

# Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JEANNETTE WINTERSON

Born in Manchester to a seventeen-year-old factory worker and adopted by the Winterson family six months after her birth, Jeanette Winterson was raised by Pentecostal Evangelical Christian parents in Accrington, a manufacturing city in Northern England. Winterson was raised to be a missionary, but after coming out as a lesbian at the age of sixteen, she was forced to leave home, live in her car, and work odd jobs to put herself through college at Oxford University. Shortly after graduating, when she was just 25 years old, Winterson published her first book, the autobiographical novel [Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit](#). The novel was an enormous success, and was eventually adapted into a serial television program for the BBC—Winterson wrote the screenplay, and the program premiered in 1990 to even more buzz and acclaim. A prolific writer, Winterson is the author of over twenty-five books of fiction, nonfiction, and literature for children. She was made an officer of the Order of the British Empire in 2006. She is married to the writer and psychoanalyst Susie Orbach, and she teaches at the University of Manchester. She makes her home in the Cotswolds, just west of Oxford.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Winterson charts the histories of both Manchester, the place of her birth, and Accrington, the stuck-in-time city where she grew up, in order to explain the historical context of both *Oranges* and *Why Be Happy*. She describes Manchester as a “raw,” working-class city, which became a “radical” hub due to the “uncontrollable reality” of harsh factory conditions and the “success and shames” that accompanied them. Ann, Winterson’s birth mother, worked in a textile factory at the time of Winterson’s birth, and her adoptive father, in Accrington, was a shift worker at a power station and a manual laborer all his life. Religion was a hub and a refuge in the “raw” world of the factories, and the Pentecostal Church was the center of young Jeanette’s life (as it was the center of life for so much of her community)—so much so that, for the Wintersons, the church subsumed and overpowered everything else.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Winterson refers to *Why Be Happy* as the “silent twin” of her 1985 novel [Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit](#). In *Oranges*, she wrote an account of her life story that she could “survive”—in *Why Be Happy*, separated from *Oranges* by a quarter of a century, she speaks more frankly and accurately about the traumas she

endured. Memoirs such as Augusten Burroughs’s *Running With Scissors*, Alison Bechdel’s [Fun Home](#), and David Sedaris’s *Naked and Dress Your Family in Corduroy and Denim* are all memoirs by LGBT writers which explore the artist’s often difficult, bizarre, or even traumatic childhood as they come to inhabit their identities and understand the complexities of family.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?*
- **When Written:** 2009-2011
- **Where Written:** England
- **When Published:** 2011
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Memoir
- **Setting:** Accrington, Lancashire; Oxford; London
- **Climax:** After years of denying herself the opportunity to seek out her birth mother, Jeanette Winterson seeks out, finds, and meets her birth mother, a woman named Ann.
- **Antagonist:** Mrs. Winterson
- **Point of View:** First person

### EXTRA CREDIT

**Stranger Than Fiction.** Jeanette Winterson, who famously rattled the international literary landscape with [Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit](#), has long drawn on her real life in order to inform the characters in her fiction. In addition to using fictionalized versions of herself and Mrs. Winterson in *Oranges*, Winterson has created versions of herself that have appeared in later novels—for instance, the orphan, Silver, in 2004’s *Lighthousekeeping*, can be read as a Jeanette-figure.



## PLOT SUMMARY

This memoir tells the story of acclaimed writer Jeanette Winterson’s tumultuous, abusive upbringing in a small, working-class town in the north of England. It’s also a nonfiction parallel to Winterson’s award-winning autobiographical novel [Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit](#), which fictionalized the upbringing described in *Why Be Normal When You Can Be Happy?*, and which Winterson discusses often.

After being adopted at six months old by Mr. and Mrs. Winterson—a devout Pentecostal Evangelical Christian couple with no children of their own—Jeanette Winterson comes of age in a home deprived of happiness or joy. Her mother constantly tells her that “the Devil” led her and her husband to

“the wrong crib” when they selected Jeanette at the adoption society. Mrs. Winterson, who is obsessed with End Time and the coming of the Apocalypse, emotionally abuses Jeanette and forces Mr. Winterson to dole out physical punishments.

Jeanette is often locked outside of the house and left on the street or sent underground to the family’s claustrophobic coal-hole. Though Jeanette’s childhood has a few bright spots—she does, for a while, enjoy the “exciting” tent revivals of her family’s church, and she finds refuge, solace, and kinship in her intense love of books and literature—she is mostly miserable. She’s unable to make friends, fearful of abandonment, and constantly suffering under her parents’ abusive ways.

At fifteen, Jeanette falls in love with an older girl from church, Helen. When Mrs. Winterson discovers the relationship between the two girls, the Wintersons and their church force Jeanette to undergo an exorcism, which leaves both her and her parents emotionally scarred. When Jeanette pursues another romantic relationship with a classmate named Janey a year later, she is kicked out of the Winterson household and begins living in her **Mini Cooper**. She is taken in, eventually, by the head of English at her junior college, the kindly and eccentric Mrs. Ratlow, who coaches Jeanette through her Oxford entrance exams and eventually helps her to secure an offer of admission. At Oxford, Jeanette is frustrated by the patriarchal nature of the university, but her love of reading and books deepens, and she feels the world opening up to her. After a disastrous trip home at Christmastime after her first term at school, Jeanette parts ways with her mother, never to see her again.

The narrative flashes forward to the year 2007—Jeanette, now an acclaimed and world-renowned writer, is struggling in her life, as the demons of her past have finally caught up with her. After the dissolution of a tumultuous romantic relationship, Jeanette attempts suicide—she fails, and realizes that she must begin to confront the “creature” within her, the scarred and angry version of her younger self, who has threatened her all her life.

After a period of healing, Jeanette, with the help of her new partner Susie, embarks on a journey to find her birth mother. Jeanette has found her birth certificate while cleaning out her father’s home after the death of his second wife, and the discovery has sparked new questions about her heritage. Jeanette, Susie, and Jeanette’s social worker Ria encounter a series of brick walls and red tape as they negotiate the distant and unhelpful government agencies which keep the truth of Jeanette’s past and the identity of her birth parents just out of reach. Eventually, through a combination of sheer will and intrepid detective work, Jeanette discovers the identity of her birth mother—a woman named Ann S. who lives outside of Manchester—and reconnects with her.

The book ends with Jeanette having found some measure of peace in her reconnecting with Ann, though she is still

uncertain of both how she feels about her birth mother and what her own future might hold.



