

INTRODUCTION

Sexing the Cherry is a book about a pineapple:

'The pineapple arrived today. Jordan carried it in his arms as though it were a yellow baby. With the wisdom of Solomon he prepared to slice it in two.'

That was going to be the beginning of the story but stories have a way of changing the story.

Sexing the Cherry is not really about fruit. It is about bringing home something not seen before. But longed for. Or dreamed about. Life as voyage and risk. Capsize and rescue. The story itself is the pocket of air in an upturned boat.

When I was growing up and things were a mess I put a book over my face like an oxygen mask. I am a writer because I wanted to secure my own air supply.

Sexing the Cherry is my third novel – published when I was 29. There's the Dog-Woman – a giantess who breeds hounds on the banks of the River Thames. There's Jordan, her son, fished out of the river. It's her story and his story and a story about never quite meeting in the middle. The book is full of disappearances.

You remember that definition of a fishnet as holes held together by string? I am interested in the holes. The string is the narrative but the spaces are what

matters. It is the same with a Barbara Hepworth sculpture; the rock is there so that you can see the space.

Sexing the Cherry is all about what happens in between what happens.

'I discovered that my own life was written invisibly, was squashed between the facts, was flying without me, like the Twelve Dancing Princesses who shot from their window every night and returned home every morning with torn dresses and worn-out slippers and remembered nothing.'

I am preoccupied by memory and its relationship with experience. I use time slippage for this reason. Our minds are not clock-work and neither are our dreams. We are forced to live in manufactured time, utilitarian and arbitrary. Against that is our sense of real time – natural rhythm, seasonal change, sleeping, waking, heartbeat, the past. We know that one hour is not the same length as another. The measure of our days is uniform, but that is not our lived experience of time, nor is it how we remember.

Art does the strange job of compressing time and expanding it all at once. In a novel huge tracts of time happen in a reading experience of a few hours. A poem can take a single moment and contain all of life therein. When we listen to a serious piece of music we are not conscious of time at all. The feel-better factor that art offers is not just what it says or does – it is what it allows. Daily time doesn't matter for a while. When we say 'I didn't notice the time' we feel free. It happens when we fall in love. It happens when we are fully absorbed in what we are doing. It happens when we settle down with a book.

Reading gives you more time than not-reading.

Sexing the Cherry could be called an historical novel

because it is mostly set in the reign of Charles I. But if yesterday is history what is an historical novel? The past happens every minute.

I don't believe that relevance depends on writing about your own time. The time we live in will always affect how we write – and it should. But that doesn't mean that the only way to write or the best way to write is a contemporary take on now. If that was all that mattered we would never read any fiction or poetry written before our own lives. There is such a thing as literature because it lasts long after its own moment has passed.

What I was trying to do in *Sexing the Cherry* was not about ventriloquism of the dead, nor a reproduction of an historical period – I was using history as a way of talking about everything that was bothering me. Writing is personal.

I don't mean writing is a private agenda or a kind of weird therapy where people you don't know pay you to talk about yourself. We are back to the holes in the net. Whatever story I string together I am hiding in the holes.

I have never sat down and thought, 'I will write an historical novel.' Or, 'I will write about a pineapple today.' What happens is a trigger from the outside that starts a series of images on the inside. I follow the trail and see what happens.

Sexing the Cherry began after a visit to Kew Gardens.

But I was conscious, too, of not wanting to be tied down by the kind of thing other people thought I should write.

After *Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit* I wrote *The Passion* to get as far away from my own circumstances

as I could. I didn't want to be the northern working-class girl writing realism. *Oranges* is an inventive, strange book, but it was read as an autobiography – because I used my own name – because I wanted to be my own fictional character, as well as the Jeanette Winterson who occupies a small slab of time.

And yes, I suppose *The Dog-Woman* is Mrs Winterson. Yes, I suppose I am Jordan, but so what?

The literal-mindedness of so much discussion about writing – about art in general – dismays me.

When I looked at my own life it felt like the triumph of imagination over experience. That is what I wanted to write and how I wanted to write. What difference if I am Henri or Jordan or Villanelle or Silver or Bigamist the Rabbit or the Donkey with a Golden Nose?

At my saddest and most depressed I wrote a children's story called *The Lion, the Unicorn and Me*. Me is the Donkey. I am the Donkey. I gave myself a golden nose.

