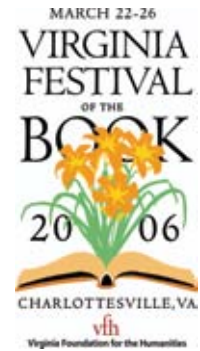


The World As I Found It by Bruce Duffy recommended by Judith Viorst

A program of the Center for the Book at the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities, the "VABooks!" column suggests books for Virginians to read in common. This month, Judith Viorst—author of several collections of poetry, prose, and children's stories like her classic *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No-Good, Very Bad Day*—recommends *The World As I Found It* by Bruce Duffy. We hope that individuals, book groups, families and neighbors



I fell so in love with *The World As I Found It* that when I met the author, Bruce Duffy, in person I embarrassed myself by behaving like a groupie, heaping effusive praise and non-stop adoration upon him and ending my undignified carryings-on with this pushy request: Could my husband and I hold a dinner for him to which we would invite all of our friends who had read his astonishing novel? He graciously said yes, and so we and some 22 women and men enjoyed a very un-Washingtonian evening, discussing, between bites of pasta with pesto, Duffy's touching, profound, sometimes laugh-out-loud take on three quite quirky philosopher pals—Ludwig Wittgenstein, Bertrand Russell, and G.E. Moore.

Actually, despite the various oddities of the two Brits, the melancholy and difficult Viennese Wittgenstein wins the quirky contest hands down. This linguistics genius published the intimidatingly titled *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, but he was also entranced by the charms of Ginger and Fred and Mickey Mouse and Daffy Duck. This son of wealth and privilege also labored as a gardener in a monastery and, having given away his inherited fortune, taught school children in a rural Austrian village. This loner who lived an existence that he often felt to be burdensome and painful also asked for this message to be transmitted to his friends in his final days: "Tell everyone that I've had a wonderful life."

Wittgenstein may or may not have really had a wonderful life. But Duffy has certainly written a wonderful book.

I'm not prepared to explain exactly what this book is about because I'm not exactly sure that I know. But I found it so expansive and audacious in its reach that even if I have failed to grasp its full meaning I've still been left with Duffy's absorbing stories of his extraordinary protagonists, plus a multitude of other intriguing characters; and with his intense and full-bodied portraits of Cambridge in all of its brilliance and competitiveness; of luxurious, cultivated old Vienna; and of the horrors and heartbreak of World War I, where we discover Sergeant Wittgenstein down in the trenches at the Russian front. Duffy's bold exploration of complex philosophical issues, and such matters as love, sex, friendship, death, and ducks, also left me reeling with admiration. And so did his precise and elegant writing, as when he quietly describes "the unspoken part of the story—the loss part lingering in the background, hooked like an old coat behind a darkened door."

Duffy's is a novel that can be read again and again, and on one of my readings perhaps I will feel, "Ah, I've got it!" But what I've got right now, what I have found in *The World As I Found It*, is a world so stirring and bountiful that I want all those who love books to find it too. And though I won't be offering to cook new Duffy fans a pasta dinner, I can guarantee that he will provide a feast.