

Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?

At this time of year, as the faces of comedians who have written, or at least read, their autobiographies throng the book tables, you could be forgiven for making a rapid U-turn to the fiction department. You may not want to hear about any more miserable childhoods. Or any more journeys from tragedy to triumph.

How welcome then are memoirs which come with no moral at all, perhaps because their authors are still staring wildly at a life that has exploded in fragments around them and are attempting to extract a meaning. All of these memoirs could quite accurately be subtitled 'Look Back In Anguish'. But that is certainly not a criticism.

Jeanette Winterson's memoir ***Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?*** (Jonathan Cape 230pp £14.99) is particularly unusual, given that it covers the same ground that she fictionalised so brilliantly in her autobiographical novel, *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*: her upbringing in Accrington as the adopted child of working-class evangelical Christians, the discovery of her lesbianism and, ultimately, her triumphant escape to Oxford. But now, twenty-six years later, she has produced what she calls 'the story's silent twin'. It is a memoir full of things that were too painful to say in fiction, most of them dwelling on the cruelty of her adoptive mother, Mrs Winterson, and on the author's own self-destructive tendencies, manifested in both her relationships and her attempted suicide.

Grim though all this is, Winterson is first and foremost a dazzling, poetic writer; and however traumatic her predicament, she can't ignore its comic aspect. There is a Dickensian quality to the monstrous Mrs Winterson, with her stock of doom-laden mottos and her apocalyptic way with words. 'Why be happy when you could be normal?' was her objection when the writer announced she was gay. When Jeanette returned to Accrington to introduce her new lover, who was not only female but black, the girl was presented with a blanket knitted by Mrs Winterson because 'they feel the cold'. Treacherous though it seems, I could take more of Mrs Winterson. 'She was her own black hole that pulled in all the light,' says the author. She ordered *Murder in the Cathedral* from the library 'because she thought it was something nasty about the Pope'.

Inevitably, given Winterson is now in a relationship with the psychotherapist Susie Orbach, bits of therapy-speak emerge, but not the awful Californian kind. Therapy, Winterson says, 'is like bomb disposal, but you are the bomb'. It has helped her reach some sort of explanation. Ultimately everything, from her aggression and occasional violence to the moment in February 2008 when she tried to gas herself in the garage, comes back to the yearning for the birth mother she lost. 'It all seems so obvious now - the Wintersonic obsessions of love, loss and longing. It is my mother. It is my mother. It is my mother.'

Undoubtedly, though, Winterson's most enduring love affair is with literature, which she writes about with tender metaphors of extreme beauty. The *Morte d'Arthur* stories, which she read as a child, 'docked into me like the missing molecule of a chemical compound'. And while life denied her a loving mother, circumstance gifted her Mrs Winterson, a subject who honed her writer's eye for the eccentric and made this memoir just as magnificent and absorbing as its fictional other.

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