

# Venus Envy Short Guide

## Venus Envy by Rita Mae Brown

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# Characters

The main character of *Venus Envy*, Mary Frazier Armstrong, is a beautiful, successful thirty-five-year-old businesswoman with a well-kept secret. Although Frazier apparently fits in with her ritzy surroundings in the small but societyobsessed town of Charlottesville, Virginia, she does so at the expense of her personal happiness and integrity, as she has been hiding her lesbianism from everyone save her closest friend, Billy Cicero, a rich, fast-living, gorgeous gay man who is also firmly in the closet, albeit a gold-plated one. Our first view of Frazier is in her hospital bed, where she is presented on the verge of death from an inoperable lung cancer. Although regretful of her early demise, she is portrayed as both brave and generous as she faces death boldly and plans happy surprises in her will for her friends and business associates. Spurred into writing as a way of dealing with any remaining conflicts in her life, and as a way of letting the people closest to her know how she felt about them while she was living, Frazier confronts the people in her life and the conflicts they embody in a series of "letters to tomorrow" that she believes will only be read after her death. When Frazier recovers from what actually turns out to be a bad case of bronchitis, after the letters have been mailed, she is forced to face the consequences of her brutal honesty and resume her life in a community in which both her true feelings about her family and friends and her homosexuality fast become public knowledge.

As in many of Brown's books, this novel contains, if not a cast of thousands, then at least a cast of too many to mention. Two groups of characters are, however, of particular importance: Frazier's immediate family and her (formerly) closest friends. These two sets of characters embody a myriad of different attitudes towards people who are openly homosexual. Although on one level these characters are functional representations, Brown paints an impressively realistic picture of a dysfunctional southern family reacting in different ways to the revelation of an only daughter's homosexuality.

Libby Armstrong, Frazier's cold and overbearing mother, reacts in a predictably negative way to her daughter's honesty, wishing to keep the disgraceful secret firmly buried in order not to jeopardize her social standing. Frazier's letter to her foreshadows this reaction: "You will no doubt be glad I'm dead after reading this. I'll spare you social embarrassment. What would the garden club think?" Frazier's letter also characterizes her mother as being unaffectionate and strongly favoring her brother Carter: "I have no memories of you hugging or kissing me, if not for show in front of your friends. What I do remember is incessant criticism. I was never good enough." In this case, as in all the others, Frazier's deathbed letter contains pearls of wisdom which the person to whom it was addressed will either recognize or ignore. In her actions throughout the novel, Libby clings tenaciously to her own narrow-minded beliefs and learns nothing from her daughter's honesty.

In sharp contrast to this portrayal is that of Frank Armstrong, Frazier's father, who admires his daughter and favors her over his son, whom he considers a loser.



Frank, who receives his letter a considerable time after the others (Libby keeps it hidden in a hat box so as not to "upset" him), is more willing to accept his daughter for what she is and takes her model of courage to heart. Eventually he takes steps that lead him to defy the social conventions within which he was raised, and strikes out to pursue his own personal and professional happiness.

Perhaps the most interesting portrait of a family member is that of Frazier's only brother, Carter. He completes the mother-son/father-daughter split within the Armstrong family. He is an alcoholic who refuses to show any interest in the family business, resents his sister for her success and closeness to their father, is unhappily married to Laura, a younger, more vindictive version of his mother, and spends much of his time and money having badly-concealed affairs and drinking binges. The revelation of Frazier's homosexuality initially instigates him to spread the word all over town in a spiteful attempt at retribution on his "perfect" sister who has finally done something that is beyond the pale. Ultimately though, Carter takes Frazier's wisdom to heart and forges a strong bond with her that recalls their close childhood relationship and eventually leads him to reclaim his life from his mother and (ex)wife.

As the central message of the novel would perhaps seem to necessitate, two of the more unflattering portraits are of Ann Haviland, Frazier's clandestine lover for a year and a half before her illness, and the charming but dishonest Billy Cicero. These two characters represent the closeted gay, to whom coming out is a fearful prospect and unrealistic idea.

