

WHY BE HAPPY WHEN YOU COULD BE NORMAL?

Part fact part fiction is what life is. And it is always a cover story. I wrote my way out.

She said, 'But it's not true . . .'

Truth? This was a woman who explained the flash-dash of mice activity in the kitchen as ectoplasm.

There was a terraced house in Accrington, in Lancashire – we called those houses two-up two-down: two rooms downstairs, two rooms upstairs. Three of us lived together in that house for sixteen years. I told my version – faithful and invented, accurate and misremembered, shuffled in time. I told myself as hero like any shipwreck story. It was a shipwreck, and me thrown on the coastline of humankind, and finding it not altogether human, and rarely kind.

And I suppose that the saddest thing for me, thinking about the cover version that is *Oranges*, is that I wrote a story I could live with. The other one was too painful. I could not survive it.

I am often asked, in a tick-box kind of way, what is 'true' and what is not 'true' in *Oranges*. Did I work in a funeral parlour? Did I drive an ice-cream van? Did we have a Gospel Tent? Did Mrs Winterson build her own CB radio? Did she really stun tomcats with a catapult?

I can't answer these questions. I can say that there is a character in *Oranges* called Testifying Elsie who looks after the little Jeanette and acts as a soft wall against the hurt(ling) force of Mother.

I wrote her in because I couldn't bear to leave her out. I wrote her in because I really wished it had