

that refract from a parent's heart to an adult child and back again.

Letters to Virginia Woolf

Lisa Williams.
Lanham, MD: Hamilton, 2005.

Reviewed by Roxanne Harde

In *Letters to Virginia Woolf*, a non-fiction work of 43 letters, Woolf scholar Lisa Williams focuses on mothering and violence and probes the significance of Woolf's life and writing. Williams is at her best in those letters that describe birthing and raising her son, the miscarriages she suffered before having him, and the fertility treatments she underwent in order to conceive. Her experience of mothering gives her a deeper understanding of and appreciation for her own mother. When describing great joy or great pain, Williams's prose is eloquent and direct; her first letter moves from a sunny fall day with her son in a New York City park to the devastating events that happened that very day, 11 September 2001. This letter opens with a quotation from Woolf, as do several letters, and Woolf's rumination on war and life from *Three Guineas* inspires Williams even as it enriches her insight into her own responses to the aftermath of the terrorist attacks. The last letters circle back to where the book begins as they discuss the first anniversary of what we now know as 9-11 and draw from Woolf's writings on war to make clear that Woolf, and Williams, are connected to history and life, disconnected from nationalism and war.

Letters to Virginia Woolf is not consistently successful, however. The letters are divided into six parts that do not cohere and the whole seems fragmented. Williams's ruminations—on 9-11, her body, and her child; her adolescence and the Vietnam War; her parents and their divorce; and her Woolf scholarship—cover a good deal of her life, and the divisions seem arbitrary and unenlightening. Further, I expected a scholar who has spent a good deal of her adulthood immersed in Woolf's writing to have more acuity with language. Woolf is generally a model of concision; Williams has a tendency to repeat images, words, and phrases, including clichés. How many times does one need to pause over a mother's beehive hairdo; how many times does one need to "revisit the landscape of my childhood"? Woolf's descriptions are cogent; Williams's prose is overwrought at times. A sun, for example, "seemed to stretch her arms languorously over hills and streams," and a mother's "hair splintered into many threads while the evening light hovered round her." When not weighted down with descriptions, Williams's prose soars and the two short poems she includes show a sharp acuity often lacking in this book. I will be sure to seek out her poetry on the strength of those poems alone.