

BIOGRAPHY

Novelist Jeanette Winterson was born in Manchester, England in 1959. She was adopted and brought up in Accrington, Lancashire, in the north of England. Her strict Pentecostal Evangelist upbringing provides the background to her acclaimed first novel, ***Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit***, published in 1985. She graduated from St Catherine's College, Oxford, and moved to London where she worked as an assistant editor at Pandora Press. She is a regular contributor of reviews and articles to many newspapers and journals and has a regular column published in *The Guardian*.



One of the most original voices in British fiction to emerge during the 1980s, Jeanette Winterson was named as one of the 20 'Best of Young British Writers' in a promotion run jointly between the literary magazine *Granta* and the Book Marketing Council

Her novels include *Boating for Beginners* (1985), published shortly after *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* and described by the author as 'a comic book with pictures'; *The Passion* (1987), twin narratives following the adventures of the web-footed daughter of a Venetian gondolier and Napoleon's chicken chef; *Sexing the Cherry* (1989), an invented world set during the English Civil War featuring the fabulous 'Dog Woman' and the orphan she raises; and three books exploring triangular relationships, gender and formal experimentation: *Written on the Body* (1992), *Art and Lies* (1994) and *Gut Symmetries* (1997). She adapted her novel, *The PowerBook* (2000), for the National Theatre in 2002. *Lighthousekeeping* (2004), centres on the orphaned heroine Silver, taken in by the keeper of the Cape Wrath lighthouse, Mr Pew, whose stories of love and loss, passion and longing, are interwoven in the narrative.

Jeanette Winterson adapted *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* for BBC television in 1990, and also wrote *Great Moments in Aviation*, a television screenplay directed by Beeban Kidron for BBC2 in 1994. Her radio drama includes the play *Text Message*, broadcast by BBC Radio in November 2001. She is the author of a collection of short stories, *The World and Other Places* (1998), and a book of essays about art and culture, *Art Objects*, published in 1995. In 2000, she also edited a series of new editions of novels by Virginia Woolf.

Her latest novel is *The Battle of the Sun* (2009), a children's book which follows two other books for children, *The King of Capri* (2003) and *Tanglewreck* (2006). She also recently edited *Midsummer Nights* (2009), a collection of stories by contemporary writers inspired by opera, to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the Glyndebourne Festival of Opera; and wrote the children's thriller, *Ingenious*, for BBC Television.

In 2009, *The Lion, The Unicorn and Me* was published - a children's story for Christmas.

Jeanette Winterson lives in Gloucestershire and London. In 2006, she was awarded an OBE.

GENRES (IN ALPHABETICAL ORDER)

Children, Drama, Essays, Fiction, Non-fiction, Radio drama, Screenplay, Short stories

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Boating for Beginners Pandora, 1985
Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit Pandora, 1985
Fit for the Future Pandora, 1986
The Passion Cape, 1987
Sexing the Cherry Cape, 1989
Written on the Body Cape, 1992
Art and Lies Cape, 1994
Art Objects Cape, 1995
Gut Symmetries Granta, 1997
The World and Other Places Cape, 1998
The PowerBook Cape, 2000
Mrs Dalloway/Virginia Woolf (series editor with Margaret Reynolds) Vintage, 2000
Night and Day/Virginia Woolf (series editor with Margaret Reynolds) Vintage, 2000
Orlando/Virginia Woolf (series editor with Margaret Reynolds) Vintage, 2000
To the Lighthouse/Virginia Woolf (series editor with Margaret Reynolds) Vintage, 2000
The Voyage Out/Virginia Woolf (series editor with Margaret Reynolds) Vintage, 2000
The Waves/Virginia Woolf (series editor with Margaret Reynolds) Vintage, 2000
The Years/Virginia Woolf (series editor with Margaret Reynolds) Vintage, 2000
Jacob's Room/Virginia Woolf (series editor with Margaret Reynolds) Vintage, 2000
Between the Acts/Virginia Woolf (series editor with Margaret Reynolds) Vintage, 2000
The King of Capri Bloomsbury, 2003
Lighthousekeeping Fourth Estate, 2004
Tanglewreck Bloomsbury, 2006
The Stone Gods Hamish Hamilton, 2007
Weight (Canongate Myth Series) Canongate, 2007
Midsummer Nights (editor) Quercus, 2009
The Battle of the Sun Bloomsbury, 2009
The Lion, The Unicorn and Me (with Rosalind MacCurrach) Scholastic, 2009

