

# lovethe mor loathethem

## the novels of Jeanette Winterson



**Margaret Reynolds** considers the work of this highly individual novelist.

Jeanette Winterson is not an acquired taste. If you like her work, you love it: passionately, without reserve, no matter what the cost. Every paragraph is a poem, every phrase is a jewel. Her words will be talismans and guides, your copies of her books will be battered and worn, but the treasure that is in your heart will be burnished and pure.

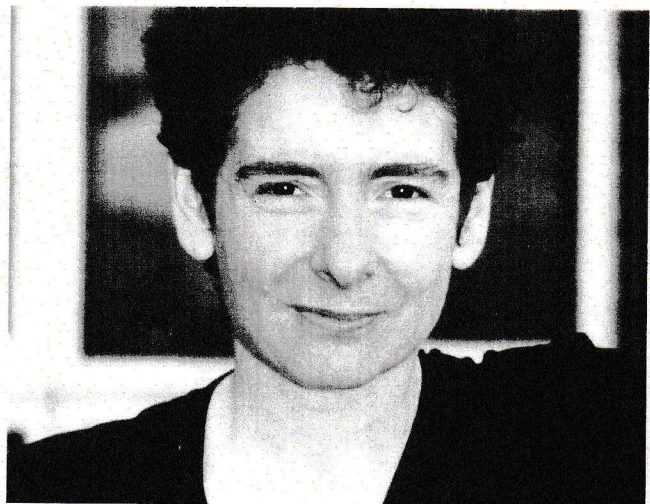
**I want someone who is fierce and will love me until death and know that love is as strong as death, and be on my side for ever and ever. I want someone who will destroy and be destroyed by me.**

If you don't like her work, you hate it. It's overblown, pompous, self regarding. But there aren't any 'don't knows'. Even the people who've never read a line of her work have an opinion on Jeanette Winterson.

I may as well say now that I'm part of the love brigade, and in extremely good company. Madonna and Julia Roberts are fans, her books carry fulsome quotes from eminent writers and critics like Muriel Spark, Gore Vidal, John Bayley and Edmund White, she has won prizes in Britain, Europe and the United States, and her work is translated in twenty two languages.

**Romantic love has been diluted into paperback form and sold thousands and millions of copies. Somewhere it is still in the original, written on tablets of stone. I would cross seas and suffer sunstroke and give away all I have, but not for a man.**

It's been like that from the start. When Winterson's first



novel was published by Pandora in 1985 there was no hardback and the print run was small. But readers loved it, told their friends about it, and it was those readers who turned it into a phenomenon. Well, those readers, and the book itself. *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* currently features on the AQA A English specification as a coursework option text along with Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* under the generic theme of 'A Woman's Struggle'. If you're doing this paper, then, great, because you get to read *Oranges*. But also, tough cookies, because 'a woman's struggle' is hardly the most important thing about this book or about any of Winterson's writing. ***I'm telling you stories, trust me.***

So what is it about her work that provokes these reactions

**MEN**



Changes Are Not the Only Fruit © BBC, 1990 (Source: bfi stills)

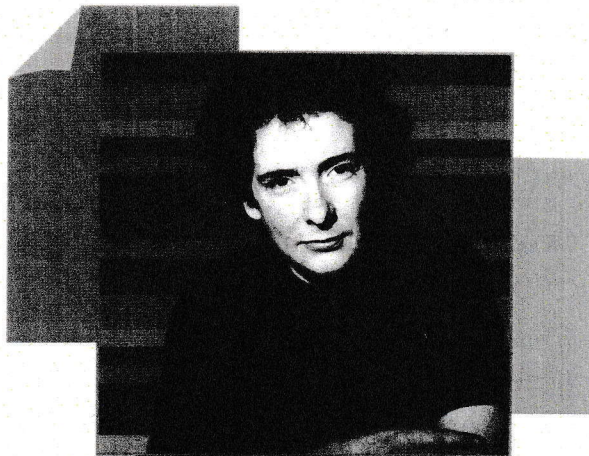
VINTAGE LIVING TEXTS   
CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE IN CLOSE UP

