is the author of the 2003 best-selling novel, “The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time,” which was adapted for the stage and won Best Play at the 2015 Tony Awards. He published his first short-story collection, “The Pier Falls and Other Stories,” in May.

The WSJ Book Club will be reading “To the Lighthouse” over the coming weeks. Follow along on the club’s Facebook page, on Twitter with #WSJBookClub or sign up for our newsletter. Next month, Mr. Haddon will join us for a Q&A. An edited interview.

Why do you return to this novel?

Some of the best books hook you in a different way every time. One of the reasons I come back to it is, rather like an interesting person, like a good friend, you find that it has changed in your absence, and for the better. The way you grow with another person, you see different aspects of them as they get older and you get older, and it’s that same kind of relationship to great books. I’ve read it at times and thought it’s about motherhood, womanhood, feminism, the state of women, and that Mrs. Ramsay is at the center. I’ve read it at other times and thought Mr. Ramsay’s at the center.



What do you have in common with Woolf?

She's interested, I think to a greater extent than any other writer, in what it means to be a human being from minute to minute. The way the mind really works—not ideas, but the experience of being a human being in real time. That's something that always fascinates me.

She has an overt approach to that, using a stream-of-consciousness style.

Yes, and there's something even odder than that: Sometimes in a sentence she can move from the interior of one character to another, which is also something I'm not sure any other writers have done or at least not done with the same adroitness, so that you get a sense, not only

of what it is to be in the mind of individuals but of what it's like to be in the mind of a family.

What do you hope readers will take away from "To the Lighthouse"?

It's so rich and so layered. It's not a book for everyone, and I know people who are annoyed by it, but I think it is readable in so many different ways. I think five readers could read it and have five very, very different experiences...All the main characters give you a different entry point, and she understands those characters. They don't have walk-on parts in a drama; I think as she moves between them, she sees the world through their eyes in a way which is profoundly understanding of their experiences. She completely understands what it is to be a child. Strangely, she seems to understand exactly what it is to be a mother—and an aging man, as well. If you didn't know, I think it would be a shock to understand that she'd never had children.

Do you have advice for readers who tend toward more plot-driven fiction?

Read it slowly, if that's possible. Plot scoots us along, doesn't it? This is definitely a book to be—I'm not going to say savored, I don't quite mean that. There's a lot there. Let it sink in, paragraph by paragraph. You miss things by reading fast in Woolf. It will repay close scrutiny. And remember that some of it is very funny. I think it's easy to start reading Woolf and think this is going to be difficult and austere.

Are there any parts of the novel that feel dated?

I'm always uneasy at her treatment of marginal, lower-class characters...You just remember that every dead author has some weak point. We try to forget the anti-Semitic bits in Dickens, don't we? We just sort of whistle as we go past them and think, oh, that's terribly disappointing.

Have you read all Woolf's work?

No. I think her letters are something like 10 volumes. She wrote a huge amount. She had a lot of time taken out of her life in chunks, not just by psychiatric illness but by enforced inactivity, which was one of the 'treatments' for psychiatric illness at the time. But when she wasn't ill, she was ferociously productive—letters, novels, essays, magazine articles. I'm not a completist. I don't have an urge to collect everything. I've got all the Sonic Youth albums, and that's about it.

Do you catch glimpses of Woolf herself in “To the Lighthouse”?

On the last reading I saw quite a lot of her in Mr. Ramsay, disguised in such a way that most readers don't see it. I think if you are a writer, you always feel that anxiety about how you will fall in that great alphabet [of achievement, envisioned by Mr. Ramsay in “To the Lighthouse”]. Will you reach Q? Will you reach R? All those other writers who seem to have got to W and you hate. I can imagine something like that happening in Woolf's mind. It happens in all writers' minds, and I think she realizes that. We're all egotistical aren't we? We all need reassurance. We all need comfort.

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