

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Jeanette Winterson

Jonathan Noakes and
Margaret Reynolds

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About the Book

In *Vintage Living Texts*, teachers and students will find the essential guide to the works of Jeanette Winterson. *Vintage Living Texts* is unique in that it offers an in-depth interview with Jeanette Winterson, relating specifically to the texts under discussion. This guide deals with Winterson's themes, genre and narrative technique, and a close reading of the texts will provide a rich source of ideas for intelligent and inventive ways of approaching the novels.

About the Author

Jonathan Noakes has taught English in secondary schools in Britain and Australia for fifteen years. For six years he ran A-level English studies at Eton College where he is a house-master.

Margaret Reynolds is Reader in English at Queen Mary, University of London, and the presenter of BBC Radio 4's *Adventures in Poetry*. Her publications include *The Sappho Companion* and (with Angela Leighton) *Victorian Women Poets*.

Also available in Vintage Living Texts

Martin Amis

Margaret Atwood

Louis de Bernières

Sebastian Faulks

Ian McEwan

Toni Morrison

Salman Rushdie

Vintage Living Texts

Jeanette Winterson

The Essential Guide to Contemporary Literature

Series Editors

Jonathan Noakes and Margaret Reynolds

Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit

The Passion

Sexing the Cherry

The PowerBook



V I N T A G E

VINTAGE LIVING TEXTS

Preface

About this series

VINTAGE LIVING TEXTS: The Essential Guide to Contemporary Literature is a new concept in reading guides. Our aim is to provide readers of all kinds with an intelligent and accessible introduction to key works of contemporary literature. Each guide suggests techniques for reading important contemporary novels, and offers a variety of back-up materials that will give you ways into the text – without ever telling you what to think.

Content

All the books reproduce an extensive interview with the author, conducted exclusively for this series. This is not to say that we believe that the author's word is law. Of course it isn't. Once his or her book has gone out into the world he or she becomes simply yet another – if singularly competent – reader. This series recognises that an author's contribution may be valuable, and intriguing, but it puts the reader in control.

Every title in the series is author-focused and covers at least three of their novels, along with relevant biographical, bibliographical, contextual and comparative material.

How to use this series

In the reading activities that make up the core of each book you will see that you are asked to do two things. One comes from the text; that is, we suggest what you should focus on,

whether it's a theme, the language or the narrative method. The other concentrates on your own response. We want you to think about how you are reading and what skills you are bringing to bear in doing that reading. So this part is very much about you, the reader.

The point is that there are many ways of responding to a text. You could concentrate on the methods you might use to compare this text with others. In that case, look for the sections headed 'Compare'. Or you might want to do something more individual, and analyse how you are reacting to a text and what it means to you, in which case, pick out the approaches labelled 'Imagine' or 'Ask Yourself'.

Of course, it may well be that you are reading these texts for an examination. In that case you will have to go for the more traditional methods of literary criticism and look for the responses that tell you to 'Discuss' or 'Analyse'. Whichever level you (or your students) are at, you will find that there is something here for everyone. However, we're not suggesting that you stick solely to the approaches we offer, or that you tackle all of the exercises laid out here. Choose whatever most interests you, or whatever best suits your purposes.

Who are these books for?

Students will find that these guides are like a good teacher. They introduce the life and work of the author, set each novel in its context, explain key ideas and literary critical terms as they arise, suggest comparative exercises in a number of media, and ask focused questions to encourage a well-informed, analytical approach to reading the novels in a way that is rigorous, but still entertaining.

Teachers will find in this series a rich source of ideas for teaching contemporary novels and their contexts, particularly at AS, A and undergraduate levels. The exercises on each text have been tailored to meet the various assessment objectives laid down in the subject

criteria for GCE AS and GCE A Level English Literature, and are explained in such a way that they can easily be selected and fitted into a lesson plan. Given the diversity of ways in which the awarding bodies have devised their specifications to meet these assessment objectives, a wide range of exercises is offered. We've had fun devising the plans, and we hope they'll be fun for you when you come to teach and learn with them.

And if you are neither a teacher nor a student of contemporary literature, but someone reading for your own pleasure? Well, if you've ever wanted someone to introduce you to a novelist's work in a way that will let you trust your own judgement and read more confidently, then this guide is also for you.

