

1.26.2012

Jeanette Winterson On Fiction and Fact



"I learned really early on that if you can read yourself as a fiction, as well as a fact, then you really can expand the self."

UPDATE: If you prefer to hear Winterson in conversation*, you can listen to a podcast of the cozy interview she did for *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?* with Eleanor Wachtel for CBC's Writers & Co. The hour-long interview includes a compassionate discussion of Mrs. Winterson (who committed the literary sin of recasting the ending of *Jane Eyre* when she read it to little Jeanette) as well as the story of how Accrington's Henrietta Alger talked her way into Oxford. At Minute 46, Wachtel elicits Winterson's two-track writing process for the memoir, and then the conversation opens into high-stakes emotional territory (this section previews the memoir's darkest and most miraculous scene). Links: The online listening page for the Writers & Co. Winterson interview is [here](#). The link to download the podcast of the Writers & Co Winterson interview from iTunes is [here](#) (the iTunes link may expire).

*Even if you prefer conversation, please sample the 2010 Edinburgh International Book Festival podcast reviewed below to hear Winterson read a classic excerpt from *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (just past Minute 11).

Tent Talk

Jeanette Winterson's memoir *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?* will be published in the U.S. in March 2012. Its split halves comprise a hindsight analysis of the writer's childhood under the dominion of a larger-than-life Pentecostal evangelical mother and an as-it-was-lived account of her midlife search for her biological mother. (Winterson skips over 25 years of her somewhat salacious salad days with the tease, "Maybe later...".) I can't reveal any more about *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?* before my review appears in Shelf Awareness Pro [now available!], but I can tell you that if you want a stealth preview that

combines highlights from Winterson's autobiographical novel *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* with nonfiction material from her life, you can listen to this lively hour-long podcast of Winterson working a tent full of literary pilgrims at the 2010 Edinburgh International Book Festival. Winterson's oratorical training as a half-pint proselytizer is in full evidence, as is her philosophical sense of humor.

The Heathen Next Door

Winterson begins her talk with the opening pages of *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* ("My father liked to watch the wrestling, my mother liked to wrestle"), followed by an account of the real-life Mrs. Winterson's habit of keeping a revolver in the duster drawer (just one example of how Winterson's childhood truth is more frightening than her childhood fiction). Just past Minute 11 Winterson swoops from conversational chumminess about the state of the memoir into declaiming, "**The Heathen were a daily household preoccupation.**" Winterson's abrupt transition and her penetrating projection are enough to make even the most secular soul sense a Presence. Maybe the suddenness was created by podcast post-editing, but I doubt it, and regardless, it's a thrilling piece of audio brought on by voice and enhanced by Winterson's Lancashire accent. The Heathen on Sunday excerpt is hilarious and wonderfully specific in its details, and I won't spoil it for you if you've never read *Oranges*, except to defy you not to laugh out loud when Winterson reads, "While my mother was covering up the television, Mrs White was slithering up and down the skirting board," or not to cringe-laugh at the spotty backyard crescendo. (Any writer looking for craft tips would do well to study Winterson's use of verbs and short segments of dialogue.)

"The trouble with a book"

There are many similarities between the personal anecdotes Winterson tells in this Edinburgh International Book Festival podcast and what she wrote in *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?* (Having read the memoir after hearing the podcast, I can reassure you that there's plenty in the book that doesn't get mentioned in the podcast, particularly the second half about her search for the truth about her birth mother.) Some of the nonfiction highlights from the talk: Winterson's early relationship with Bible and the text ("**I was fed with words and shod with them**"--Minute 23); Mrs. Winterson's treatment of non-mystery novels as the forbidden fruit and young Jeanette's paperback concealment method (Minute 25); teenage Winterson's T.S. Eliot epiphany on the steps of the Accrington Public Library (Minute 30); and the real-life conversation that generated the title quotation, *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?* (Minute 34). What's not in any book, or in any other podcast I've ever listened to: a vocal imitation of a geysering varicose vein (Minute 39).

Maternal Questions

During the Q & A portion of the talk an audience member asks Winterson what she would say to Mrs. Winterson (now deceased) if she were sitting in a chair "right there" (Minute 47). Jeanette Winterson makes a little joke, and then answers seriously: "I'd say, 'Why aren't you proud of me?'" She quickly backfills the hush of poignance that follows by adding, "Sad, isn't

it? But, I might also say, 'Everything is forgiven.'" It's not just festival tent talk--Winterson's portrayal of her adoptive mother in *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?* is shockingly forgiving, and something to be proud of.

Disclosure: I bought my own copy of *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* in London many pears ago, but I received a free advance proof of *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?* to review from Grove Press via Shelf Awareness.

Podcast Series Note: The Edinburgh International Book Festival podcast is worth sampling, and offers an eclectic selection of writers. I commend them for not retiring their content as some other podcasts do. It's all up on iTunes for downloading portability, and it's all free.

From <http://www.litagogo.com/>