## CHARACTERS

### MAJOR CHARACTERS

**Jeanette Winterson** – The writer and protagonist of *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?*, Jeanette Winterson is an author who was born in Manchester in 1959 and adopted at six months old by the Winterson family of Accrington. Winterson grew up in a strict and deeply religious household ruled by her tyrannical, mercurial adoptive mother, Mrs. Winterson, who frequently told Jeanette that “the Devil [had] led [the Wintersons] to the wrong crib” when they picked her. Winterson was emotionally and physically abused as a child—subject to beatings, to being locked out of her home, to being barred from reading any secular literature, and, after her parents discovered her lesbian relationship, to a grueling exorcism. After being expelled from her home and community following a second lesbian relationship, Winterson lived in her **Mini Cooper**, worked odd jobs, and attended a junior college. She was eventually admitted to Oxford, and, shortly after graduating, published her first book—the highly successful and deeply autobiographical novel [Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit](#). Winterson says that *Oranges* was an alternate version of the true story of her life—it was a version she could “survive.” In *Why Be Happy*, Winterson seeks to find happiness and remedy her difficulty giving and accepting love, which leads her to try to come to terms with her childhood trauma and to seek out her birth mother. Jeanette is a born writer, an avid reader, and a stubborn child who grows into a frank, brash, and observant adult; she is self-aware of her flaws and deficiencies, and writes with a humorous but literary eye and ear about all the details of her life—the good, the bad, and the ugly.

**Mrs. Constance Winterson** – The primary antagonist of *Why Be Happy*, Mrs. Winterson is the cruel and domineering adoptive mother of Jeanette Winterson. A deeply devout Pentecostal Evangelist, Mrs. Winterson believes in depriving herself of happiness and pleasure as she waits for the apocalypse. Mrs. Winterson verbally and physically abused Jeanette, her only child, when she was young, subjecting her to an exorcism in one notable instance. As Jeanette matures into an adult, the two fall out of touch. They speak only on the phone and only sporadically—after Jeanette publishes her debut autobiographical novel, Mrs. Winterson gets in touch to relay her shame and embarrassment. Mrs. Winterson always told Jeanette that her birth mother was probably dead, and had never wanted her—she represented herself to Jeanette as the only path to salvation, all the while making life a living hell for the child she professed to have wanted so badly. The pain and trauma Mrs. Winterson inflicts upon Jeanette follows her

throughout her entire life, and it is because of Mrs. Winterson's cruelty even more than the trauma of her adoption that leaves Jeanette unable to "love well" even as an adult. Mrs. Winterson, like the religion she so devoutly followed, was full of contradictions—she believed in austerity and deprivation, but allowed herself small indulgences; she often disappeared for the night, or for days at a time, and Jeanette speculates that she was off at the movies, which were forbidden; she was ashamed of being a "nobody" but longed to disappear into the afterlife where she felt she belonged. Mrs. Winterson represents themes of religion, the relationship between mothers and daughters, and the pursuit of love and happiness—as she was Jeanette's main obstacle, for so many years, to that lifelong quest.

**Mr. Jack Winterson** – Jeanette Winterson's adoptive father. A manual laborer all his life, he was the one responsible for doling out the physical punishments Mrs. Winterson assigned to Jeanette for her many "transgressions." Though he was complicit in abusing Jeanette, Mr. Winterson too lived under the imposing shadow of his first wife, Mrs. Winterson, until her death. He later remarries a woman named Lillian, at whom he frequently gets angry and throws household objects, such as Mrs. Winterson's **Royal Albert china**. After Mr. Winterson's death, Jeanette, when cleaning out his house, finds documents relating to her adoption, which she uses to embark on a search for her birth parents.

**Helen** – An older girl who goes to the Emil Pentecostal Church with Jeanette. One day, after prayer meetings, she kisses Jeanette, and the two begin a relationship when Jeanette is fifteen years old. Mrs. Winterson is suspicious of the two, and one day, at church, the pastor steers his sermon toward an indictment of lesbianism. The girls are separated and Jeanette is made to undergo an exorcism. After her ordeal, she returns to Helen, and discovers that Helen confessed everything, apologized, and was spared the ritual. Jeanette begs Helen to kiss her, but Helen, frightened and upset, turns her away.

**Janey** – Jeanette's second girlfriend. Janey's family is much more tolerant of their relationship than the Wintersons, though Janey's father doesn't care much for Jeanette. When Jeanette tells Mrs. Winterson that she is in love with the joyful, patient Janey, and that she is happy with her, Mrs. Winterson kicks Jeanette out of the house, and then, as she leaves, asks her the question that will ultimately become the book's title: "Why be happy when you could be normal?" Janey and Jeanette stay together through college, until Jeanette goes off to Oxford, and they do share a great deal of happiness, which is rare and healing for Jeanette.

**Mrs. Ratlow** – The head of English at Jeanette's sixth-form college (a kind of junior college where students in their late teens study for their college entrance qualifications and exams). Mrs. Ratlow has a flamboyant appearance and Jeanette describes her as "vain and frightening and ridiculous." Mrs.

Ratlow takes Valium in class and often throws books at her students' heads. Mrs. Ratlow has a deep love of literature, which she attempts to instill in her pupils. Jeanette eventually confides in Mrs. Ratlow the fact that she has been kicked out of her home and is living in her **Mini Cooper**, and Mrs. Ratlow takes Jeanette in, giving her a place to stay, rent-free. Mrs. Ratlow coaches Jeanette through her Oxford entrance exams and writes a letter in support of her admission when she is initially rejected, which results in an offer of admission.

**Vicky Licorish** – A friend of Jeanette's at Oxford whom Jeanette brings home to Accrington for the Christmas holidays. The two volunteer together at a local mental hospital while they are in Accrington. The trip will ultimately be the last time Jeanette ever sees her mother in person. Mrs. Winterson cooks an overwhelming number of pineapple dishes over the course of Vicky's visit, since Vicky is black and Mrs. Winterson believes that pineapples are what "Africans" eat. When Vicky admits that she does not like pineapples, Mrs. Winterson descends into a depressed rage. Vicky is caught off-guard by the bizarre and hostile atmosphere in the Winterson household, and, eventually, Jeanette and Vicky leave.

**Ria Hayward** – A social worker in London who helps an older Jeanette to find her birth mother. Ria assures Jeanette that, having counseled "many mothers over the years" as they make the difficult choice to give their babies up for adoption, she knows that "they never want to do it." She implores Jeanette to understand that she was always wanted by her birth mother. As the process becomes more and more difficult and shrouded in policy, protocol, and red tape, Ria stays by Jeanette's side and helps her to uncover crucial documents relating to her adoption.

**Susie Orbach** – A well-known psychoanalyst and writer of books such as *Fat is a Feminist Issue*, Susie Orbach has been Jeanette Winterson's partner since about 2009. Jeanette describes Susie as a loving and empathetic person who sees and supports her, and who is her rock and her advocate throughout the process of attempting to find her own birth mother.

**Ann S.** – Jeanette's birth mother, Ann was just sixteen and working in a factory when she got pregnant. After six months of raising Jeanette in a home for mothers and babies, Ann chose to give Jeanette up for adoption. One of ten children, Ann and her large family embrace Jeanette once she finds them again—Ann tells Jeanette that she was "always wanted," confirming what Ria told Jeanette months earlier. Ann is warm, welcoming, and funny, and both interested in and sorry for Jeanette's difficult childhood and adolescence. In the book's coda, Jeanette describes her burgeoning relationship with Ann—the two of them are similar in some ways but very different in others, and though Jeanette thinks that Ann "would like [Jeanette] to let [her] be [her] mother," Jeanette is "wary" of believing she has lucked into an "instant family." Jeanette, at the

book's end, does not know exactly how she feels about Ann, and has "no idea what happens next."