Ann especially is portrayed as unbalanced and neurotic, terrified that Frazier will reveal her secret and jeopardize her position within the white heterosexual female Junior League set. When jilted by Frazier, who can no longer stand her dishonesty and counsels her that "you're only as sick as your secret," Ann embarks on a smear campaign against Frazier and throws herself into frantically affirming her own heterosexuality in the eyes of the community. She opts out of any kind of loyalty to Frazier or any other homosexual and ingratiates herself with Laura, Frazier's hated sister-in-law. Billy on the other hand is portrayed as shallow, incapable of long-term commitment and uninterested in anything that does not benefit him or his fast-paced, pleasure-seeking lifestyle.

He is angry with Frazier about her revelation, not understanding the ideal that truth and pride in one's sexual identity matter more than social convenience. For him the truth about his sexuality would function as an unwanted obstacle.

A much more positive characterization is that of Mandy, a beautiful and intelligent African-American woman who works at Frazier's art gallery. Frazier's friendship with Mandy blossoms as a result of her trials, and the reader is left with the idea that a romantic relationship might be developing between the two women. Obviously, Mandy is now the perfect partner for Frazier because she understands art, values honesty, and has unique insight into the problems of belonging to a minority, never having been able to conceal her color, as Frazier was able to conceal her sexuality.



## Social Concerns/Themes

True to established form, Rita Mae T Brown's fiction incorporates many social concerns which often have to do with being the outsider or the minority in a given situation or community. Predictably, Brown deals mostly with women, gays and people of color, how society reacts to these groups, and how these groups react to society.

*Venus Envy*, while touching on topics such as AIDS, alcoholism, male friendships, female friendships, dysfunctional families, class tensions and racial barriers, retains as its overarching concern the survival of the gay woman in the maledominated heterosexual world.

Brown's major theme in this novel consists of an expose and criticism of the social norms and expectations which trap people into acting contrary to their true nature, and thus prevent them from achieving fulfillment and happiness. The institution of marriage takes a beating in this novel, as all the people who are married are desperately unhappy and trapped by convention into living with a person they no longer love. The only really positive portrayal of marriage is given as a retrospective by Ruru, who is now a widow and thus able to defy social convention in ways which the other female protagonists cannot. The mute assumption of heterosexual identity is another convention that Brown deplores, and through Frazier, the main protagonist of the novel, Brown explores the concept of the importance of personal integrity juxtaposed against the prospect of great personal loss. In Frazier's case, personal integrity is the act of coming out as a gay person, and the losses she faces are demonstrated through the repercussions this act has on herself, her family, her friends and her community.

The theme of friendship is also an important one in *Venus Envy*, which seems to demonstrate that the only true friends are those who know the real you, and who accept you and love you for what you are. The fleeting and unstable nature of friendship based on falsehood is encapsulated in the characters of Ann and Billy, who abandon Frazier when she comes out. Mandy and Ruru represent the true nature of friendship, as Frazier's disclosure brings them closer to her and allows them to develop a depth of understanding about her that they had formerly been denied because of Frazier's subterfuge.



# Techniques

In an ingenious twist on the deathbed confession formula, Brown's principal protagonist Mary Frazier pens letters to her closest friends and family in an effort at closure and honesty at what she believes to be the end of her life. The letters not only contain the confession that Frazier is a lesbian, but are filled alternately with sympathy, love, rancor, hardhitting honest character assessments, and hard-to-take advice. This is a technique which instantly piques the reader's curiosity and plays on the ail-too human desire to read other people's mail. When Frazier learns that she has been misdiagnosed, and that she is not in danger of dying, she finds that the letters have already been mailed and that there is nothing to be done but confront the people and issues concerned. The narrative of the book alternates effectively between the reading of the letters by her friends and family (the reader gets to share in these readings and vicariously experience their contents), and a third-person chronological narrative that relates the reactions of the letters' recipients and the events unleashed by the increasingly public knowledge of her confession in her home town. The complexity and number of subplots in this narrative link content to form as we experience the gradual unravelling of Frazier's formerly simple and orderly life.

As in *Rubyfruit Jungle* (1973; see separate entry), part of the realistic appeal of this novel lies in the grounding of Frazier's fictional experience in autobiographical reality, Rita Mae Brown being, by example of her own life, an outspoken proponent of the honesty and social example involved in the process of coming out. As a little light relief, and as a way of adding a curious and somewhat surreal twist to the story of all the human dramas being played out in the novel, Brown offers a subtext drawn from the world of classical mythology, in which the literary and cultural motifs of art and the gods are interwoven with the main plot. In the final chapters, Frazier is taken up into a painting of the gods on Mount Olympus and engages in a feisty sexual romp with Venus (hence the tide) and Mercury in which she gets to ask some archetypal questions about the human condition in general, and gay identity in particular.

