

There is warmth there

The difficult word



Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal is English novelist Jeanette Winterson's last effort. A memoir where the most crucial events of her life are given to the reader in a stream of personal emotions. From the early years of an adopted child to her never-ending and hopeful search for a

mother.

The novel is the spiritual sequel to *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (1985), the apparently autobiographical novel of her first success. Being only 25, at that time Jeanette was not yet able to clearly express her difficult emotional growth in full awareness as she manages to in her present memoir.

The title appeals to the reader directly, wondering whether it is better to pursue happiness or to be judged normal. What's more the writer addresses her novel to what she calls her three mothers: her adoptive mother, Mrs. Winterson, a "literary" one, Ruth Rendell and her biological young mother, Ann S.

The core of the matter is not only her eternal search for a mother, one that can give her love, the love she was never given and that she eventually learned to offer and receive.

To the naive and reader, the novel could sound disjointed every chapter developing on its own, but from a deeper insight you can recognize the thread crossing the whole text meanwhile the writer recalls the episodes of her days.

As Winterson herself admits, identity process formation for her largely depended on her birth place. Manchester thus becoming a pivotal element in narration.

19th century Manchester, an industrial town, showing all the contradictions brought forth by the Industrial Revolution with a huge divide between rich and poor people and the oppressive condition of work leading to labourers' rebellion to an unfair system, one recalling L. Zingales' consideration about the Italian crises. The first Trade Union movements being the natural result of a growing process of awareness of a new social class asking for representation. Marx and Engels wrote their essays right from the observation of Manchester's economic and social condition. And Jeanette seems to have learnt much from the working

class fight for recognition: what she really wants is to assert her identity vigorously, disregarding the old fashioned stereotypes of her mother's culture. Mrs. Winterson's shows a bossy and patronizing attitude along all the story and rebellion together with escape was Jeanette only way out. But what is interesting is that rebellion did not end up in itself. It fostered awareness and the ability to reduce the contrast with an adoptive mother, one who was herself a victim. Like the workers fighting for their rights succeeded in getting Unionism recognized, Jeanette admitted the fight was worth: the difficult contrast with her mother fostered her imagination, one that allowed her a rebirth and the willingness to accept her mother's nature and understand that life can be re-invented.

In her latest novel, Jeanette Winterson does not only tell of her life, she does much more. She tries to involve the reader inside her dilemmas, sharing her fears as well as her successes. Indeed, in line with the promise of the title, the novelist desperately fights for and defends the never-ending pursuit for happiness, the only relevant effort one can make in life.

"Happy times are great, but happy times pass – they have to – because time passes. The pursuit of happiness is more elusive; it is life-long and it is not goal centred. [...] The pursuit isn't all or nothing – it's all AND nothing" (chapter 2)

Having a bigot mother, God took an important part of her life, too; however, differently from her mother who married with the idea of a punishing God, in her early childhood Jeanette had an opposite view: God was love.

"I loved God of course, in the early days, and God loved me. [...] God is forgiveness – or so that particular story goes, but in our house God was Old Testament and there was no forgiveness without a great deal of sacrifice" (Chapter 1)

J. Winterson shows all her skill in portraying character: Mrs. Winterson's psychology unveils all her obsessive pathologies: her habit of stuffing the house with Biblical quotations, the refusal to go to bed with her husband, the repulsion towards sexual desires and earthly life. Her comical and humoristic descriptions is probably one of the most catchy aspects, one that allows the readers to cope with all the suffering pervading narration.

"She was a flamboyant depressive; a woman who kept a revolver in the duster drawer, and the bullets in a tin of Pledge. A woman who stayed all night baking cakes to avoid sleeping in the same bed as my father" (chapter 1)

Books occupy an important part in Jeanette Winterson's life. Since a child, when her mother closed her in the coal hole, she made up stories. And her mother's prohibition to read books only increased her desire to discover them. And, when

Mrs Winterson caught her in the act, she burnt all the books. Reading is the key to get out of an unpleasant world; books are a home, where you never feel cold, an idea every reader can make his own and share with the novelist.

"The books had gone, but they were objects; what they held could not be so easily destroyed. What they held was already inside me, and together we would get away. [...] Books for me, are a home.

Books don't make a home – they are one, in the sense that just as you do with a door, you open a book and you go inside. [...] There is warmth there too – a hearth" (Chapter 4/5)

The search for a mother, which covers almost the second half of the book, ends up well, with Jeanette Winterson and her mother's meeting in Manchester. Yet, the wound never gets healed, no matter how hard you try:

"All my life I have worked from the wound. To heal it would mean an end to one identity – the defining identity. But the healed wound is not the disappeared wound; there will always be a scar. I will always be recognisable by my scar" (chapter 15)

The writer takes the reader directly inside her medley of emotions, but she eventually leaves them to write their own story, one which must be based on love, the point of starting and ending.

"Love. The difficult word. Where everything starts, where we always return. Love. Love's lack. The possibility of love. I have no idea what happens next" (coda)

To Jeanette Winterson, Love is a pure feeling, not necessary linked to sexual attraction, though she has also experienced that; it is more a message of hope and desire to live, a longing for self-realization.

It is a universal message, which invites taking our life in our hands. To write our story, exactly what she has done.