

Sigrid Nunez. *Mitz: The Marmoset of Bloomsbury*.  
Brooklyn, NY: Soft Skull Press, 1998.

Sigrid Nunez has received much recognition for *The Last of Her Kind*, *A Feather on the Breath of God*, *For Rouenna*, and *Naked Sleeper*, including a Whiting Writers' Award, the Rome Prize in Literature, and a Berlin Prize Fellowship. What few readers might identify her with is a hybrid book about the life of a pet marmoset, specifically, a marmoset that was as much a part of England's Bloomsbury culture as Leonard and Virginia Woolf.

*Mitz* was inspired by Virginia Woolf's book *Flush*, a biography of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's cocker spaniel. Nunez's original idea was to write a children's book about the Woolf's pet monkey, Mitz; instead she wrote a book for adults, in the same vein as *Flush*.

What is particularly fascinating about *Mitz* is that it is not just a fanciful romp about a much-adored pet. The elegantly written work is an amalgam of Nunez's imagination and actual events. The story also brings the reader into the Woolf's writing, personal, and social life.

. . . Usually, she worked on fiction in the morning and on nonfiction after lunch. (Leonard claimed that he could tell whether she had been writing fiction or nonfiction by how flushed she was when she came out of her studio. She too was a critic, she too reviewed books—and how, by the way, did she judge herself in this role—she who was so sensitive to criticism? Not tough enough, it seems. Too polite. (Ah.) . . . In *Flush* Virginia describes a house pet mystified by the activity of a hand perpetually moving a black stick over a white page . . .

Whimsical, intelligent, and historically engaging, the book never stops producing surprise turns while providing a vivid look at lives shadowed by war, work, love, mental and physical illness, as well as joy inspired by Mitz.

Leonard, who had adopted the animal from Victor Rothschild, nursed the sickly Mitz back to health and was rarely seen without the pet in tow—whether in his jacket pocket or on his shoulder in the car.

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. . . only now did he discover an ugly sore under Mitz's chin, probably caused by the same chain that had rubbed away the fur of her neck. Leonard washed the sore with soap and hot water three times a day. The eczema he treated by dabbing it with cotton soaked in olive oil. Lack of vitamin D was the cause of the rickets, and Leonard knew the cure. He took Mitz out every day, letting her take the sun on his shoulder, and every day he fed her a spoonful of cod-liver oil and some butter . . .

It's impressive just how much information Nunez has extracted from letters, diaries, and memoirs to reconstruct the invaluable dimension that Mitz added to Leonard and Virginia's life. Mitz moved with Leonard and Virginia between their homes in London and Sussex. She developed relationships with the family's dogs (whether they wanted to or not) and with various members of the Woolfs' social circle, among them T. S. Eliot, who suffered a finger biting by Mitz.

Nunez combines themes of mental and physical health, travel, home, social, political, and professional life. And to weave an even more complex fabric, Nunez sets the story against the backdrop of Hitler coming to power.

. . . Brandy was served. Leonard lit his pipe and Victor his cigar. Conversation resumed. Conversation was mostly serious that night and kept coming round—as was no doubt the case at many another dinner table—to the same topic. Three weeks earlier, in Germany, hundreds of people had been slaughtered. This had confirmed many people's worst fears about Hitler, who had come to power the year before . . .

The above passage appears on page 13. So from the start, the author evokes the horror that replaces garden parties, croquet, elegant dinner parties, and leisurely car trips through Europe.

Nunez depicts a world at a time when humans were shaken from their roots and way of life. And if you were Jewish, like Leonard Woolf, you knew your future was precarious. Nunez's parallel between Jews in Europe and Mitz is subtle but powerful: Marmosets are tropical animals, and Mitz, a refugee from South America, living in damp London weather,

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endures as as best she can in a perpetually threatening climate.

. . . Mitz felt the quickening pulse in Leonard's neck and his repeated swallowing . . . Came a man in black uniform, face very red. He threw up his hands, he shook his fists, he lifted one knee and then the other and stamped his feet. He was a swastika himself, all angles, twisted, black and red. He bore down on the car. Leonard felt for the letter in his pocket. Mitz, excited by the noise and the flags and now this amusing fellow, leapt onto the steering wheel and screeched. The man stopped in his tracks. Surprise, then puzzlement, then tenderness showed in his face . . .

The guard let the Woolf family pass through the border.

Such brushes with danger do not always end with a successful passage. No one is immune to certain forces. And life for everyone, including Mitz, would be taken to a precipice unfathomable to humanity:

. . . The prime minister would address the House of Commons the next day. All one could do was wait, and surely it was better to wait in the country. Anyone able to leave London was being urged by the government to do so. It was believed that, at the outbreak of war, the Germans would begin by bombing London steadily three times an hour. Makeshift hospitals were being set up for miles around. There were plans to evacuate thousands of children, and, at the zoo, keepers stood ready to kill all the dangerous animals . . .

Though Nunez didn't write a children's story about Mitz, she did give us a book in which to dream—garden parties and reciting poetry over dinner—yet with a palpable dose of reality and an understanding of just how quickly good fortune can turn.

*Madeleine Beckman*