**Ruth Rendell** – A friend of Jeanette's, whom Jeanette describes as her "Good Mother." A supportive and helpful confidant, Ruth lent Jeanette a cottage to write in when she was just starting out, and she helps and guides Jeanette as she attempts to wade through the paperwork and red tape that stands between her reunion with her birth mother. When Jeanette does find her birth mother, and is scared to go meet her, Ruth urges Jeanette to go through with the meeting. Ruth embodies the text's thematic arcs about mothers and daughters and the pursuit of happiness.

## MINOR CHARACTERS

**Lillian** – Mr. Winterson's second wife. The two have a physically abusive relationship, and Lillian often disparages the effects that Mrs. Winterson has had on both Mr. Winterson and Jeanette herself.

**Uncle Alec** – Mrs. Winterson's brother who physically assaults Jeanette after she breaks into her parents' house when they leave her alone and go to the beach for a week, barring her from entering the home while they are away.



## THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



### STORYTELLING

As a writer, Jeanette Winterson is keenly aware that life can often be stranger than fiction. *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal* is a nonfiction

account of the events of her childhood and her adult life as she navigates the fallout of the many traumas inflicted upon her by her adoptive mother, the tyrannical Mrs. Winterson. Throughout this account, Jeanette often references the power and importance of books and storytelling. She returns repeatedly to the influence literature and stories have had on her since her school years, when she worked her way through the "English Literature in Prose A-Z" section of her hometown library—defying her deeply religious mother's determination to keep her from all secular influences. Jeanette also explores her own storytelling by discussing the intersection of the true story of her life and the narrative of her breakout novel [Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit](#) which fictionalized the true story of her childhood and adolescence living with her mother. As the narrative unfolds, Jeanette shows that imposing a narrative on her difficult life has allowed her to survive it.

Jeanette takes refuge in the unpacking and exploring of the story of her own life in order to make sense of it and turn it into a narrative she can "live with." Jeanette's childhood, she feels, began with a fundamental loss—a rupture in the story of her life before it had even really begun. "Adoption drops you into the story after it has started," she writes. "It's like reading a book with the first few pages missing." By describing her life as a story in the early pages of the text, Winterson sets the stage for a book-long exploration of the ways in which life imitates art—and vice versa. "I wrote my way out," Winterson says of her early forays into novel-writing; "I wrote a story I could survive." In writing *Oranges*, Winterson allowed herself to imagine a version of her life that was not as painful as her reality. The novel saved her in two ways: it gave her that imagined reality, and the success it garnered allowed her to claim her identity as an artist, to profit off of her talent, and to escape mentally and physically from the despair of her childhood.

In addition to taking refuge by applying narrative to her own life, Jeanette seeks solace in the narratives of the great works of English literature. Jeanette is constantly referencing stories and literature throughout the text: some of the narratives she invokes are the legends of Odysseus, Philomel, and Bluebeard; the classic, long-running British television show *Doctor Who*; Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*; and Biblical stories. She also references stories of her own creations—her picture books and novels for children, as well as her novels [Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit](#), *Written on the Body*, *Lighthousekeeping*, and *The Stone Gods*. Poetry is the "rope" and literature is the "raft" that have proven literal lifelines for Jeanette throughout her difficult and often disastrous life—the poems of T.S. Eliot and Thomas Hardy and the memoirs of Gertrude Stein and Mark Doty are referenced at key points in the narrative, as Jeanette reaches across time and space to the many writers who came before her for guidance. From Hardy she learns to "feel the feeling," from Stein she learns to accept that even if she is on the wrong road, the road she is on is the road she is on, and from Doty she learns that though "living with life" is hard, it should never be stifled or dulled.

Jeanette Winterson survived a difficult and painful childhood through stories. She didn't lose herself in the books she read—she found herself in them. In other words, Winterson never used stories to escape her life; instead, she used the lessons she learned from them in order to more closely examine her life, more deftly hone her own craft, and to ultimately write her way "out" of her life. And, eventually, in this memoir of *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?* she wrote herself back into her life, on her own terms.



### RELIGION AND CONTROL

The religion of Jeanette Winterson's childhood—the Elim Pentecostal Church—is an evangelical and fatalistic one, obsessed with death

and the coming apocalypse. Throughout Jeanette's childhood and adolescence, Mrs. Winterson—Jeanette's strict, devout, and tyrannical mother—openly longed for and fantasized about her own death and the death of the world. The Winterson family's entire lives revolved around waiting for End Times to arrive. Though Jeanette concedes that as a child she found "excitement" in many aspects of religion, the church turned against Jeanette when, as teenager, she engaged in a lesbian relationship with another girl from the congregation. Soon, Jeanette was subject to an exorcism, and eventually was cast out of her home. When Jeanette left home and at last divorced herself from religious control, she also divorced herself from parental control, and was able to pursue the start of a new life—an educated life, a literary life, and a liberated life.

For her audience to understand the role of religion in Jeanette's childhood, she needs for them to understand the role of religion in her largely uneducated, almost uniformly working-class hometown. Though religion wielded "the cruelty of dogma, the miserable rigidity of no drink, no [smoking, and] no sex," as well as the omnipresent threat of the apocalypse, it also offered "camaraderie, simple happiness, sharing, [and] the pleasure of something to do every night in a town where there was nothing to do." For the unhappy and overworked manual laborers, factory workers, and mechanics of Accrington, religion—and even the impending Apocalypse—offered a welcome respite from the hardships of daily life. For these reasons, the Wintersons were a strict and devout family, and Jeanette's parents dreamed that she would grow up to become a missionary and live a life free of secular influence. However, the religion which bolstered her community served only to tear Jeanette down. When Jeanette made it clear that she was not going to live that life, her mother's fear, anger, and desire for control culminated in Jeanette's exorcism—a traumatic event for the entire Winterson family which was the first step in Jeanette's rejection of the control religion had over her life.

After she left the church—and her parents' house—Jeanette soon left Accrington for Oxford, where literature and writing became the focus of her life. Jeanette was free to read and explore all she wanted, and religion never really played a role in Jeanette's adult life. The controlling aspects of it, though, continued to rear their heads throughout Jeanette's adulthood—she remained paralyzed by her inability to find somewhere she belonged (something the church had once offered, though at far too steep a price for Jeanette) and, when confronted by the strict, controlling government protocols that stood between Jeanette and discovering her birth mother's identity, Jeanette was unable to cope, and became subject to breakdowns and fits of despair. Furthermore, when Jeanette finally confronted the neglected "creature" inside herself, she realized that that creature had controlled—and sought to continue to control—her for most of her life. Jeanette's triumph over the "creature," and her ability to learn how to live with it,

rather than in constant opposition to it, symbolizes Jeanette's regaining control over her own life, and her ultimate success in freeing herself from the controlling mechanisms of her childhood.