Whoever you are, we hope that you will enjoy using these books and that they will send you back to the novels to find new pleasures.

All page references in this text refer to the Vintage editions.

Jeanette Winterson

Introduction

JEANETTE WINTERSON IS not an acquired taste. If you like her work, you love it passionately, without reserve. Every paragraph is a poem, every phrase is a jewel. Her words will be talismans and guides, your copies of her books will be battered and worn, but the word-hoard you cherish will be burnished and pure. This is what she says in *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*:

I want someone who is fierce and will love me until death and know that love is as strong as death, and be on my side for ever and ever. I want someone who will destroy and be destroyed by me.

If you don't like her work, you hate it. But there aren't any 'don't knows'. Even the people who've never read a line of her work have an opinion on Jeanette Winterson.

If you are part of the love brigade, and an admirer of Winterson's work, then you're in extremely good company. Madonna and Julia Roberts are fans; her books carry fulsome quotes from eminent writers and critics like Muriel Spark, Gore Vidal, John Bayley and Edmund White; she has won prizes in Britain, Europe and the United States, and her work has been translated into twenty-two languages. Here she is again, in *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*:

Romantic love has been diluted into paperback form and sold thousands and millions of copies. Somewhere it is still in the original, written on tablets of stone. I would cross seas and suffer sunstroke and give away all I have, but not for a man.

It's been like that from the start. When Winterson's first novel, *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, was published by Pandora in 1985 there was no hardback, and the print run was small. But readers loved it, told their friends about it, and it was those readers who turned it into a phenomenon, creating a huge audience who in turn established her success. The book itself is like no other, right from its opening line: 'Like most people I lived for a long time with my mother and father.' It's a deceptive beginning because it looks innocent enough until you discover – as you read the book – that the heroine, archly called 'Jeanette', is by no means 'like most people' and that these aren't her 'mother and father' either. Add to that the quirky humour, the extreme swervings back and forth between a banal everyday and a surreal vision, the inset fairy stories that increasingly take over the 'real' story, and the conviction of a prose that is poetic in its intensity, and you see why *Oranges* is the only fruit. As she says in *The Passion*: 'I'm telling you stories. Trust me.'

What is it about Winterson's work that makes it so distinctive? There are her themes for a start, which are always the same, though handled differently in her various books: boundaries, desire, love, loss. When you come to the borders of common sense, do you cross over? In *Oranges* (1985) and *The Passion* (1987) these are a young person's questions asked – and answered – with bravado and daring. *Written on the Body* (1992) and *Art & Lies* (1994) are not so swaggering, *Gut Symmetries* (1997) and *The PowerBook* (2000) are more cautious still, but the gusto and the wit and the fierce commitment are still the same. And the challenge remains the same. In *The Passion* she says: 'What you risk reveals what you value.'

But large and intense though these themes are, it's Winterson's literary method that makes her work so memorable. She uses a concrete imagery: if there is an adjective or adverb, it matches the noun or verb exactly; if

there is a metaphor, it is extended on its own terms. Here is an example. Check out the idea of the traveller and the foreigner and the voyage and the way it's followed through. This is from *The Passion*:

Travellers at least have a choice. Those who set sail know that things will not be the same as at home. Explorers are prepared. But for us, who travel along the blood vessels, who come to the cities of the interior by chance, there is no preparation. We who were fluent find life is a foreign language.

This technique makes for the power of the 'treasure phrase'. It's in all Winterson's books, and it's in her titles too. Look at how Winterson's titles mean much more than they say, so that they have become part of the language. How often have you heard some variation on 'Oranges are not the only fruit' used as a catchphrase? And who else has given us derivative headlines like 'Sexing the Shopping Trolley' or 'Sexing the City'? Then rhythm and assonance and association come in. In *The PowerBook* there is a rewriting of a story taken from Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*, and there's also a story about the Everest explorer George Mallory who was lost on the mountain in the 1920s and whose body was discovered there in 1999. It's only their names that make this delicate and yet intricate connection, but it works, as we too start to make connections, follow threads.