Although the gods are not nearly so structured by conventions of society or gender, the conversation tends to become overly didactic and moralistic at this point and Venus does answer somewhat stereotypically concerning the particular qualities of gay people: (Frazier): "Do you think gay people, those people who are totally gay, do you think they are more creative?"

(Venus): "I think if Michelangelo were straight, the Sistine Chapel would have been painted basic white with a roller."



# Key Questions

Because of its witty style and unconventional characters, Brown's fiction is usually entertaining and often hilarious.

Behind the humor, though, readers will find a myriad of social concerns that deal with how people and society work together or in conflict. These social considerations may form the basis for interesting and penetrating group discussion.

Venus Envy certainly makes no pretence of hiding some of the more unattractive aspects of the social condition, and although the main character's homosexuality is the catalyst for the majority of events and dialogue in this text, the novel could also be discussed in the context of a more generalized search for truth and integrity. Given Brown's portrayal of the Armstrong family, and the apparent lack of support for the continuation of the nuclear family unit, another possible line of discussion would be the way that family is currently defined in American culture, as same-sex relationships, divorce and adoption are changing the face of the archetypal family makeup.

1. Is it important that this work is set in the South? Are there any social implications based on the geography of the setting, or do these characters reflect universal attitudes towards homosexuality and society?
2. Billy Cicero and Ann Haviland are portrayed very negatively in the text as they put personal convenience above personal integrity in their refusal to tell the truth about their sexuality. Do you have any sympathy for them?
3. Do you think that Brown portrays straight people fairly in the book?
4. Why do you think that Brown's main protagonist is an art dealer?
5. What is your reaction to the "romp with the gods" scene at the end of the book? Do you feel that the mythological subplot adds to or detracts from the novel as a whole?
6. Why does Brown use the character of Mandy to instigate the plot device of the letters? Are there traits particular to this character revealed in the course of the novel that point to specific reasons for this choice?
7. What kinds of different friendships exist in this novel? Does the gender or sexuality of the friends have a direct impact on the nature of the friendship?
8. Imagine the continuation of the story for any of the main characters.
9. Do you believe, as many critics do, that Venus Envy is a "flawed" novel? If so, what do you see as its major flaws?
10. To what extent do you believe this novel sends the message that the conventions that once held our society together are now partly responsible for its disintegration?

## Literary Precedents

Brown claims Aristophanes, Euripides, and Mark Twain as her major literary influences. In *Venus Envy* it is perhaps Twain who has wielded the most influence on the biting social satire Brown uses to describe the rich, mindless "starved to perfection" women of the Virginia country-club set, and the hypocrisy of the closeted gay characters who try to fit into the very social conventions which have made them outcasts. Conversely, the "romp with the gods" scene near the conclusion of this novel shows not only Brown's great imagination and quirky sense of humor, but also points to a thorough knowledge of ancient mythology, as well as of art history and its more classical sources. Stylistically, the novel owes something to the French tradition of the letter-novel, popularized effectively by Choderlos de Laclos (1741-1803) in his infamous book *Dangerous Liaisons*, where the content of personal letters never meant to see the light of day is eventually publicly broadcast and provokes mayhem and social disaster.





## Related Titles

While *Venus Envy* is a novel with a new set of characters and a new set of problems, it, like Brown's first novel *Rubyfruit Jungle* (1973; see separate entry), draws heavily and primarily on the gay experience. The main character is again a gutsy, outspoken gay woman, whose philosophies of life closely follow those of the author, and who even quotes verbatim from Brown's unorthodox writer's manual, *Starting/row Scratch* (1988). Like most of Brown's novels, *Venus Envy* is a novel of the South and more precisely a study of family and society in a small town in Virginia. This setting forges obvious links with some of Brown's earlier titles such as *Southern Discomfort* (1982), *Wish You Were Here* (1990), and *Rest in Pieces* (1992).

The text is further linked to *Southern Discomfort* in its extensive use of mythology, which Brown uses as "cultural shorthand" to enrich and enliven *Venus Envy*.



# Copyright Information

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