Religion was a stifling force in Jeanette's life throughout her childhood, and her resolution as an adult to completely divorce herself from it and to learn how to free herself from stifling impulses is what ultimately led to her salvation—from herself, from the ghosts of her past, and from the shame that once threatened to keep her from her journey toward the pursuit of happiness and love.



## THE PURSUIT OF LOVE AND HAPPINESS

Jeanette Winterson's adoptive mother Mrs. Winterson, who believed that Jeanette's lesbianism was a sin and a curse, once asked her daughter, "Why be happy when you could be normal?" This quotation lends the book its title and its central question: what is the worth of the pursuit of happiness? To Jeanette, happiness and love are intertwined and they are of paramount importance—the story of her life is the story of her quest for the happiness and love that have eluded her all her life. Through her investigations into romantic and sexual love, maternal and filial love, love of literature and language, and love of life itself, Jeanette illustrates that though difficult and uncertain, the pursuit of happiness is what makes life worth living.

Jeanette—as an adolescent and an adult—bears the scars of having felt something was "missing" from her life as a result of her adoption, and of having been abused by her mother and rejected by her family and her community. She fears that she will never be able to find and accept love, and thus will never be able to find and accept happiness. Jeanette admits that part of the obstacle to finding love is that, just as she conflated love and happiness, she has, all her life, conflated love and loss, assuming that love could only result in pain. She attributes this conflation to both her and her mother's lifelong "obsession [with] love, loss, and longing."

As Jeanette describes her search for fulfilling and healthy romantic love, she is conscious of the difficulty she has in giving love, and in accepting the love that her partners give to her. After the trauma of undergoing an exorcism after her mother found out about her first sexual relationship with another girl, Helen, Jeanette is both fearful and needful of "making [a] home" with someone. She believes—due to her experiences with her adoptive and birth mothers—that home is an "impossibility" and that abandonment is imminent. As Jeanette grows closer and closer to finding her birth mother, a social worker helping her with her case, Ria Hayward, implores her to understand that mothers giving their babies up for adoption "never want to do it." She entreats Jeanette to accept that she was wanted. "Feeling is frightening," Jeanette thinks on the train home, as

she processes the social worker's words. As Jeanette tracks down and eventually meets her birth mother, she continues in the struggle to accept that she was wanted (and that she has been wanted all her life by those around her who love her), realizations that begin to allow her to separate love from loss. "Happy endings are only a pause," Jeanette writes toward the end of the book. Jeanette's life has been consumed by the pursuit of happiness in the face of obstacle after obstacle, so she recognizes that "happy endings" are fleeting. True happiness is not a destination on a map or a final chapter in a book. Jeanette's notions about the inability to achieve permanent and consistent happiness come from her awareness that, though it's possible to impose a narrative on one's life in order to make sense of it, sticking a happy ending on the last page rings false. She chooses to end her book instead with a coda, in which she proclaims that though she is content and optimistic, the scars of her past have stayed with her, her sense of "dislodgement" has not gone away for good, and she has "no idea what happens next."



## MOTHERS, DAUGHTERS, AND FORGIVENESS

At the heart of the narrative of *Why Be Happy* are the intense and complex roles that mothers play in the lives of their daughters. Though Jeanette is at best full of pity and at worst full of hate for her abusive adoptive mother, Mrs. Winterson, she still feels a possessiveness over her: "She was a monster but she was my monster," Jeanette writes toward the end of the book, invoking their shared obsession with (and revulsion for) one another, and the grievous effects that obsession and revulsion had on each of them. As the adult Jeanette seeks out and connects with her birth mother, Ann S. she realizes that Ann is "someone [she doesn't] know at all"—someone who threw Jeanette from the "wreckage" of her own life without fully considering where Jeanette might land. Questions of love and hatred as well as abandonment and acceptance swirl around the mother-daughter relationships between Jeanette and her two mothers—in the end, Jeanette decides that forgiveness is the only thing that "redeems and unblocks" both the past and the future, and continues on her journey to forgive both of her mothers for the very different kinds of pain they inflicted on her.

The effects of all the pain Jeanette inherited from each of her mothers disrupted Jeanette's ability to love as an adult. Jeanette feared both that she would always be abandoned—an effect of Ann's having given her up—and that she would never be able to "make a home" with someone she loved—an effect of Mrs. Winterson's having made Jeanette's childhood home into an unsafe space on the days she was allowed in, and an impenetrable fortress on the days (and long nights) she was locked out in the street or the coal-hole. The journey of *Why Be Happy* is, in large part, Jeanette's journey toward learning how

to "love well"—a journey which requires her to meditate deeply on both the possibilities and deficiencies of love, and to work through her past. Jeanette engages "creature" inside of herself—her younger self, a terrifying and terrified entity which has lurked inside Jeanette for years—in order to move closer to, understand, and overcome the traumas inflicted on her by Mrs. Winterson. Shortly after this journey of recovery, Jeanette begins tracking down her birth mother Ann, a process which again allows her to move closer to, understand, and then overcome and distance herself from Ann's own decisions.

Jeanette, in the end, is able to come to terms with Ann's decision to give her up for adoption, and, to a lesser but still meaningful degree, with Mrs. Winterson's cruelty. Ann's seemingly-reckless decision to hurl Jeanette from the "wreckage" is transformed from a choice that once seemed cruel into a choice that indicates care and love—though Jeanette remains to some degree "furious," she is "glad" that Ann made the choice she made. Mrs. Winterson's abuses and abominable actions are less easily forgiven, but Jeanette's admission that even if Mrs. Winterson was a monster, she was "my monster" reveals an admission that the "dark gifts" Mrs. Winterson gave her made her into who she is.



## SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



## ROYAL ALBERT CHINA

Jeanette Winterson describes her mother's china set as "a very nasty set of sentimental tableware."

Though her mother, Mrs. Winterson, permitted few happinesses or indulgences in her household, the china set was a small joy that she allowed herself. Floral, decadent, and showy, the china was likely an anomaly in the austere Winterson household—Mrs. Winterson wanted to show "everyone else in the street that even though [she] wasn't better off, [she] was better," and saw displaying the china as a means to do so. Jeanette describes how Mrs. and Mr. Winterson saved their "spare pennies" in a tin in order to buy more china, and that she, too, caught "Royal Albert fever" as a child and began saving up on her own. "Happiness," Jeanette says, "was on the other side of a glass door—" the china was as close to happiness as her mother would ever get. In a book so thematically preoccupied with the pursuit of happiness, Mrs. Winterson's Royal Albert obsession symbolizes the basic human need for that pursuit—even in those who claim to shun or reject happiness, contentment, and indulgence. The china itself, forever "on the other side of a glass door," serves as a symbol of the fact that happiness was always kept just out of Jeanette's reach—and of her parents' reach. The china was a

means of intimidation and a way to perform a fantasy as much as it was an object of pleasure, and so the two things, in Jeanette's mind, are perhaps inextricably linked.



