

TLC Showcase

MAGGIE HUMM

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Introduction to *Talland House*

T*alland House* takes the artist character **Lily Briscoe** from Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* and is a romantic historical novel - set between 1900 and 1919 - in picturesque Cornwall and war blasted London, with fictional versions of Woolf's life. The novel depicts Lily Briscoe's emotional journey in becoming a professional artist: her loves and friendships, mourning her dead mother, and solving the mystery of her friend Mrs. Ramsay's sudden death. Pub date August 2020 by [She Writes Press](#).

The Royal Academy, London 1919: Lily has a painting displayed. She's put her student days in St. Ives behind her: her substitute mother Mrs. Ramsay disliked Lily's portrait of her, it seemed; Louis Grier, her tutor, didn't seduce her as she'd hoped. Ten years on she's been a suffragette, a nurse in WWI, and a successful artist. Then Louis appears at the exhibition telling Lily that Mrs. Ramsay died suddenly. Lily realizes she needs to find out more about the death and the sometimes-violent Mr. Ramsay. And she still loves Louis.

I was inspired to write the novel because of my love for Virginia Woolf's writings. My mother died at 49 when I was 13 the exact ages of Woolf's mother and Virginia when Woolf's mother died. So, Woolf's depiction of her mother as Mrs. Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse* meant so much to me. I had to discover how Mrs. Ramsay died!

The support and expert advice of the Literary Consultancy was outstanding and kept me writing and revising. The first stage was a report on my initial draft. This showed me I needed to take a Creative Writing Diploma which brought the novel to fruition. Often creative writing courses only see novels in sections. So, following the course, I took a TLC nine-month mentorship which really helped me restructure and fine tune. Without TLC *Talland House* would not be finished let alone published! For my second novel *Rodin's Mistress* I am again drawing on TLC's expertise, and again am so impressed by the reports and guidance. The TLC is a jewel in the literary landscape.

Extract from *Talland House* by Maggie Humm

I

1919: The Royal Academy, London

Plucking a glass of champagne from a passing waiter, Lily was desperate for a cigarette, but none of the ladies were smoking.

"Can you see my painting?"

"There it is, Lily," Eliza said. "Look—they've placed it at eye level! Not skied at all."

"Goodness. I imagined the Royal Academy would hate my colours."

"You're a revolutionary," Eliza said, smiling, as she rearranged the French lace around her shoulders. "Clashing colours are the thing. It's a new era."

Lily raised her glass to Eliza. She knew she could paint, and *Delphiniums* might change things; she felt this with a brilliant intensity, like holding a nugget of gold. The blooms in the painting were almost alive. But never as much as in Talland House garden, where her beloved Mrs. Ramsay's favourite flowers stood glorious in front of a purple escallonia hedge.

The gallery was too crowded and hot to think clearly. Painting was the one thing she thought about, and she couldn't hide the joy she got from it, a sense of completeness, of being herself, of feeling as if she'd taken wing and everything else was insignificant. And it was the one thing she'd ever been good at.

Draining her glass, Lily strode after Eliza to the end of the high-ceilinged room. It was full of men in top hats dressed in black frock coats stretched over fat stomachs, but their clothes weren't for mourning. They weren't examining the pictures much at all, looking for their own kind, their own "set," with flushed red faces, moustaches grown into noses, waistcoats dotted with shiny buttons.

"A new era? So why do men claim they won the Great War," she said, wondering where the waiters had gone with the champagne, "when they've only won it for half the population, and the other half have taken a step backwards?"

"Don't bother about them," Eliza said. "Let's see who else is at eye level."

During the war, what with the nursing, there'd been a few hours snatched here and there for painting in the small studio close to Father's study, but the moments after painting were liberating. Those Sunday evenings had made her feel free, walking alone to Victoria and the tram back to the hospital, sometimes as late as midnight. Trees appeared taller in the shadows; houses haunting in the blackout, no glints allowed from windows. With iron railings torn from their sockets to be melted down for guns, the remaining rounded shapes along the perimeters of houses were like animal footprints, making her imagine black leopards prowling the streets of South Kensington. There was beauty and adventure in London's wartime streets.

