Finding a home and a room of her own in South Orange

BY MARCIA WORTH-BAKER

Anne Fernald’s work has taken her to Uruguay, London and, daily, to Manhattan. There she teaches at Fordham University while researching and writing about Virginia Woolf. Fernald, who awaits publication of her edition of Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*, comes home from her travels to South Orange. Here she revels in domestic life. “Woolf writes about ‘the great task of weeding the terrace,’” says Fernald. “I think of that every time I garden.”

Fernald, her husband Bill Morgan, and their two daughters moved to a Victorian house in South Orange on Halloween, 2010. Fernald dove into local living; active at Marshall and Jefferson Schools, and with her children’s soccer programs, she also serves as a deacon at Prospect Presbyterian Church. She’s led audience talkback sessions at Luna Stage, in West Orange, advising on a production of *Vita and Virginia* in 2012.

At the same time, based on a previous book and volumes of other writing on the subject, Fernald was tapped as the sole American to edit a volume of Woolf’s work for Cambridge University Press. That project brought her into ever-closer contact with Woolf, and challenged her to reconcile the well-known British modernist and feminist writer with Fernald’s life as mother, wife and citizen.

“What most people know of Woolf is her suicide and they also know her as an early feminist,” explains Fernald. Virginia Woolf is familiar for the 1929 essay that argues that in order to write, a woman needs “a room of one’s own.” Some 12 years later, Woolf filled her coat pockets with rocks and drowned herself in the Ouse River, a death that has been dramatized many times.

For Fernald, Woolf is a much more complicated figure. Fernald became aware of the writer...
From her girlhood in her father’s library to the end of her life, Virginia Woolf read widely and with passion. Fernald’s *Virginia Woolf: Feminism and the Reader* shows how Virginia Woolf’s reading affected her feminism and how her feminism affected her opinions of her reading. This book looks at the impact of that intense reading on Woolf’s writing and on her feminism. Each chapter looks at an aspect of her thinking – her attitude towards the English nation, the imagination, the public sphere, and fame – through the lens of a literary period, from Ancient Greece through the Romantics. The epilogue explores Woolf’s surprising legacy among contemporary African writers.
Anne pictured with daughters Olivia and Izzy.

as an undergraduate at Wellesley College, and became engaged in the study of Woolf in graduate school at Yale University. “She has been in my life for 25 years,” Fernald laughs. “I’m still fascinated by her. She read everything and I’m astonished at how people all over the world read her.”

Fernald notes that, despite its calamitous ending, Woolf lived a “happy, rich, full adult life.” Fernald encourages her students to realize that Woolf’s life was “filled with friendships, parties, writing and reading. It was kind of an ideal life.” Woolf’s depression, argues Fernald, was the legacy of a difficult childhood. “Woolf succeeded in many areas of life,” says Fernald. “That includes overcoming the early death of her mother and other childhood traumas.”

In her lifetime, Woolf was criticized for not demonstrating for women to achieve the vote despite her avowed feminism. Here, too, Fernald sees a bigger story. “Woolf was criticized at times for not being on the picket lines, but she was a writer. She used that talent for women. I see that she asked herself, ‘What can I contribute?’ and it was her writing,” Fernald smiles. “What more can you ask of life than to figure out your strength and put that towards causes that matter to you?”

Fernald reads memoirs for pleasure and, along with her daughters, is a loyal Harry Potter fan. The family spends time along the St. Lawrence River. That experience, coupled with a daily commute between Manhattan and South Orange is, to Fernald, an ideal existence. Woolf, she notes, wrote very specifically about the geography of her life. To the Lighthouse is probably the best-known such work.

As her own life has changed in the past 25 years from student to teacher, parent, wife and homeowner, Fernald says her understanding of Woolf has altered, too. “I used to admire her more aesthetically,” she says. “Now it’s more personal.” Woolf wrote often in the post-World War I era about shell shock and her own battles with depression. “Woolf wrote in the post-World War I era about shell shock and her own battles with depression. “Woolf put the challenges of quieting a troubled mind into words,” says Fernald. “That’s a tremendous gift she gave us.”

Marcia Worth-Baker lives in South Orange, where she combines a happy domestic life with literary aspirations.