### JEANETTE'S MINI COOPER

When Jeanette Winterson is thrown out of her house at just sixteen years old, she begins sleeping in the “beaten-up old Mini” on which she has been learning to drive. A boy at church whose parents gave him a car without realizing that he was terrified of driving has effectively given it to Jeanette, and, with nowhere else to go, she makes the car her home. She sits in the front to read and eat, and lies down in the back to sleep—the distinction to her is very important as she attempts to cobble together some order out of her “dislodged” life. When she confesses the state of affairs to the head of English at her junior college, Mrs. Ratlow, Jeanette is offered a place to stay and a key to the Ratlow home—“I have never had a key,” Jeanette says, “except to the Mini.” The Mini is therefore a contradictory object that symbolizes both the first autonomous space Jeanette has ever had and also the depth of the solitude and isolation that Mrs. Winterson forced her to endure.

church and her house. The insidious suggestion that Jeanette came to the Wintersons by mistake or even by evil design haunts Jeanette into her adult years, as she considers through the years the randomness and unthinkingness with which adopted children are cast out into the world. Jeanette is a writer and a storyteller in part because she feels she was born to be one, but in part because imposing a narrative on her life has allowed her to “survive” it, as she says later in the text.

☞ Adopted children are self-invented because we have to be; there is an absence, a void, a question mark at the very beginning of our lives. A crucial part of our story is gone, and violently, like a bomb in the womb. The feeling that something is missing never, ever leaves you—and it can't and it shouldn't, because something *is* missing.

**Related Characters:** Jeanette Winterson (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 5

#### Explanation and Analysis

The theme of storytelling is tied closely to Jeanette's sense of having been “self-invented;” she has had to discover, tell, and shape the story of her own life. As the “crucial” beginning of her story (her birth and origins) was erased, she eventually set out on a journey to rediscover that beginning—and to fill in the gaps of her own personal narrative. Jeanette turned her life into fiction in order to survive it, and as an adult (and one now writing a *non-fiction* account of her life), she still wants to honor the impulse to recognize that something is indeed still missing from the narrative she created for herself.

### Chapter 2 Quotes

☞ I liked best the stories about buried treasure and lost children and locked-up processes. That the treasure is found, the children returned and the princess freed, seemed hopeful to me. And the Bible told me that even if nobody loved me on earth, there was God in heaven who loved me like I was the only one who had ever mattered. I believed that. It helped me.

**Related Characters:** Jeanette Winterson (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   



## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Grove Press edition of *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?* published in 2012.

### Chapter 1 Quotes

☞ When my mother was angry with me, which was often, she said, “The Devil led us to the wrong crib.”

**Related Characters:** Jeanette Winterson (speaker), Mrs. Constance Winterson

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 1

#### Explanation and Analysis

Jeanette Winterson's memoir begins with a remembrance of a line her mother “often” repeated throughout her childhood. Mrs. Winterson, unhappy in her own life and soothed only by the structure, control, and apocalyptic promises of her religion, berated Jeanette by insisting that as a baby she had been brought to the Winterson family by the devil himself. As Jeanette grew up, she faced nonstop vitriol from her mother, and was eventually cast out of her

**Page Number:** 22

### Explanation and Analysis

Just as Jeanette had to self-invent her own story in order to make sense of the narrative of her life and to fill the void left by the erasure of her past before her adoption, she has had to seek refuge in the stories of others to dull the pain of her difficult childhood. Jeanette was kept from secular books and stories as a child, and so their allure was even more striking—meanwhile, the Bible, the only book really allowed in the Winterson household, did for a time hold the answers Jeanette so desperately sought. Reeling from the pain and loss of her adoption into the strict and unloving Winterson family, Jeanette sought acceptance and love in one of the only stories she had access to: the story of her family's religion.

☝ We were matched in our lost and losing. I had lost the warm safe place, however chaotic, of the first person I loved. I had lost my name and my identity. Adopted children are dislodged. My mother felt that the whole of life was a grand dislodgement. We both wanted to go Home.

**Related Characters:** Jeanette Winterson (speaker), Mrs. Constance Winterson

**Related Themes:**   



**Page Number:** 23

### Explanation and Analysis

The “dislodged” feeling that Jeanette feels is also one that the cruel and tyrannical Mrs. Winterson experiences. Whereas Jeanette can pinpoint the source of her “dislodgement,” Mrs. Winterson feels a much more general misery at the state of her life and the world, and longed to be delivered to the afterlife. Regardless of how justified was each woman's feeling of dislodgement, they both felt out of place and desperate to find where they belonged. Mrs. Winterson and Jeanette could have bonded deeply over this experience, but instead continued to misunderstand and mistreat one another, trapped in their inability to communicate, to love, and to empathize with the other.

☝ Pursuing happiness, and I did, and still do, is not at all the same as being happy—which I think is fleeting, dependent on circumstances, and a bit bovine. The pursuit of happiness is more elusive; it is life-long, and it is not goal-centered. The pursuit isn't all or nothing—it's all AND nothing. Like all Quest Stories.

**Related Characters:** Jeanette Winterson (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 24


### Explanation and Analysis

The pursuit of happiness and love is a major theme throughout the text. Jeanette, having experienced a fundamental “dislodgement” and the resulting feeling throughout her entire life that something is “missing” from within her, battles her difficulty in feeling love or happiness with her deep desire to experience these things. Happiness, though, is not a destination—the actual state of being happy is even a little bit boring to Jeanette (“bovine,” or cow-like, as she says). Rather, the pursuit of happiness is what has driven and guided her life. She sees her pursuit of happiness as the foundation for a “Quest Story”—again, Jeanette must tell herself the story of her own life, and come to understand what has happened to her through the lens of a narrative.

## Chapter 3 Quotes

☝ A working-class tradition is an oral tradition... For the people I knew, books were few and stories were everywhere, and how you tell 'em was everything.

**Related Characters:** Jeanette Winterson (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 30

### Explanation and Analysis

As Jeanette Winterson tracks the history of her hometown, and how that history has influenced the role of religion, control, and storytelling in the life of her community, she reflects on the importance of the oral tradition in the life of the working class. Largely uneducated and often illiterate, the working-class people she knew relied on oral storytelling in order to pass down important tales, lore, and tradition. Jeanette's incubation period as a child in this community which valued the role of storytelling—and the skill of storytelling—helped to shape who she became as an





adult. The ability to control the stories that make up a community's collective history is something that is unique to an oral tradition, and it's one that shaped the town of Accrington as deeply as it shaped Jeanette Winterson as both a person and an artist.