Nobody assumed that little book to be an autobiography, but it is.

So the whole thing is nuts. Raving mad. Bonkers.

Be where you want to be in time. Be who you want to be in time. Readers have hundreds of avatars. Be Hamlet today. Arthur Kipps tomorrow. Stop worrying about what is 'real' and find what is relevant. Reading is freedom, not a set of rules.

And writing?

Empty space and points of light. That is all an atom is and atoms is all we are. *Sexing the Cherry* is a challenge to the solid world of objects. I am in love with the idea of nothing – and that nothing is really something. That we are made of energy converted into mass seems wonderful to me. The body is beautiful, but all

traditions believe that we can step out of the body, leave it behind for a while, that we shall leave it behind forever one day, as worn out as a favourite dress that can't be repaired any more.

You don't need to believe in God or the after-life to recognise what I am saying here. For me, art is about the invisible made visible. Object, artefact, performance, story, poem, dance, a piece of music. What is communicated is more than He She What Where When How Why. This is obvious with abstract art or with music and dance. Once language is involved we forget that the story is still the string and that the string is there for the invisible space to become visible. Our innermost thoughts. Our inner life. The things we can't say. Feelings we are afraid to feel. Longings. Dreams.

Not the journeys I made but the ones I might have made in some other place or time.

Jeanette Winterson

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MY NAME IS Jordan. This is the first thing I saw.

It was night, about a quarter to twelve, the sky divided in halves, one cloudy, the other fair. The clouds hung over the wood, there was no distance between them and the top of the trees. Where the sky was clear, over the river and the flat fields newly ploughed, the moon, almost full, shone out of a yellow aureole and reflected in the bow of the water. There were cattle in the field across, black against the slope of the hill, not moving, sleeping. One light, glittering from the only house, looked like the moat-light of a giant's castle. Tall trees flanked it. A horse ran loose in the courtyard, its hooves sparking the stone.

Then the fog came. The fog came from the river in thin spirals like spirits in a churchyard and thickened with the force of a genie from a bottle. The bulrushes were buried first, then the trunks of the trees, then the forks and the junctions. The top of the trees floated in the fog, making suspended islands for the birds.

The cattle were all drowned and the moat-light, like a lighthouse, appeared and vanished and vanished and appeared, cutting the air like a bright sword.

The fog came towards me and the sky that had been clear was covered up. It was bitterly cold, my hair was damp and I had no hand-warmer. I tried to find the path but all I found were hares with staring eyes, poised in the middle of the field and turned to stone. I began to walk with my hands stretched out in front of me, as

do those troubled in sleep, and in this way, for the first time, I traced the lineaments of my own face opposite me.

Every journey conceals another journey within its lines: the path not taken and the forgotten angle. These are journeys I wish to record. Not the ones I made, but the ones I might have made, or perhaps did make in some other place or time. I could tell you the truth as you will find it in diaries and maps and log-books. I could faithfully describe all that I saw and heard and give you a travel book. You could follow it then, tracing those travels with your finger, putting red flags where I went.

For the Greeks, the hidden life demanded invisible ink. They wrote an ordinary letter and in between the lines set out another letter, written in milk. The document looked innocent enough until one who knew better sprinkled coal-dust over it. What the letter had been no longer mattered; what mattered was the life flaring up undetected . . . till now.

I discovered that my own life was written invisibly, was squashed between the facts, was flying without me like the Twelve Dancing Princesses who shot from their window every night and returned home every morning with torn dresses and worn-out slippers and remembered nothing.

I resolved to set a watch on myself like a jealous father, trying to catch myself disappearing through a door just noticed in the wall. I knew I was being adulterous; that what I loved was not going on at home. I was giving myself the slip and walking through this world like a shadow. The longer I eluded myself the

more obsessed I became with the thought of discovery. Occasionally, in company, someone would snap their fingers in front of my face and ask, 'Where are you?' For a long time I had no idea, but gradually I began to find evidence of the other life and gradually it appeared before me.

'Remember the rock from whence ye are hewn and the pit from whence ye are digged.'

My mother carved this on a medallion and hung it round my neck the day she found me in the slime by the river. I was wrapped up in a rotting sack such as kittens are drowned in, but my head was wedged uppermost against the bank. I heard dogs coming towards me and a roar in the water and a face as round as the moon with hair falling on either side bobbed over me. She scooped me up, she tied me between her breasts whose nipples stood out like walnuts. She took me home and kept me there with fifty dogs and no company but her own.



