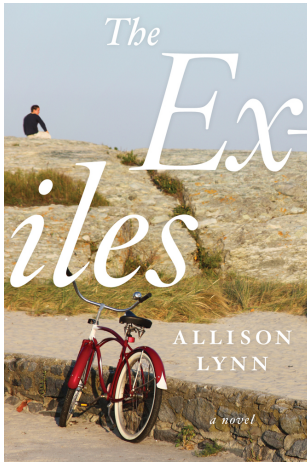


Maureen Langloss

Author as Lion Tamer: *The Exiles* and *The Interestings*



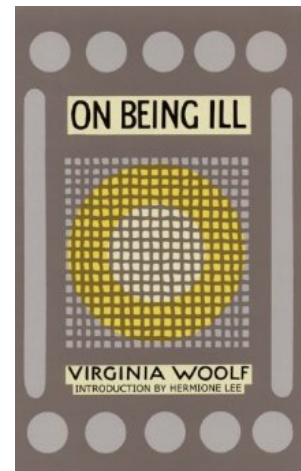
Allison Lynn's inspired, new novel *The Exiles* touches on many juicy themes that make it a fabulous summer read – BIG secrets that mates keep from one another, jealousy that makes people do bad things, parenting with second-hand Bugaboos, grief, the impossibility of Manhattan for the middle class. The book even plays host to an art heist. Any book that manages an art theft deserves at least a hundred extra credit points – especially this one because it is unexpected and wry and woven so artfully throughout the plot. But what made me adore *The Exiles* was the even more surprising appearance of disease in a book that at first blush seems like a simple tale of a couple, Nate and Emily, making a new start by moving from expensive Manhattan to more affordable Rhode Island.

In her wonderful, strange 1930 essay, “**On Being Ill**,” Virginia Woolf ponders why illness “has not taken its place with love and battle and jealousy among the prime themes of literature.” After all, it is so common and brings with it “tremendous spiritual change.” “What wastes and deserts of the soul a slight attack of influenza brings to view,” she writes.

I wonder what Woolf would say about our WebMD, our Dr. Oz, our chat rooms and memoirs devoted to everything from living with Lyme to dying with dignity. As a personal collector of oddball diseases, I eat these writings up with a spoon. Maybe you do too? (Ever Google yourself into a sleepless night after a visit to the doctor?) But something tells me Woolf would find our medical pop culture writing banal. I think she would still be daring authors to produce those rare works of literature where illness takes a seat at the table in a deep and meaningful way, where lying supine actually produces fascinating effects on the psyche and on human relationships.

Woolf boldly states that to look illness “squarely in the face would need the courage of a lion tamer.” Allison Lynn has certainly lived up to this call. She is a lion tamer.

Don't worry, there are no bodily fluids here, no bone ripped from sinew. Her book avoids the lurid details for the squeamish among you, for those in summer mode. The worst you'll see is some arm flinging, a quiet coma and a little spleen trouble. What does appear, however, is haunting: a genetic disease that hangs like a specter over the characters who wonder, *will I contract it, will my children?* The



specter causes a father to be withholding, a son to flee in denial and characters to make choices they would not otherwise make. I think Woolf would have enjoyed how Lynn uses illness to challenge her characters, to see what they were made of, to explore human nature.

Lynn's writing is not maudlin or overwrought. It is matter-of-fact and employs humor expertly to keep an otherwise morose topic rather light – perfectly suitable for the beach. I particularly liked the line, "There was nothing like a tainted gene to remind a man that he couldn't escape his past. Nate felt DNA skittering through his veins like water bugs, like rats darting beneath the subway tracks planning a siege."

For those who aren't naturally drawn to medical drama, *The Exiles* offers plenty of other morsels upon which to feast. You Eves will enjoy the funny, yet poignant scene in which Lynn describes Emily's job in "experiential advertising" (who knew that was even a thing?). Knocking herself out to sell a lousy potato chip sends Emily into the kind of existential crisis that is all too familiar to those of us who have done time in the corporate world.