In the next gallery, Lily could feel her face becoming shiny. "I'm thirsty," she said, smiling at Eliza. "Let's go and have tea."

The crowd parted, and in front stood two men, one older with a younger companion, declaring a painting's surface was too flat. It was his rich tenor voice Lily recognized first. Her memories hadn't faded over the years. She could feel her face flushing, and, with a stomach twist of embarrassment, she turned to Eliza.

"It's Louis Grier and Hilary Hunt," she whispered.

It was the effect of Louis's smile and the touch of his hand Lily most remembered, and somehow, for a moment, the gallery seemed to be as vibrant as its art. He was well dressed in a three-piece suit rather than the old rough trousers spattered with paint she was used to, but he still wore the same jaunty hat he'd always worn. The hair peeking out was almost completely grey; he wasn't wearing a wedding ring. Hunt hadn't aged so well, seemingly settled into a suit like a stout businessman. Lily felt pulled back to St Ives, but she wasn't an indecisive young girl any longer. If only she'd been braver, more honest than about her feelings for Louis. Was it too late? She stood behind him, scrutinizing the painting. The image was too conventional, not true of her memories of Cornwall's dramatic seas, and she nodded in silent agreement with him. Both men turned, smiled broadly in recognition and doffed their hats.

"Miss Briscoe, such a pleasure to see you and Miss Stillman again," Louis said, and Hunt smiled. "I saw your name in the catalogue. Many congratulations! We hoped you might want to see Cornish scenes in the exhibition, and here you are."

His eyes were steady, looking intently at her before gesturing at the painting, and she felt her spine prickle under his gaze.

"Is this depiction of St Ives contemporary or too traditional?" he asked. "What do you think?"

He could still make it seem as though her opinion mattered to him.

"It's too fussy." The sudden certainty of her view warmed her cheeks. "It lacks the line of your *Silver Nights*, and it needs more texture."

"Well, yes, my painting was decently reviewed," Louis smiled, "but that was many years ago."

He hadn't lost his Australian accent. She glanced down at her serge dress, smoothing an imaginary crease in the skirt. Her mother always said her little daughter had Chinese eyes, and she wished she'd risked oriental silk, or at least something more vivid than black, but it was her ideas he'd admired, not her clothes. He'd agreed with her that you couldn't die from working too hard, only from boredom.

"Your name is not in the catalogue, Mr. Grier. I didn't think you'd be here." Had he been in the war? But he'd never been interested in the military and seemed completely unharmed.

"I chose not to submit. There was too much work in Australia, so I've missed all the British exhibitions for a few years. I return to St Ives next month. Australia has claimed me for far too long."

Everything seemed suspended as she remembered the first time he held her arm steady for the long brushstroke needed for a horizon; her whole body warm despite the chilly sea air; the two of them painting together on St Ives quayside; the drizzle on her eyelashes; their evenings in the Sloop Inn, its upper room always full of cigarette smoke, firelight, student laughter. Somehow, she'd felt at the centre of the world watching Louis grasping a tumbler of whisky, his deep brown eyes, smiling endlessly it seemed, at her stumbling appreciation of seascapes, her attempts to describe what she saw not as boats, "I see simply colours and mass," she'd said, trying so hard to impress him, while the peaty smell hung in the air enveloping them both, and his hand was close to hers, speeding up her heart.

Hunt's voice called her back. He was watching her with raised eyebrows as if about to dispense some superior thought.

"How much our dear friend Mrs. Ramsay would have praised your success, Miss Briscoe," he said. "You must miss her a good deal."

"I do," Lily said. "I haven't seen her since before the war."

In her mind was the final meal in Talland House before the guests all returned to London for the winter, the wine-infused stew and the treble-soft birdsong in the garden; Mrs. Ramsay placating her husband at the other end of the table with nods and smiles, her face so familiar Lily could remember every detail when she closed her eyes. With a smile, she turned to Hunt, who was gazing uneasily at Louis.

"I take it you don't know?" Hunt said to her in a low voice. "Haven't you heard?"

"Heard what?" Lily asked, feeling both men's gazes on her face.

"Perhaps we might all step into the alcove," Louis said, almost in a whisper, as he guided them over. "I regret to say, I'm not sure how to tell you."

