Mrs Dalloway: Biography of a Novel by Mark Hussey (review)

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Ultimately, *Flann O'Brien and the European Avant-Garde* is an outstanding contribution to scholarship on both European modernism and Flann O'Brien. Harris's meticulous research and insightful arguments are poised to make a substantial and lasting intervention in the growing field of O'Nolan Studies, while also holding significant interest for modernist scholars studying literary movements and cultural politics.

***Mrs Dalloway: Biography of a Novel*. Mark Hussey. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2025. Pp. 232.**

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"A biography," Hermione Lee writes in *Biography: A Very Short Introduction*, "might tell the story of an animal or a thing rather than a person: there are biographies of cities, deities, and diseases, of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's spaniel Flush, of the Bayeux Tapestry, and of the River Thames."[1] The new "Biography of a Novel" series published by Manchester University Press reflects this creative broadening of the definition of biography. In the first volume published in this series, Mark Hussey traces the "life" of Virginia Woolf's 1925 novel *Mrs Dalloway*, all the way from its initial stirrings in the author's 1922 diary—as an intention to represent "the world seen by the sane & the insane side by side"—to its far-reaching ripples in popular culture today.[2] *Mrs Dalloway* is a fitting choice for such a long-range study, as it is itself a novel about aftermath: the lingering legacies of the First World War, the 1918–20 influenza epidemic, British colonial rule in India, and the formative experiences of young adulthood. Timed to coincide with the centenary of the original publication of Woolf's novel, Hussey's *Mrs Dalloway: Biography of a Novel* offers an encyclopaedic overview of a hundred years of literary interpretation and adaptation.

Hussey aims at a wider readership than literary scholars alone. His preface contains the disclaimer that this text is "not a work of interpretation or analysis," although it "stands upon the shoulders of the many insightful critics who have written about the novel since 1925" (xi). We should not, therefore, expect the eagle-eyed close reading that animates other recent works on Woolf's creative afterlives, such as Elizabeth Abel's *Odd Affinities: Virginia Woolf's Shadow Genealogies* (2024). Instead, as its subtitle suggests, Hussey's text has more in common with popular works of literary biography: it is a rich and engaging narrative that synthesizes a great deal of past scholarship alongside occasional nuggets of original insight. While it may be most satisfying for newer Woolf enthusiasts, seasoned Woolf scholars will find it worth a look, if only for the sheer breadth of sources upon which it draws.

Across its five sections, Hussey's book explores in roughly chronological order the different stages in the "life" of Woolf's novel. The first part, "Drafting *Mrs Dalloway*," offers a genetic history of the novel: how it grew out of Woolf's aspiration to bring the techniques of her short experimental fiction into the longer form of the novel, a project she began in 1922's *Jacob's Room*. In this opening chapter, Hussey's attempt to shoehorn in a potted biography of Woolf herself—"Virginia Woolf was born Adeline Virginia Stephen in 1882," and so on—leads him to retread some ground that will seem overly familiar to Woolf scholars (6). More engaging, however, are his moments of attention to archival materials, such as when he notes that the novel's famous opening line first appeared, somewhat inauspiciously, "in the middle of a handwritten manuscript," "two years after Woolf had first begun to plan the novel in 1922" (24). Part two, "*Mrs Dalloway*: Content and Influences," delves further into the novel's historical and literary contexts, which range from the machinations of the British empire to the high-society parties featured in the fiction of Marcel Proust. Both the first and second parts of Hussey's book make

effective use of contemporaneous newspapers as historical sources. It is fascinating to discover the articles Woolf might have read in *The Times* while drafting the novel, including pieces on shellshock by Francis Hopwood, Lord Southborough, who was seeking in 1922 to establish a Parliamentary Commission into the psychological aftereffects of war. Hussey uses such sources to reinforce "how topical *Mrs Dalloway* was when it was published" (60).