You will also be moved by George Bedecker, Nate's father, a real gem of a supporting cast member who almost outshines the leads. I am a sucker for a good architect character, and George does not disappoint. He is as spare, yet complex, as the modern buildings he designs. One of my favorite scenes is when Nate takes an audio tour of George's Copenhagen Central Court. "Nate slid the headphones over his ears ... and, over the next fifteen minutes, he listened to his father's voice narrate the construction of the building ... Nate had traveled across the Atlantic and heard, for the first time in his life, his father talking at length."

What Lynn's characters fail to say to one another is often as interesting as what they say. She astutely depicts the human tendency to bungle communication with those we love. And these failures reminded me again and again of Meg Wolitzer's latest novel – similarly titled *The Interestings*. If you like one, you will certainly like the other, for *The Interestings* is perhaps the sprawling, ranch house version of *The Exiles*. While Lynn's book takes place over the course of a neat, tidy three-day weekend, Wolitzer's book spans decades. It is deliciously epic, beginning with a group of teenagers who go to summer camp together and then following them through the many twists of their journey into marriage, middle age and even death. Both books sport unique, likeable characters you can really sink into and will miss when the reading is over. And both books roost upon the same themes – secrets between spouses, jealousy between friends, the financial pressures of Manhattan, how the dreams we have for ourselves as hopeful children fall short in our adult reality, how illness can alter the course of a marriage.

Yes, Meg Wolitzer also tries to tame the lion of illness. She does a remarkable job stitching a myriad of illnesses into the patchwork of lives she explores. At times it feels like you're on the greatest-hits-of-disease roller coaster ride. Wolitzer tackles a lot: AIDS, melanoma, depression



and autism. She even invents a new technological affliction: “Maybe googling people *kills* them ... You keep looking them up to see where they are, until one day you look them up and they’re dead.” (Scary, brilliant thought, right?) Wolitzer could certainly delve deeper in her discussions of some of the book’s illnesses, but her description of what it is like to be married to someone with mental illness is particularly nuanced.

And, for me, her exploration of all the illnesses works because it feels very real. The characters’ reactions to disease feels real. In my short forty-two years, I have also gone to the AIDS funeral, had the friend on lithium, taken the loved one to chemo, cared about the child who may never speak, been ill myself. Live long enough and these things are everywhere. As Virginia Woolf explains, “All day, all night the body intervenes ... heat and cold, comfort and discomfort, hunger and satisfaction, health and illness, until there comes the inevitable catastrophe ... But of all this daily drama of the body there is no record.” Wolitzer is not afraid to make this daily drama part of her record, and I appreciate the honesty of life in it.

Clearly, Wolitzer and Lynn had similar preoccupations swimming through their minds when they wrote their books. Intriguingly, their novels also share the same narrative tendency: a bit too much connective tissue, a bit too much explained and repeated, too little left to our imagination. Maybe they shouldn’t bring us inside so many characters’ minds. But, despite this quibble, I hope these books end up leaning against each other on your bookshelf for a little book-on-book tête-à-tête.

And if *The Exiles* and *The Interestings* send you looking for more lion-taming books, don’t forget about Jose Saramago’s *Blindness* (perhaps the best novel about disease ever written), Yannick Murphy’s *The Call* (a uniquely written, insightful novel about a veterinarian whose son falls into a coma), Camus’ *The Plague* (which you probably haven’t read since high school), and Mark Haddon’s *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (told from the point of view of a boy with autism). Or, if you prefer non-fiction, try Josh Hanagarne’s *The World’s Strongest Librarian* (a wonderfully comic memoir by a 6’7” weight-lifting librarian with Tourette’s) and Will Schwalbe’s *The End of Your Life Book Club*. I’m also looking forward to reading David Masche’s *The Priority List: A Teacher’s Final Quest to Discover Life’s Greatest Lessons* when it comes out in January. Until then, be well!

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