PRIZES AND AWARDS

1984 **Whitbread First Novel Award** *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*
 1987 **Mail on Sunday/John Llewellyn Rhys Prize** *The Passion*
 1989 **E. M. Forster Award**
 1990 **BAFTA (Best Drama Series/Serial)** *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*
 1990 **Prix d'argent Best Script (France)** *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*
 1999 **International Fiction Prize for Experimental Literature (Italy)**
 2005 **Commonwealth Writers Prize (Eurasia Region, Best Book)** (shortlist)
Lighthousekeeping
 2006 **OBE**

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

In the introduction to *Weight* (2007), her re-telling of the Greek myth of Atlas holding up the world, Jeanette Winterson rightly calls herself a writer 'who believes in the power of storytelling'. She goes on to characterize the book as 'a personal story broken against the

bigger story of the myth'. Making free with its sources (from Robert Graves), the freewheeling narrative is typical of her work in entertaining us with episodes of action, arguments, comedy, pathos and explicit sensuality. We encounter rebellious Titan Atlas and his sly friend Hercules, Zeus and his 'drop dead gorgeous' wife Hera; even, at the end, as Atlas' special friend, Russian space dog Laika ('Woof!'). The 'personal story' is hinted at in asides: 'I left my hometown, left my parents, left my life'. 'My girlfriend says I have an Atlas complex'. But – as her androgynous narrators always insist – 'There's no such thing as autobiography. There's only art and lies'.

Winterson has come a long way since the success of her first novel, *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (1985). She is one of Britain's best-known writers and controversialists, often expressing views of strong conviction on sexual or global politics in interviews, newspapers, and in blogs on her website: see www.jeanettewinterson.com. For all the elaborate development of her transgressive art, its origins can surely be traced back to this relatively straightforward debut novel. The book draws upon her personal history as the adopted child of Pentecostal Church missionaries, but also playfully on the language and structure of the Bible itself. Telling a tragic-comic tale of young Jess's first love and losses – of her family and faith – her growing awareness of sexual difference stimulates the action. There are some memorable characters, notably Jess's evangelist mother, kindly Elsie, and Pastor Finch who attempts an exorcism of the girl's demons. The 'realism', however, is ironically interwoven with Biblical episodes, fables, and Arthurian romance. Religious language, sexual desire, the quest motif: all of these are prominent, within various guises, throughout Winterson's subsequent works.

'I'm telling you stories. Trust me'. This often repeated phrase links together episodes in *The Passion* (1987), which incorporates elements of feminist fairytale associated with Angela Carter and Marina Warner. Among her best novels, it tells of two cross-dressing characters coming together only to eventually lose each other. Henri is Napoleon's cook during the disastrous Russian campaign, while Villanelle is the web-footed daughter of a Venetian boatman. Both recount their deprivations, disappointments in love and bawdy episodes, before meeting on the retreat from Russia. Villanelle explains that she has a task for Henri when he returns to France, as she doesn't have a heart: 'My lover still has it. I left it there. I want you to help me get it back'. He finds her heart, however, in her native Venice, where their love-and-loss story takes many strange turnings.