## Chapter 4 Quotes

☛ Think about, say, Jack and the Beanstalk... [the beanstalk,] the bridge between two worlds is unpredictable and very surprising. And later, when the giant tries to climb after Jack, the beanstalk has to be chopped down pronto. This suggests to me that the pursuit of happiness, which we may as well call life, is full of surprising temporary elements—we get somewhere we couldn't go otherwise and we profit from the trip, but we can't stay there, it isn't our world, and we shouldn't let that world come crashing down into the one we can inhabit. The beanstalk has to be hopped down. But the large-scale riches from the "other world" can be brought into ours, just as Jack makes off with the singing harp and the golden hen.

**Related Characters:** Jeanette Winterson (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 35-36



### Explanation and Analysis

This quotation demonstrates how the text's themes of storytelling and the pursuit of happiness are deeply intertwined with one another. Jeanette longs to bridge the many worlds she has inhabited through the stories she tells herself about her own life. From a baby given up for adoption, to an unhappy child in a devout community, to an enthusiastic Oxford student, to an acclaimed and world-renowned writer, Jeanette Winterson has inhabited many selves and lived many "lives." She ruminates in this quotation on what can be brought from each "world" she has lived in to the other "worlds" of her life, and ponders how the story of her life is comprised of disparate but valuable lessons from many different individual stories which are bridged by one thread—Jeanette's lifelong pursuit of love and happiness.

## Chapter 5 Quotes

☛ I've spent a lot of time understanding my own violence, which is not of the pussycat kind. There are people who could never commit murder. I am not one of those people. It is better to know it. Better to know who you are, and what lies in you, what you could do, might do, under extreme provocation.

**Related Characters:** Jeanette Winterson (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 46

### Explanation and Analysis

Jeanette Winterson was an angry child, and admits that she is, still, often an angry adult. Her own "violence"—toward herself, toward her partners, toward the memories of her past—is something that she is well aware of, and still struggles against each day as she continues her pursuit of happiness. Jeanette's belief that it is best to "know who you are" speaks to the importance of storytelling within her life—if one understands their own personal narrative, and sees themselves as a character with defined traits, tics, and goals, it is possible to approach one's life with respect for that narrative and the wants and needs of the character of oneself. Jeanette respects her own narrative, no matter how dark it might be, and understands the power of the stories we tell ourselves *about* ourselves to transform or disrupt our lives.

## Chapter 6 Quotes

☛ The tent was like the war had been for all the people of my parents' age. Not real life, but a time where ordinary rules didn't apply. You could forget the bills and the bother. You had a common purpose.

**Related Characters:** Jeanette Winterson (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   



**Page Number:** 71

### Explanation and Analysis

Though the controlling religion in which she was raised eventually became a source of pain for Jeanette, she did, for a time, find comfort in it during her childhood. The Glory Crusades—or the traveling tent crusade her church brought around the countryside in the warm months of the year—was a happy time for Jeanette, and also, she says, a happy time for everyone in her community. United by a "common purpose" and a detachment from the ordinary and the everyday, the Glory Crusades were a chance to abandon the narrative of one's life, the control represented by the "rules" of the ordinary, and to launch off in a pursuit of inhabiting the fleeting but deep and communal happiness that the tent crusades represented.

When love is unreliable and you are a child, you assume that it is the nature of love—its quality—to be unreliable. Children do not find fault with their parents until later. In the beginning the love you get is the love that sets.

**Related Characters:** Jeanette Winterson (speaker), Mrs. Constance Winterson, Mr. Jack Winterson

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 76



### Explanation and Analysis

Jeanette Winterson's lifelong struggle to learn how to "love well" is part of her journey in pursuit of happiness. Just as the "void" in her childhood due to her adoption threatened to impede her happiness, the "unreliable" kind of love she experienced within her adoptive family gives her the sense that something is missing from her life—something that she must seek and find. Though as an adult, Jeanette can see her parents very clearly, as a child she had no idea that the kind of love she was getting was not what love is supposed to be. As her lifelong quest for happiness unfolds, Jeanette comes to terms with her blind spot when it comes to love, and, with the help of a series of caring and loving friends, acquaintances, and romantic partners, she begins to feel a different kind of love set in.

## Chapter 7 Quotes

I don't know why [Mrs. Winterson] hated Accrington as much as she did but she did, and yet she didn't leave. When I left it was though I had relieved her and betrayed her all at once. She longed for me to be free and did everything she could to make sure it never happened.

**Related Characters:** Jeanette Winterson (speaker), Mrs. Constance Winterson

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 88

### Explanation and Analysis

This quotation speaks to the contradictory and often impossible relationship between Jeanette and her mother, Mrs. Winterson. Jeanette struggled her whole childhood against a mother who seemed to both want to keep her out and draw her further in—Jeanette was often physically locked out of her childhood home, or kept underground in the family's coal hole. However, at the same time, her

mother implored her to forsake happiness for "normal[cy]" and to submit to the ways of her family and her church. Though Mrs. Winterson hated Accrington and longed to leave, she never did, and so when it is Jeanette's chance to get out, she does so knowing that she is going both for her mother's sake and her own. She is pursuing her own happiness and fulfilling her own dreams, but carries the knowledge that she is living out a bit of her mother's fantasy life on her behalf, as well.

I think Mrs. Winterson was afraid of happiness. Jesus was supposed to make you happy but he didn't, and if you were waiting for the Apocalypse that never came, you were bound to feel disappointed. She thought that happy meant bad/wrong/sinful. Or plain stupid. Unhappy seemed to have virtue attached to it.

**Related Characters:** Jeanette Winterson (speaker), Mrs. Constance Winterson

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** Book Page 96

### Explanation and Analysis

Mrs. Winterson was a woman of few pleasures—she enjoyed Christmastime and her collection of Royal Albert China, but very little else. She always looked toward the end of the world and the apocalypse expectantly, waiting for the end of her "dislodged" life on earth. Here, Jeanette considers the possibility that her mother was actually afraid or disdainful of happiness, rather than just an inherently unhappy woman. As Jeanette's entire adult life has been about the pursuit of happiness—the quest to find peace with herself after a painful, abusive childhood—the idea that her mother saw "virtue" in unhappiness is both baffling and somehow fitting. Mrs. Winterson's utter disinterest in pursuing her own happiness is perhaps what sets Jeanette so strongly and clearly on her path in pursuit of her own.

## Chapter 8 Quotes

☝☝ We were not allowed books but we lived in a world of print. Mrs. Winterson wrote out exhortations and stuck them all over the house Under my coat peg a sign said THINK OF GOD NOT THE DOG. Over the gas oven, on a loaf wrapper, it said MAN SHALL NOT LIVE BY BREAD ALONE. Those who sat down [on the toilet] read HE SHALL MELT THY BOWELS LIKE WAX. When I went to school my mother put quotes from the Scriptures in my hockey boots. Cheery or depressing, it was all reading and reading was what I wanted to do. Fed words and shot with them, words became clues. Piece by piece I knew they would lead me somewhere else.