I had a name but I have forgotten it.

They call me the Dog-Woman and it will do. I call him Jordan and it will do. He has no other name before or after. What was there to call him, fished as he was from the stinking Thames? A child can't be called Thames, no and not Nile either, for all his likeness to Moses. But I wanted to give him a river name, a name not bound to anything, just as the waters aren't bound

to anything. When a woman gives birth her waters break and she pours out the child and the child runs free. I would have liked to pour out a child from my body but you have to have a man for that and there's no man who's a match for me.

When Jordan was a baby he sat on top of me much as a fly rests on a hill of dung. And I nourished him as a hill of dung nourishes a fly, and when he had eaten his fill he left me.

Jordan . . .

I should have named him after a stagnant pond and then I could have kept him, but I named him after a river and in the flood-tide he slipped away.

When Jordan was three I took him to see a great rarity and that was my undoing. There was news that one Thomas Johnson had got himself an edible fruit of the like never seen in England. This Johnson, though he's been dead for twenty years now, was a herbalist by trade, though I'd say he was more than that. When a woman found herself too round for her liking and showing no blood by the moon, it was Johnson she visited with only a lantern for company. And when she came back all flat and smiling she said it was Mistletoe or Cat-nip or some such, but I say he sucked it out for the Devil.

Nevertheless, it being daylight and a crowd promised such as we see only for a dog and a bear, I took Jordan on a hound-lead and pushed my way through the gawpers and sinners until we got to the front and there was Johnson himself trying to charge money for a glimpse of the thing.

I lifted Jordan up and I told Johnson that if he didn't

throw back his cloth and let us see this wonder I'd cram his face so hard into my breasts that he'd wish he'd never been suckled by a woman, so truly would I smother him.

He starts humming and hawing and reaching for some coloured jar behind his head, and I thought, he'll not let no genie out on me with its forked tongue and balls like jewels, so I grabbed him and started to push him into my dress. He was soon coughing and crying because I haven't had that dress off in five years.

'Well, then,' I said, holding him back, the way you would a weasel. 'Where is this wonder?'

'God save me,' he cried, 'a moment for my smelling salts, dear lady.'

But I would have none of it and whipped off the cover myself, and I swear that what he had resembled nothing more than the private parts of an Oriental. It was yellow and livid and long.

'It is a banana, madam,' said the rogue.

A banana? What on God's good earth was a banana?

'Such a thing never grew in Paradise,' I said.

'Indeed it did, madam,' says he, all puffed up like a poison adder. 'This fruit is from the Island of Bermuda, which is closer to Paradise than you will ever be.'

He lifted it up above his head, and the crowd, seeing it for the first time, roared and nudged each other and demanded to know what poor fool had been so reduced as to sell his vitality.

'It's either painted or infected,' said I, 'for there's none such a colour that I know.'

Johnson shouted above the din as best he could . . .

'THIS IS NOT SOME UNFORTUNATE'S

RAKE. IT IS THE FRUIT OF A TREE. IT IS TO BE PEELED AND EATEN.'

At this there was unanimous retching. There was no good woman could put that to her mouth, and for a man it was the practice of cannibals. We had not gone to church all these years and been washed in the blood of Jesus only to eat ourselves up the way the Heathen do.

I pulled on the hound-lead in order to take Jordan away, but the lead came up in my hands. I ducked down into the shuffle of bare feet and torn stockings and a gentleman's buckle here and there. He was gone. My boy was gone. I let out a great bellow such as cattle do and would have gone on bellowing till Kingdom Come had not some sinner taken my ear and turned me to look under Johnson's devilish table.

I saw Jordan standing stock still. He was standing with both his arms upraised and staring at the banana above Johnson's head. I put my head next to his head and looked where he looked and I saw deep blue waters against a pale shore and trees whose branches sang with green and birds in fairground colours and an old man in a loin-cloth.

This was the first time Jordan set sail.

London is a foul place, full of pestilence and rot. I would like to take Jordan to live in the country but we must be near Hyde Park so that I can enter my dogs in the races and fighting. Every Saturday I come home covered in saliva and bitten to death but with money in my pocket and needing nothing but a body for company.

My neighbour, who is so blackened and hairless