## Jeanette Winterson

*the essential guide*

Margaret Reynolds and Jonathan Noakes

ORANGES ARE NOT THE ONLY FRUIT  
THE PASSION  
SEXING THE CHERRY  
THE POWERBOOK



*includes an exclusive author interview*

and makes it so distinctive? There are her themes for a start, which are always the same, though handled differently in her various books: boundaries, desire, love, loss. When you come to the borders of common sense, do you cross over? In *Oranges* (1985) and *The Passion* (1987) these are a young person's questions asked – and answered – with bravado and daring. *Written on the Body* (1992) and *Art & Lies* (1994) are not so swaggering, *Gut Symmetries* (1997) and *The PowerBook* (2000) are more cautious still, but the gusto and the wit and the fierce commitment is still the same. *What you risk reveals what you value.*

But large and intense though these themes are, it's Winterson's literary method that makes her work so memorable. She uses concrete imagery: if there is an adjective or adverb, it matches the noun or verb exactly; if there is a metaphor, it is extended on its own terms.

*Travellers at least have a choice. Those who set sail know that things will not be the same as at home. Explorers are prepared. But for us, who travel along the blood vessels, who come to the cities of the interior by chance, there is no preparation. We who were fluent find life is a foreign language.*

This technique makes for the power of the 'treasure phrase'. It's in all the books, but it's in the titles too. Look at how Winterson's titles mean much more than they say, so that they have become part of the language. How often have you heard some variation on 'Oranges are not the only fruit' used as a catch phrase? And who else has given us derivative headlines like 'Sexing the Shopping Trolley' or 'Sexing the City'? Then rhythm and assonance and association come in. In *The PowerBook* (2000) there is a rewriting of a story taken from Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*, and there's also a story about the Everest explorer George Mallory who was lost on the mountain in the 1920s and whose body was only discovered there in 1999. It's only their names that make this delicate and yet intricate connection, but it works. And as to rhythm? Have a count of the syllables in some of Winterson's best known lines and you'll find they come out at eight. It's poetry by another name.

*I'm telling you stories. Trust me.  
The pineapple arrived today.  
Why is the measure of love loss?*

Then there are her literary structures. Winterson almost always uses the first person, which makes her stories sound immediate and directly personal, as if this is a someone confiding in you. And yet, that is set against a shape which is multiple, that has more than one strand. In *The Passion* (1987) and in *Sexing the Cherry* (1989) that structure is obvious because each book has two first person narrators: Henri and Villanelle; the Dog Woman and Jordan. But in

*Oranges* and in *The PowerBook* the same shape is made out of setting a 'real' story against a variety of other stories: the Jeanette strand and the inset fairy tales in *Oranges*, and the Ali-with-married-redhead story and the inset parables and rewritings in *The PowerBook*. In *Art & Lies* (1994) and in *Gut Symmetries* (1997) there are three first person narrators. And even in *Written on the Body* (1992) – which might seem the simplest in structural terms – there is the voice of the unnamed and ungendered narrator set against the central poetic reverie on Louise and the body.

#### Why is the measure of love loss?

Winterson likes to have more than one thing on the go. Measurement, comparison, analogy – these are her tools. That's why so many of her works are layered and work with an intertextuality where they refer constantly to other literary sources: the Bible, for instance, in *Oranges*; the romance quest in *Written on the Body*; scientific discourse in *Gut Symmetries*. And, above all, Winterson refers to herself. Like no other author, she quotes and re-quotes herself in all her works. Her texts create their own image and their own mask.

To avoid discovery I stay on the run. To discover things for myself I stay on the run.

Winterson says that with *The PowerBook* she has come to the end of a cycle. There will be a new book next year. Already she has created a world which is her own. A new world beckons. It may have different skies, different horizons, different stars, but one thing is sure. Nothing dazzles like the Winter Sun.

I don't know if this a happy ending but here we are let loose in open fields.

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Margaret Reynolds is Reader in English at Queen Mary College, University of London. Her books include *The Sappho Companion* and *Victorian Women Poets*. She is the presenter of Radio 4's *Adventures in Poetry* and a judge for the Orange Prize for Fiction 2003.

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#### Follow it up

Jeanette Winterson's novels, including *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, are available in Vintage editions. The video of the BBC's adaptation of *Oranges* is available from BBC Enterprises and the script, written by Winterson, is available in Vintage. *Vintage Living Texts: Jeanette Winterson* by Margaret Reynolds and Jonathan Noakes offers reading guides for *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, *The Passion*, *Sexing the Cherry* and *The PowerBook*. You can access Jeanette Winterson's own website at [info@jeanettewinterson.com](mailto:info@jeanettewinterson.com) and there is also a reader's site run at [www.winterson.net/main/community.htm](http://www.winterson.net/main/community.htm).