While Hussey is well known for offering indispensable critical tools for reading Woolf (such as his 1996 *Virginia Woolf A to Z*), this *Biography of a Novel* reveals a fuller picture of him as a Woolf devotee. He demonstrates his longtime love of *Mrs Dalloway* by including a photograph of his own well-worn 1972 copy, and he consistently defends Woolf against certain now-cliché criticisms. Regarding her reputation for snobbery, for example, he suggests that "in fact this was an aspect of her character that she investigated rigorously" (7). To prove this point, he addresses the controversy around *Mrs Dalloway*'s supposedly contemptuous portrayal of the working-class character Miss Kilman. Positing a new "possible reading of Miss Kilman, such as one might lead students through in a classroom," he argues that the protagonist Clarissa Dalloway's ambivalence toward Miss Kilman reflects the novel's core philosophy about the irreducible complexity of human beings (120). On the long history of comparisons between Woolf and James Joyce, Hussey disputes the perception of *Mrs Dalloway* as—in the words of critic Walter Allen—"a tiny *Ulysses*," arguing instead that it is "more apt" to think of these two modernist circadian novels as "in dialogue" than as "one echoing the other in pale imitation" (17).[3] Besides, Hussey concludes, "*Mrs Dalloway* is by far a more Proustian than Joycean novel" (71). He also parrots Woolf's own argument about what distinguishes her from her experimental peers: while both Joyce and Dorothy Richardson were concerned with the consciousness of a single individual, Woolf criticized their foci on what she called "the damned egotistical self" and sought instead to represent the inner lives of a broader slice of society.[4] By putting these tired debates to rest, Hussey makes a compelling defence of Woolf's extraordinary standing in the English literary canon.

The third and fourth parts of Hussey's text turn their attention to the reception history of *Mrs Dalloway*. "Publishing *Mrs Dalloway*" surveys a great number of early reviews of the novel—paying careful attention to differences in reception by English versus American audiences and by literary critics versus "common readers"—whereas "*Mrs Dalloway* Out in the World" demonstrates how the novel went on to find a place within classrooms, international literary markets, feminist literary criticism, and trauma studies. The final part of Hussey's study, "*Mrs Dalloway*'s Legacies," is concerned with adaptation, discussing the innumerable novels, plays, films, operas, and ballets that have been inspired by Woolf's novel. Hussey devotes several pages to Michael Cunningham's *The Hours* (1998), which he rightly deems "an inescapable chapter in the biography of *Mrs Dalloway*" (167). He cites a recent Picador edition that publishes Woolf's and Cunningham's novels within a single volume as evidence of how entwined they have become in the cultural consciousness. Hussey offers a balanced view of Cunningham's divisive novel (later adapted into a 2002 film and a 2022 opera), acknowledging Woolf scholars' concerns about how it entrenched a caricature of the author as a tortured artist while also celebrating the new readership it brought to Woolf's original. He admits that a similar survey of adaptations has already been attempted in Monica Latham's *A Poetics of Postmodernism and Neomodernism: Rewriting* Mrs Dalloway (2015), but he suggests that "by now a second volume may be warranted" (145). Indeed, Hussey identifies several creative successors to *Mrs Dalloway* that have been published during the last decade, including Asali Solomon's *The Days of Afrekete* (2021) and Deborah Levy's *August Blue* (2023).

Namedropping recent titles in contemporary fiction is just one of the ways in which Hussey's book consistently feels up-to-date. He also casually incorporates references to Goodreads.com reviews; an internet meme that riffs on *Mrs Dalloway*'s opening line; the "Mrs. Dalloway Mapping Project," which has produced interactive maps of the novel's London-based topography; and even Miley Cyrus's 2023 hit song "Flowers." A short coda underscores the new cultural

relevance *Mrs Dalloway* gained during the COVID-19 pandemic, due to the way the 1918–20 influenza epidemic haunts the novel, as highlighted by Elizabeth Outka's prescient study *Viral Modernism: The Influenza Pandemic and Interwar Literature* (2019). "For those re-reading *Mrs Dalloway* in 2020," Hussey suggests, "its sensations of invisible danger, the experiences of loss, of being cut off from other people—'here was one room, there another'—resonated profoundly" (179). Such reflections on the present day form the parts of Hussey's sweeping overview that feel the freshest. *Mrs Dalloway: Biography of a Novel* leaves us with the impression that, after echoing down a whole century, Woolf's great novel of aftermath is perhaps more resonant now than ever before.

Notes

1. Hermione Lee, *Biography: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2009), 6.

2. Virginia Woolf, entry for October 14, 1922, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf: Volume Two: 1920–1924*, ed. Anne Olivier Bell and Andrew McNeillie (Harvest, 1980), 207.

3. Walter Allen, *Tradition and the Dream: A Critical Survey of British and American Fiction from the 1920s to the Present Day* (Penguin, 1965), 41.

4. Woolf, entry for January 26, 1920, in *The Diary of Virginia Woolf: Volume Two*, 14.