What could it be? Something about the Ramsays?

The dark recess was silent, the drapes at either side partly obscuring their group from the crowded gallery.

"It's difficult to give the sad news directly," Louis said, fumbling his words.

"I worked as a nurse. So did Eliza," Lily said impatiently. "We've seen everything. We won't faint."

"It's about Mrs. Ramsay's death," Louis said hesitatingly.

It felt as if the gallery throng were closing in on her as she absorbed his words.

"She died over two years ago," Louis said.

"No!" Eliza said. "That can't be." She turned to Lily.

"Dead?" Lily asked, faltering. "How?"

"She was caring for a young man near her Kensington home one week, and dead by the end of the next," Hunt said. "Rheumatic fever. So sudden and tragic."

His mouth was moving. Lily could sense the words in the air, but she felt as though she were outside of time, where nothing seemed to matter but everything might. She could hear Hunt murmuring to Eliza about Mrs. Ramsay's children, about Prue dying in some illness connected with childbirth.

"Andrew, of course, was killed later in the war," Hunt continued. "A lethal shot. He expired instantly they said. Such a gifted young man! Thank goodness their mother died before them and was spared from knowing her children perished."

As Lily stood motionless, the memory of Mrs. Ramsay sitting in a glow of candles at the dinner table dimmed, becoming a palimpsest under the news.

As she watched, Hunt gazed around the room and seemed about to continue, but Louis raised his eyebrows. The two men caught eyes for a moment and Hunt paused.

"I understand," he said, "Mr. Ramsay stood to inherit all the art—her portraits by Watts, Burne-Jones, and Rothenstein." He looked at Louis before continuing. "Those albumen prints taken by her aunt are quite valuable now, I believe."

Louis put a hand on Hunt's arm. Lily stared through Hunt, amazed at how callous and crass he was to talk about the value of Mrs. Ramsay's art; Lily was somewhere above herself with everything tiny and far away. Her cheeks were wet, and she felt a wave of gratitude as Louis held out a handkerchief with an apologetic wince.

"I do regret our abruptness," he said. "Her death was so sudden, not the lingering state one would expect with a fever. So it was a shock to us all. I thought the news more generally known. You were once such good friends of the Ramsays. I imagined you would be some of the first to hear. It was unconscionable to speak in public. Please, let me escort you both outside into the tea area. More air there."

He offered his arm to Lily and she stumbled forward, thinking of the day Mrs. Ramsay first invited her to Talland House. There was something not quite right, something troubling about the Ramsays she'd tried to fathom, tried to counter with her affection for Mrs. Ramsay and painting her portrait, but, as her senses filled with the escallonia scent from the garden high above St Ives on what had been the last warm day of summer, the sweetness was all she could remember.

About the Writer

Maggie Humm is an Emeritus Professor, University of East London, UK, and international Woolf scholar, the author/editor of fourteen academic books, the last three about Woolf and the arts, the topic of her debut novel *Talland House*. *Talland House* was shortlisted for the Impress and Fresher Fiction prizes (as *Who Killed Mrs. Ramsay?*) and Retreat West and Eyelands prizes. She lives in London and is currently writing *Rodin's Mistress* about the tumultuous love affair of the artists Gwen John and Rodin. Find her at www.maggiehummm.net



To transition to creative writing, she gained a Diploma in Creative Writing from UEA/Guardian followed by a mentorship with The Literary Consultancy and *Rodin's Mistress* is also receiving support from The Literary Consultancy.

She regularly speaks at literary events. Last year's events: *Voyaging Out* Hatchards, 'Dallowday' Waterstone's Gower Street, and Woolf's *The Widow and the Parrot*, NOW Gallery, Greenwich.

Last year's media appearances included French radio – France Culture 'La Grande Traversee: Virginia Woolf'; and 'Invitation au Voyage: Cornwall Through the Eyes of Virginia Woolf' by the French TV channel ARTE; and BBC Front Row. In 2020 she spoke on Turkey's TRT World television 'Showcase'.

Active in feminist politics all her life, she founded the first full-time undergraduate UK Women's Studies degree. A chapter about the history is forthcoming in *The University of East London: A Radical History* Lawrence and Wishart 2020.