

Devotion

Julia Oliver

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In *Devotion*, Jefferson Davis's youngest daughter Varina Anne ("Winnie") Davis writes in a private journal about the unsolicited public attention she receives in the aftermath of the civil war, "I was learning to mentally separate from my new persona and the misdirected devotion it attracted." Oliver's novel explores the implications of this kind of devotion for the identity of a woman who was in many ways defined by her historical moment. Born in 1864, when the war was nearly over, and educated in Europe in her adolescence, Winnie returns to America to find herself as the central symbol for the defeated South, Daughter of the Confederacy.

Winnie is at once a representative of a fleeting southern femininity (she is crowned queen of the men's society, the Krewe of Comus, at the exclusive New Orleans Mardi Gras ball) as well as a feminist New Woman who breaks off an engagement with a northern man she loves. Winnie writes in her journals "I began to be intellectually fascinated by the subjects of infidelity and promiscuity." The novel is told from a series of different perspectives, beginning with Winnie's own fictional diary entries dated the year of her death. In writing about the youngest daughter of the defeated leader of the Confederacy, Oliver offers a serious exploration of American and southern femininity at the end of the Nineteenth Century. The simmering resentments underlying the narratives of those closest to Winnie reveal the controversial nature of her Southern femininity. *Devotion* is Oliver's first foray into historical fiction. The Montgomery, Alabama, writer is also author of *Seventeen Times as High as the Moon*, *Music of the Falling Water*, and *Goodbye to the Buttermilk Sky*, which was selected for the Book-Of-the-Month-Club's Quality Paperback Series.

The novel opens with Winnie's July 25, 1898 journal entry that begins, "In the dream, the junction could be a mural or a mirage." The enigmatic first line suggests the way the novel will explore dreams and memory and the way they merge with the more exotic category of premonition. Oliver's use of premonition as a motivating force in Winnie's consciousness is allusive of the gothic and illustrates its importance to Southern American literature. The strangeness of identity in a world ravaged by war and decay, its big houses haunted by the memories of the past are themes suggestive of Poe and Faulkner.

The intentional blurring of literature and history has important implications for the claims made on behalf of Winnie Davis and her closest family and friends, and it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between literary trope and historical identity. A well-researched novel, Oliver's *Devotion* offers a history that is rarely told despite the immense fascination with Civil War history and suggests a compelling version of the Davis family—surprisingly progressive and intellectually well-connected.

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