Words are Winterson's tools and she is in love with words, trusts words, believes in words. But even if you have years of acquaintance with her fictions, there is still an essence of mystery. If you look at the interview with her, you will see that we pressed her on the meaning of a gnomic saying from *The Passion*, 'What you risk reveals what you value.' So what does it mean, we asked? In the end she says, quoting T. S. Eliot's famous reply to a reader who asked what the opening line of one his poems 'meant', 'It means, "Lady, three white leopards sat under a juniper-tree".' Point taken.

It means, of course, whatever any intelligent reader wants it to mean. And readers do want it to mean something inspiring and true, because it sounds so wonderful and Winterson is a sound artist. What, then, can we make of her use of rhythm? Well, count up the syllables in some of Winterson's best-known lines and you'll find that they come out in eights. Poetry again, albeit by another name.

- I'm telling you stories. Trust me.
- The pineapple arrived today.
- Wherever love is, I want to be. I will follow it as surely as the land-locked salmon finds the sea.
- Why is the measure of love loss?

Then there are her literary structures. Winterson almost always uses the first person, which makes her stories sound immediate and directly personal, as if this is a someone confiding in you. And yet, that is set against a shape which is multiple, that has more than one strand. In *The Passion* and in *Sexing the Cherry* (1989) that structure is obvious because each book has two first-person narrators: Henri and Villanelle; the Dog Woman and Jordan. But in two very different fictions – *Oranges* and *The PowerBook* – she makes the same shape by setting a 'real' story against a variety of other stories: the Jeanette strand and the inset fairy tales in *Oranges*; the Ali-with-married-redhead story and the inset rewritings in *The PowerBook*. In *Art & Lies* and in *Gut Symmetries* there are three first-person narrators. And even in *Written on the Body* – which might seem the simplest in structural terms – there is the voice of the unnamed and ungendered narrator set against the central poetic reverie on Louise and the body. The first line links them both: 'Why is the measure of love loss?'

Winterson likes to have more than one thing on the go. Measurement, comparison, analogy – these are her tools. That is why so many of her works are layered and work

intertextually, referring constantly to other literary sources: the Bible, for instance, in *Oranges*; the romance quest in *Written on the Body*; scientific discourse in *Gut Symmetries*. Winterson describes herself using this technique as a 'grave-robber'.

But there is one source from which she steals that is very alive – herself. As you read through Winterson's work, you will see that she likes to quote her own texts. She knows how words can work like a talisman, but these icons flicker and change in their different settings. 'Time is a great deadener', said in *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, is a reversal of a trite cliché. When she says 'Time is a great healer' in *Written on the Body*, it's already a quotation – but it's still being criticised as a cliché. *The PowerBook* is full of such returns and reinventions. Winterson's texts create their own image and their own mask. Here she is (or is she?) in the opening line of *The PowerBook*: 'To avoid discovery I stay on the run. To discover things for myself I stay on the run.'

Winterson says that with *The PowerBook* she has come to the end of a cycle. In some ways she has also gone back to the beginning, for the inset stories appear here, as they appeared in *Oranges*, and the story of the Muck House could be read as a rewriting of *Oranges*. Soon there will be a new book, but already Winterson has created a universe that is her own. A new world beckons. It may have different skies, different horizons, different stars, but one thing is sure. Nothing dazzles like the winter sun.

'I don't know if this is a happy ending but here we are let loose in open fields.'

Interview with Jeanette Winterson

Windrush: 14 September 2002

MR: HAVE YOU always written? When did you first start writing and what were you writing?

JW: I think I started writing before I could read because I wanted to write sermons, because I was driven by a need to preach to people and convert them which possibly I still am, except that now I do it for art's sake, and then I did it for God's sake. Being brought up by Pentecostal Evangelists meant that there was tremendous drive to go out there and make a difference, and I think that literature does make a difference. I think that that's its *purpose* - to open up spaces in a closed world - and for me, it's a natural progression which seems bizarre perhaps - from those days of preaching the Word to these days of trying to make people see things imaginatively, transformatively.

MR: So if you were writing before you were reading, do you still write in order to read the world?

JW: Yes. I write so that I'll have something to read, but I also write so that I can explain the world to myself, because writing becomes a third person - it becomes something which is separate from yourself. It's no longer you, although it's generated by you, and when it returns to you it explains things. It explains you to yourself and it explains the world. Books are always cleverer than their authors. They always contain more than the writer intended to put into them - at least they *should* - otherwise they become rather formulaic.