Henri observes of Villanelle: 'I think about her body a lot; not possessing it but watching it twist in sleep'. This anticipates the subject of *Written On the Body* (1992), though its narrator does indeed want to possess the beloved's body, while its poetically rhapsodic manner marks a definite evolution of style. Setting out to answer the opening rhetorical question: 'Why is the measure of love loss?', it tells of adulterous passion with beautiful love-object Louise, who in the midst of a lesbian affair is sent away by her husband, and is then diagnosed with leukaemia. In recalling her, the narrator also summons up the force of infatuation: 'I didn't only want Louise's flesh, I wanted her bones, her blood, her tissues, the sinews that bound her together. I would have held her to me though time had stripped away the tones and textures of her skin. I could have held her for a thousand years until the skeleton itself rubbed away to dust'. These intimations of mortality become infused into an account of an ultimately elusive

love. Again, the structure of the book is innovative, considering Louise first as a personality and then as 'The Skin', 'The Skeleton', 'The Cells, Tissues, Systems and Cavities of the Body'. *The. Powerbook* (2000), later adapted by the author for the National Theatre, uses the terminology of Windows software to organize its open-ended narrative, being set in London, Paris, Capri and cyberspace. Alix is its computer age Scheherazade, endlessly telling fantastic tales by email to keep a potential new lover intrigued: 'I can change the story. I am the story'. But despite its technological gloss, familiar Biblical echoes are often heard: 'There is no love that does not pierce the hands and feet'. And 'the only way to the Promised Land is through the Wilderness'. *Lighthousekeeping* (2004) is another kind of experiment. This mixes historical and literary sources, her characters with pre-existing ones such as R.L. Stevenson's Blind Pew, 'an old man with a bag of stories under his arm'. The orphaned Silver ('I was born part precious metal part pirate') invites Pew to 'tell me the story'. There are several layers of stories, some involving Victorian-era lighthouse keeper Babel Dark. The latter's dog – dogs are recurring minor characters in her books – is called Tristan. This ironically points up the love theme, invoking Tristan and Isolde: 'Isolde. The world became a word'. Winterson is indeed an opera lover. She recently edited *Midsummer Nights* (2009), a volume celebrating Glyndebourne's 75th anniversary, which includes her Puccini-based story 'Goldrush Girl'. A section of *Lighthousekeeping* is called 'New Planet'. This suggests some continuity with her most recent novel, *The Stone Gods* (2007), because its futuristic scenario is exactly that – the discovery and attempted colonization of 'Planet Blue'. Featuring Billie Crusoe, an increasingly harassed employee of 'Enhancement Services', and beautiful Robo sapiens Spike, they are attracted to each other despite the death penalty for inter-species sex. The ecological fable, a passionate lament for a world under threat of climate change, also contains a variant on her persistent love-and-loss theme. It is funny – in the snappy dialogues with 'gorgeous' party girls and exotic mutants in Wreck City – and poignant as Billie and Spike near the end of their journey together. It too weaves parallel narratives. One is a diary of Captain Cook's 1774 exploration of Easter Island. Another strand tells an adoption story, this time focusing on the birth mother: 'We had twenty-eight days together and then I was gone'. Birth is 'a shipwreck', and it significantly adds: 'banishment became its narrative equivalent, a story I could tell'. Whether considered as perhaps our most poetic novelist, or as a passionate evangelist, Jeanette Winterson constantly challenges conventional thinking and remains a wonderfully inventive storyteller.

Dr Jules Smith, 2009

FURTHER READING ON THIS SITE

Edinburgh Bookcase

The British Council Literature Department and British Council Scotland showcase contemporary writers at the Edinburgh International Book Festival every two years, in partnership with the Scottish Arts Council. The Bookcase... [more...](#) (09/06/2004)

CONTACT INFORMATION

Publisher (*General enquiries*)

Jonathan Cape Ltd

Agent

William Morris Agency (Suzanne Gluck)

Random House UK Ltd
20 Vauxhall Bridge Road
London SW1V 2SA
England
Tel: +44 (0)20 7840 8579
Fax: +44 (0)20 7932 0077
<http://www.randomhouse.co.uk/>

1325 Avenue of the Americas
New York NY 10019
USA
Tel: +1 212-586-5100
E-mail: sg@wma.com

<http://www.contemporarywriters.com/authors/?p=auth100>