

**Michelle Cahill. *Daisy & Woolf*.**  
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Michelle Cahill's *Daisy & Woolf* is a novel that centres on Daisy Simmons, the "dark, adorably pretty" marginal character with whom Peter Walsh declares himself in love in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (Woolf 172). The story unfolds via a compilation of letters and diary-entry-style chapters shifting between the 1920s (Daisy's experiences) and the late 2010s—where writer Mina reflects on the process of telling Daisy's story. First and foremost, *Daisy & Woolf* is interested in examining and challenging "Anglo-centric histories and fictions" through its engagement with Woolf's novel and characters, but much like its characters, the story roams far beyond this central focus in numerous directions. Cahill ruminates on writing and publishing, sexuality, gender, motherhood, technology, the passage of time and mental health—a list that overlaps significantly with the concerns of Woolf's work (see Showalter).

There is a resonance between Woolf's technique of meandering between the minds of characters and Cahill's character Mina researching the lives of various women, fictional and otherwise. The women, though diverse in race and circumstances (with Daisy and Mina perhaps overlapping the most in this sense), increasingly blur into one another through shared experiences and points of connection that are unearthed as the novel progresses. Such a strategy runs the risk of attracting interpretations that suggest marginalised or minority communities are being homogenised and falsely universalised in the story. Yet, in drawing parallels, the novel does not entirely elide the differences between the women it depicts. These women include Woolf, Clarissa, Mina, Daisy, Lucrezia Warren Smith—the Italian widow of Septimus, who kills himself in *Mrs Dalloway*—and Shuhua Ling—a historical Chinese writer drawn into the mix as a result of her involvement in an "illicit affair" with Virginia's nephew, Julian Bell (Cahill 205–206). The convergences between the women reflect the mixed ancestry of Mina and Daisy—Cahill's characters represent a blurring of cultures and identities that highlights the "liminality" (269) of those who are othered and those for whom "home is nowhere" (267).

From its title to the way *Daisy & Woolf* interweaves historical and fictional characters, the novel continuously raises questions about the nature of fact and fiction, and whose story gets told (in accounts of the past and pure feats of imagination). Cahill's narrative does not necessarily answer all the questions it raises, but it provokes readers, especially white readers, to thought. There is a seemingly unreconciled and perhaps unreconcilable tension between Mina's refrain that Woolf and the critics "kept Daisy stunted, and on purpose" (75), and the suggestion that Daisy's story was "not Virginia Woolf's" to tell (16). Perhaps the closest the novel comes to an answer on this front is the further question of whether it is "ever possible to tell stories which are not in some way partial, appropriating" (68). Cahill's novel seems to offer evidence that it is not, at least in the sense that the story naturally contains characters who are only "scarcely sketched" as Daisy is in *Mrs Dalloway* (12).

The above musing is only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to contemplations of storytelling, writing and publishing (and to a lesser degree academia) in *Daisy & Woolf*. Mina describes the need to "strike it lucky with a fellowship, or a festival or a prize or a publication" (13), her struggle with "writer's block" and "rabbit holes" (47), and the unique challenges faced by writers of colour (213) and women (244, 251). At points, writing is tied explicitly to the way boundaries between characters—as well as between fact and fiction—are dissolved in the novel. Cahill states: "Writing is like entering the narrowest portals of a rich intuitive world; one cannot leave unmarked. One travels an imaginary geography where the boundaries separating the real and the created, the Orient and Europe, the past and the present are always

shifting” (282). In this sense, continuing to write offers a partial solution for some of the novel’s complex ideas and themes—but the act of writing falls short of shouldering the entire burden of these ideas, as is the case with the contemporary book industry the story gestures towards, which continues to grapple with questions of diversity and authenticity.

Towards the end of the novel, Mina suggests that “Writing can be an impartial space, where binaries and polarities are neutralised” (285–86). This seems to be the crux of narrative progression in *Daisy & Woolf*. The book follows a trajectory that moves from an opening where history is almost jarringly inserted into Daisy’s letters, to a conclusion where real and unreal are on the cusp of being indistinguishable. Similarly, it begins with a “coloured” (170) character in need of crafting into more than a fleeting cut-out—into someone who is not relegated to the position of unknown “other.” Most readers of *Mrs Dalloway* would surely feel ill at ease about the chances of Daisy living out a happy future with Peter Walsh. Fittingly, Cahill’s story fleshes Daisy out in unexpected and satisfying ways, though the resolution of Daisy’s situation is not without hardship. Nor is the resolution of Mina’s situation, especially when it comes to family. Daisy’s future with Rezia and the transition of Mina’s child from Sam to Sinéad are perhaps the most poignant neutralisations of binaries in the novel. Where gender identity and gender roles initially come across as steady and set, with women especially restricted through labels including “wife” and “mother,” the course of the novel complicates such identities in ways that strip away the possibility of binary thinking.

*Daisy & Woolf* is wide-ranging in its concerns. It questions much and encourages reflection that is warranted, whether it is proposed by way of a dialogue with *Mrs Dalloway* or not. Through the medium of Mina and Daisy, Cahill explores some of the most relevant and topical matters for contemporary storytelling, and indeed today’s world.

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#### WORKS CITED

Showalter, Elaine. Introduction. *Mrs Dalloway*, by Virginia Woolf, Penguin, 1992, pp. xi–xlv.  
Woolf, Virginia. *Mrs Dalloway*. Penguin, 1992.