**Related Characters:** Jeanette Winterson (speaker), Mrs. Constance Winterson

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 101

### Explanation and Analysis

Though Jeanette was not permitted to read secular texts, her upbringing was nonetheless one filled with words and stories. The oral tradition of her community and the drive toward storytelling all around her—combined with her mother’s “exhortations” which covered the Winterson household and found their way into Jeanette’s belongings—instilled in Jeanette an even deeper fascination with the “clues” that words represented. Though the words available to her now are not the ones she wants, she knows that she will be “led” somewhere else by words—she has faith in language and storytelling, and a desire to lose herself in other worlds.

☝☝ Were we endlessly ransacking the house, the two of us, looking for evidence of each other? I think we were—she, because I was fatally unknown to her, and she was afraid of me. Me, because I had no idea what was missing but felt the missing-ness of the missing. We circled each other, wary, abandoned, full of longing. We came close but not close enough and then we pushed each other away forever.

**Related Characters:** Jeanette Winterson (speaker), Mrs. Constance Winterson

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 103


### Explanation and Analysis

The image of Jeanette and Mrs. Winterson “endlessly ransacking the house looking for evidence of each other” encapsulates their entire tumultuous relationship. Neither woman knew or understood the other, and yet was constantly searching for ways to do so. Rather than confront each other openly, Mrs. Winterson and Jeanette circled around each other surreptitiously, clawing through each other’s belongings and emotional space in order to find out what they could about the other. This codependent, mutually suspicious but also deeply curious configuration led to further misunderstandings, resentments, and feelings of “missing-ness” between the two that continued to worsen up until Jeanette’s eventual expulsion from the home at the age of sixteen.

## Chapter 9 Quotes

☝☝ I began to realize that I had company. Writers are often exiles, outsiders, runaways and castaways. These writers were my friends. Every book was a message in a bottle. Open it.

**Related Characters:** Jeanette Winterson (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  



**Page Number:** 116

### Explanation and Analysis

As Jeanette seeks refuge in literature, unable to find solace in her home life, she feels, for the first time in a long time, that she is not alone in the world. Being in the “company” of outcast artists through her relationships with their books allows Jeanette to feel that she is on the verge of being rescued—and by referring to each book as a “message in a bottle,” she invokes an image of herself as receiving missives from other souls just as stranded as she is, and able to communicate with her beyond the bounds of time and geography through the words they have left behind. Jeanette derives both happiness and a sense of order and purpose from her reading, and her love of literature helps to illuminate the road to happiness before her.

☛ What would it have meant to be happy? What would it have meant if things had been bright, clear, good between us? It was never a question of biology or nature and nurture. I know now that we heal up through being loved, and through loving others. We don't heal by forming a secret society of one—by obsessing about the only other “one” we might admit, and being doomed to disappointment. It was a compulsive doctrine, and I carried it forward in my own life for a long time. It is of course the basis of romantic love—you + me against the world. A world where there are only two of us. A world that doesn't really exist, except that we are in it. And one of us will always fail the other.

**Related Characters:** Jeanette Winterson (speaker), Mrs. Constance Winterson

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 119-120



### Explanation and Analysis

In this quotation, Jeanette further ruminates on the pattern of secrecy and isolation between her and Mrs. Winterson. Mrs. Winterson wanted to possess and control Jeanette, and at every opportunity created circumstances in which their inability to do right by one another was magnified by their isolation and mutual obsession. Jeanette notes that this dynamic can also be the “basis of romantic love,” but that healthy love does not trap either partner in a situation in which they will “always” fail the other. As Jeanette embarks on her lifelong quest for happiness, and the answers to what it means to “love well” despite the “missing” bits of her past and the lack of good love in her childhood, she encounters this dynamic again and again until she is finally able to make peace with its origins.

## Chapter 11 Quotes

☛ The past is so hard to shift. It comes with us like a chaperone, standing between us and the newness of the present—the new chance. I was wondering if the past could be redeemed—could be reconciled.

**Related Characters:** Jeanette Winterson (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 145

### Explanation and Analysis

Jeanette, during her first term at Oxford, studies literature and considers her own life, and her own past, as she works

her way through the words of the greats. Her own past is “like a chaperone,” in that it is always with her and always hovering over her, influencing her. The “newness” of the present represents a new chance for Jeanette, but she is unable to turn away from her past. As she considers whether or not she should go home to Accrington for the Christmas holiday, Jeanette ponders the larger issue of the schism between one's past and one's present, ultimately deciding that she must at least try to redeem and reconcile her past before turning her back on it.

## Intermission Quotes

☛ Creative work bridges time because the energy of art is not time-bound. If it were we should have no interest in the art of the past, except as history or documentary. But our interest in art is our interest in ourselves both now and always.

**Related Characters:** Jeanette Winterson (speaker)

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 153

### Explanation and Analysis

In a brief meditation on the relationship between time and art, and the relationship between her own biological life and her creative life, Jeanette Winterson asserts that creative work allows one to peer through time both backwards and forwards. As the intermission serves as a bridge in the narrative between Jeanette's youth—her birth through her years at Oxford—and her more recent years, it is a fitting place for Jeanette to consider the way “interest in art” mirrors humanity's interest in itself. Storytelling, narrative, and the origins of art are of major interest to Jeanette on both a personal and an intellectual level, and here she argues that humanity's interest in the art of the past is an interest in the world of the past and the lives contained within it, but also an interest in “ourselves now.”

## Chapter 12 Quotes

☛ Mother is our first love affair. And if we hate her, we take that rage with us into other lovers. And if we lose her, where do we find her again?

**Related Characters:** Jeanette Winterson (speaker), Mrs. Constance Winterson

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 160

### Explanation and Analysis

By describing the relationship with her mother as her “first love affair,” Jeanette again revisits the patterns of destructive, isolationist “love” that originated in her childhood and which have accompanied on her journey toward the pursuit of happiness. As Jeanette negotiates the hatred she feels for Mrs. Winterson as well as the loss of having never known her birth mother, she struggles not to take her “rage” into adult relationships. Though she experiences her share of heartbreak and tumultuousness in her partnerships, Jeanette is always self-aware of her mission to learn how to love someone well, make a home with someone, and overcome the feelings loss and rage that have marked her relationship to the very concept of love since childhood.

☞ I understood something. I understood twice born was not just about being alive, but about choosing life. Choosing to be alive and consciously committing to life, in all its exuberant chaos—and pain.

**Related Characters:** Jeanette Winterson (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   


**Page Number:** 168-169

### Explanation and Analysis

After Jeanette’s failed suicide attempt, she experiences an auditory hallucination in which a voice tells her “Ye must be born again”—a quote from the Bible. Jeanette understands that the religious texts of her childhood still have a bearing on her life—but whereas religion was controlling and restrictive in her childhood, it now offers Jeanette the opportunity to take control of her own life. She makes the choice to fully commit to all the joy and pain that life has to offer, and reclaims the meaning of the phrase “twice born” for herself. To her, this act of being “born again” does not have to do with God, but rather with her own relationship to herself.

☞ A few months later [the creature and I] were having our afternoon walk when I said something about how nobody had cuddled us when we were little. I said “us,” not “you.” She held my hand. She had never done that before; mainly she walked behind shooting her sentences. We both sat down and cried. I said: “We will learn how to love.”

