



# The Girl Prince

## Virginia Woolf, Race, and the Dreadnought Hoax

by Danell Jones



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In February 1910, the young woman who would become Virginia Woolf played the most famous practical joke in British military history. Blackening her face and masquerading as an African prince, with friends she conned her way onto the Dreadnought, the Empire's renown battleship. The stunt made headlines around the world for weeks, embarrassed the Royal Navy, and provoked heated discussions in parliament.

**The Girl Prince** intertwines three fascinating stories: a scandalous prank and its afterlife; Woolf's ideas about race and empire; and the true Black experience in Britain, from real princes to Caribbean writers and South African activists. Danell Jones describes an extraordinary chain of events, exploring how and why this future revolutionary novelist joined in a bigoted blackface prank, and probing what it tells us—about Woolf's Britain and Woolf's work.





Danell Jones is a writer and scholar with a PhD in literature from Columbia University. She is the author of *The Virginia Woolf Writers Workshop*; the poetry collection *Desert Elegy*; and *An African in Imperial London* (also available from Hurst Publishers), which won the High Plains Book Award for Nonfiction.

## CONTACT

Website: [danelljones.com](http://danelljones.com)  
<https://www.facebook.com/danell.jones>  
<https://www.instagram.com/danell>  
[danell@danelljones.com](mailto:danell@danelljones.com)

## AGENT

Jon Curzon  
Artellus Limited  
30 Dorset House, Gloucester Place, London  
NW1 5AD  
44 (0) 20 7935 6972

## Praise for *The Girl Prince*

‘Deeply researched and marvellously written, this is the book about Bloomsbury and the Dreadnought Hoax that we’ve been waiting for. Jones gives an essential racial and historical context for the event and its aftermath, which continues to this day.’ —  
Gretchen Gerzina, author of *Black England: A Forgotten Georgian History*

‘An enlightening and insightful book that keeps you reading.’ — **Remi Adekoya**, author of *Biracial Britain*

‘An enthralling book. Danell Jones at last provides the nuanced context and deep historical research so often lacking in commentary on this infamous incident.’ — **Mark Hussey**, author of *Virginia Woolf A-Z* and *Clive Bell and the Making of Modernism*



## Q & A

Is it true that the feminist icon Virginia Woolf wore blackface to hoax the British Navy?

The *Girl Prince* is based on actual events that took place when Virginia Woolf was still the unmarried Virginia Stephen. In 1910, she joined up with her younger brother, his madcap friend Horace de Vere Cole, and others to masquerade as African princes and get a tour of the most famous battleship in the Royal Navy.

What is the book's overarching argument?

The *Girl Prince* explores the often-overlooked diversity of Virginia Woolf's world and sets the record straight on a practical joke that has been misunderstood for a hundred years.

Was the public shocked that they wore blackface?

At the time, blackface minstrelsy performances were still very popular and were considered family entertainment. Although some Black British people like A.B.C. Merriman-Labor spoke out about the indignity of blackface, the British public did not consider it a taboo until much later.

Who are the Black British people whose stories are told in *The Girl Prince*?

Readers may be surprised to learn that Woolf's Bloomsbury neighborhood was home to many Black people, some of whom would go on to play crucial roles in the dismantling of empire. They may not know that her great aunt famously photographed a 19th-century Ethiopian prince who had been ripped from his homeland by a British general and brought to England to live out what would be a short, unhappy life. Her masquerade also echoes the exploits of a Jamaican swindler who impersonated African royalty and became something of a folk hero. The redoubtable Jamaican journalist and playwright Una Marson actually incorporated a version of the Dreadnought stunt into

her own anti-imperialist, anti-racist comedy. Telling the story of the hoax is inseparable from talking about the lives of Black people in Britain. Woolf may have lived in an almost exclusively white social circle, yet Black lives edged and echoed her own, and whether she acknowledged them or not, they contributed to the rich fabric of British life and culture.

### When did Woolf tell the story of the Dreadnought Hoax?

Although Woolf often told the story in private, she first told the story in public in 1940, at the height of World War II as the Battle of Britain raged and Spitfires roared overhead.

The war had forced her to confront the very purpose of her life. Bombs, stormtroopers, and mustard gas made her novel writing look trivial and, in the face of Hitler, her pacifism had begun to appear foolish. To combat feelings of hopelessness, she forced herself to write. As she waited with the rest of the nation for the anticipated Nazi invasion, she wove an elaborate adventure tale for the members of her local Women's Institute about the famous hoax. Although she claimed to be giving a "true" account of the prank, the story she created had more to do with boosting the morale of her fellow Britons than explaining the old hoax. Her professed eye-witness account was a carefully crafted pacifist fable for wartime.

### Who will want to read *The Girl Prince*?

This book will appeal to readers interested in a new kind of Woolf biography, one that considers the author's life as inseparable from Black British history.