

Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit (1985)

Jeanette Winterson

INTRODUCTION (2014)

When *Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit* was first published in 1985 it was often stocked in the cookbooks section with the marmalade manuals.

The title is attributed by me to Nell Gwynn, raunchy mistress of Charles 1st, possessor of fabulous breasts, and famously painted as an orange-seller. I thought she might have said oranges are not the only fruit, but she didn't. What is the point of being a fiction writer if you can't make things up?

Oranges is autobiographical in so much as I used my own life as the base for a story. There's nothing unusual about that. The trick is to turn your own life into something that has meaning for people whose experience is nothing like your own. Write what you know is reasonable advice. Read what you don't know is better advice.

Reading is an adventure. Adventures are about the unknown. When I started to read seriously I was excited and comforted all at the same time. Literature is a mix of unfamiliarity and recognition. The situation can take us anywhere – across time and space, the globe, through the lives of people who can never be like us – into the heart of anguish we have never felt – crimes we could not commit.

Yet as we travel deeper into the strange world of the story, the feeling we get is of being understood – which is odd when you think about it, because at school learning is based on whether or not we understand what we are reading. In fact it is the story (or the poem) that is understanding us.

Books read us back to ourselves.

And one of the things the story teaches us is this: Read yourself as a fiction as well as a fact.

When I was growing up poor in a poor place with a pair of Pentecostal parents who were waiting for Jesus to return and roll up time and space like a scroll, I never thought my life was narrow or my chances bleak. I thought I was Heathcliff, Huck Finn, Hotspur, Aladdin, the Big Bad Wolf. The Fish with a Golden Ring.

And later, when I had left home at sixteen and was living in a Mini, I had my favourite books stashed in the boot and whenever I could be in the library, I was there. This wasn't a fantasy world or escapism – though it was an escape; it was the hidden door in the blank wall. Open it.

I opened the book and went through.

The escape into another story reminds us that we too are another story. Not caught, not confined, not predestined, not only one gender or passion. Learning to read yourself as a fiction as well as a fact is liberating – it is the difference between energy and mass. Mass is the beloved object – the world we can touch and feel – but mass is also the dead weight in ourselves and others.

Shifting the dead weight takes energy but at its atomic core the dead weight *is* energy. Transforming mass into energy, energy into mass is what creative work is about. An idea becomes embodied. A tragedy is released.

Oranges works with fairy stories and in particular the Grail Legend because I am drawn to this fundamental truth about how situations can be transformed – and why they are not – which is what tragedy is all about. The Grail Legend ends badly but not hopelessly. And I suppose that even tragedy as its most bleak contains an energetic core of hope, because as spectators we realise that nothing has to end the way it does. That it does end the way it does – and often badly – need not be the final answer.

Even those words, 'final' and 'answer' are faulty. The human process is continuous. And dimensional. Answers happen as movement, not stasis.

And doesn't every fairy tale begin with a problem that is stuck?

The Kingdom is sick. The King has no heir. The Princess is lost. The Dragon is eating everyone. The Hero is dead. And so on

I was born without prospects. So I wrote myself the world I wanted to find. There is a line in *Oranges*: 'What I want does exist if I dare to find it.'

I was 23. Taking risks is essential. Any fairy tale will tell you that.

People often ask me why I have used my own name in *Oranges* when it is a novel.

It wasn't because I couldn't think of another name or because I was signalling that *Oranges* is a memoir; it was about self-invention.

I wanted to use myself as a fictional character – an expanded 'I'.

Adopted children are self-invented because we have to be; we arrive with the first pages of our story torn out. Writers are self-inventors too – we have to be – so in my case a capacity or a cast of character, (yes, that becomes a cast of characters – the multiple self of the writer) is strongly in the ascendant. Given what I am, I don't see what else I could be, but a fictioneer.

I never wanted a literal reading of *Oranges*. If I call myself Jeanette why must I be writing an autobiography? Henry Miller calls his hero Henry. Paul Auster and Milan Kundera call themselves by name in some of their work. So does Philip Roth. This is understood by critics as playful meta-fiction. For a woman it is assumed to be confessional. Is this assumption about gender? Something to do with creative authority? Why shouldn't a woman be her own experiment?

Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit is a novel.

I suppose I have, in a way, gone on using my own name in everything I have written because I prefer to write in the First Person. I am I and I am Not-I.

Understood?

Part fact part fiction is what life is.

When *Oranges* got out of the Preserves section it went into the Gay/Lesbian section – either because I am gay or because being gay is part of what the book is about. That is fine by me though why are we so busy with the labels? *Orange* is for anybody and everybody – all of my books are for anybody and everybody.

After a while, and having become a modern classic, *Oranges* went into the Literature section too. Had I been a straight white male the confidence of the writing and the experiment with form and material, would have put it there to begin with – well maybe with a detour round Jam.

Thankfully the old assumptions are slowly being killed off. I am glad that *Oranges* is one of the murder weapons.

27 years after I wrote *Oranges* I came back to some of that material because I wanted to write a memoir. The trigger was the discovery of surprising information about my biological mother. As I tried to find her like a detective story I started to think again about Wintersonworld. Out of that collision of past and present I wrote *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?*

That title was one of Mrs Winterson's best lines. She was a violent philosopher.

But let's think for a minute about Memory versus Invention.

Memory is not a filing system, or even a reconstruction; it is a re-creation. We remember the same thing differently at different times not because we are unreliable but because the past is not fixed. Even a simple memory is a cluster of experience where some things are vivid and some things obscured. As we develop and change so do our memories. Freud, one of the grand masters of narrative, understood that we can change the story because we are the story.

We keep telling ourselves to ourselves – telling ourselves to others – and sometimes one single detail rediscovered or removed is enough to change the balance of what we know.

There has been a lot of discussion about False Memory Syndrome. Sometimes what we remember is a cover-story for what we will not allow ourselves to remember. It's complicated.

Truth is what is left out as well as what is included. As a writer you work constantly to select and reject material. Memory works in the same way but with a different purpose. We are time travellers in our own lives.

When I look back what do I see? A long stretchy street with a town at the bottom and a hill at the top. Myself, walking. Leaving stories as markers as I go. I am trying to make sense of being human. So are you. The story is waiting for you when you pass this way.