**Related Characters:** Jeanette Winterson (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 177

### Explanation and Analysis

As Jeanette navigates the relationship with the tortured “creature” inside of her—which takes the form of her childhood self—she must come to terms with the fact that the creature is not a separate entity, but a part of who she was and still is; who she always has been and always will be. After months of struggling against the creature—alone, in therapy, and through constant bickering—Jeanette finally accepts and admits aloud that the creature is an extension of her and must be treated as an equal. This radical acceptance allows Jeanette to break through the walls the creature had been building, and to decide to embark along with it on the remainder of her quest for an understanding of true love and true happiness.

## Chapter 13 Quotes

☞ We have a capacity for language. We have a capacity for love. We need other people to release those capacities. In my work I found a way to talk about love—and that was real. I had not found a way to love. That was changing.

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 186

### Explanation and Analysis

After a long and difficult search, Jeanette’s social worker Ria shows her a piece of paper bearing the name of her birth mother, and Jeanette becomes overwhelmed. Ria implores Jeanette to understand that she was always wanted, and Jeanette struggles to chart the ways in which she has rejected this knowledge all her life—through difficult or bad relationships, through never learning how to love well, through forcing herself to feel like an outsider in the story of her own success. As Jeanette realizes that “other people” are necessary in making the journey toward love and happiness fully “real,” she reflects on the ways in which love

has manifested itself first in her creative work and now in her actual life. She has a long way to go, but she is “changing” her outlook on what love can mean, what love can be, and what love can do.

## Chapter 15 Quotes

☛☛ Happy endings are only a pause. There are three kinds of big endings: Revenge. Tragedy. Forgiveness. Revenge and Tragedy often happen together. Forgiveness redeems the past. Forgiveness unblocks the future.

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 225


### Explanation and Analysis

Jeanette describes the ending to her own story in the context of the endings in great literature. While Revenge and Tragedy are major staples of narrative, they are often destructive and intertwined—tragedy often leads to revenge which always leads right back to tragedy. Forgiveness, however, is the dark horse of the trio, and the most productive kind of ending—it redeems and unblocks, allowing for what has come before to be accepted and what is still to come to be made possible, and even welcome. It is then this “ending” that Jeanette chooses, as she tries to forgive her mother and make peace with her past.

## Coda Quotes

☛☛ I am interested in nature/nurture. I notice that I hate Ann criticizing Mrs. Winterson. She was a monster but she was my monster.

**Related Characters:** Ann S.

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 229

### Explanation and Analysis

At the end of the narrative, having come to terms with the damaged creature inside of her created by Mrs. Winterson’s monstrous ways and also having reconnected with and forgiven her birth mother, Jeanette Winterson still feels that her two mothers are at war with one another. Though Ann has apologized to Jeanette for abandoning her, and the two have begun to get to know one another, she does not necessarily emerge as the mother Jeanette always wanted—Jeanette still finds herself feeling possessive and protective of Mrs. Winterson, despite all reason. Perhaps this stems from Jeanette’s ownership of her own narrative and her own hardships—in the story of Jeanette’s life, Mrs. Winterson’s monstrosity served a purpose, and it was Jeanette who weathered the storm of her abuse and who came out on the other side as a whole, equipped person. Mrs. Winterson was and is Jeanette’s monster, and just as Jack felled the Giant, Jeanette has overcome the villain of her story.



## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

## CHAPTER 1: THE WRONG CRIB

Jeanette Winterson describes her adoptive mother, Mrs. Winterson, as a “flamboyant depressive.” She says that Mrs. Winterson was often angry with her when she was a child and frequently told Jeanette that the Devil had led her and her husband, Mr. Winterson, to “the wrong crib” when they adopted her. Jeanette writes that her mother kept a revolver with the cleaning supplies, stayed up all night to avoid sleeping in the same bed as her husband, and kept two sets of false teeth—everyday and “best” teeth.

Jeanette does not know why her mother could not have children. Jeanette believes she was adopted just because Mrs. Winterson wanted a friend. “I was a way of saying that she was here,” Jeanette writes.

Jeanette describes the plot of her first novel, *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, which was published in 1985, as being “semi-autobiographical in that it tells the story of a young girl adopted by Pentecostal parents [who is] supposed to grow up and be a missionary [but] instead falls in love with a woman.” The first line of the novel reads: “Like most people I lived for a long time with my mother and father. My father liked to watch the wrestling, my mother liked to wrestle.” Jeanette describes herself as a “bare-knuckle fighter” who was beaten as a child but “learned never to cry.” She was often locked out overnight, and was forced to walk five miles a day to school and to church.

*From her early childhood, Jeanette’s mother told Jeanette a story of her wickedness and “wrong-ness.” Jeanette uses this as the first moment of her memoir in order to illustrate the effects that being told that story over and over again will come to have on her entire life. This beginning also suggests that, no matter how Jeanette had turned out as an adult, her mother would always have been dissatisfied.*



*Jeanette believes that Mrs. Winterson adopted her for the wrong reasons, and that perhaps this doomed their relationship from the start.*



*Jeanette’s success has grown out of the acclaim she received for her first novel, which she published at a young age. Writing the novel, and living in the aftermath of having published something so personal, has shaped Jeanette’s adult life. Because of this, it’s important for Jeanette to reckon with the relationship between the content of her novel and the real facts of her childhood.*



Jeanette recalls the “furious” letter her mother sent her upon the publication of *Oranges* in which she demanded a phone call. Jeanette, who hadn’t seen her mother in years, went to a phone booth in order to make the call, and pictured her mother far away in Accrington also sitting in a phone booth—her tall, nearly two-hundred-pound mother would have been dressed in a headscarf and light makeup and would have “filled the phone box.” She was, Jeanette recalls, “larger than life.” On the phone, Jeanette tried to explain the book to Mrs. Winterson, who complained she’d had to order the novel under a fake name in order to avoid embarrassment. A tone sounding through the receiver told Jeanette to put more money in the coin slot in order to continue the call, and this reminded her of getting locked out on the doorstep of her childhood home. Mrs. Winterson told Jeanette that any success she’d had because of the book was “from the Devil,” and asked why, if the story was fiction, would Jeanette have chosen to also name the main character Jeanette.

Jeanette states that “adopted children are self-invented because we have to be,” and her whole life has been the process of “setting [her] story against [her mother’s.]” As Mrs. Winterson continued on the phone to question her about the “truth” of the book, Jeanette considered—and considers still in the present day—the fact that the version of her life that appears in *Oranges* is a less-painful story than the truth of her life. It is a version of her story she could “survive,” and that things were “much lonelier” in real life than they were for the Jeanette of the novel.

Jeanette recalls the friends she made in school, and the cruel ways she severed those friendships. Because she was adopted, and “adoption is outside,” she often found herself “act[ing] out what it feels like to be the one who doesn’t belong.” She writes that it was “impossible to believe that anyone [could] love [her] for [her]self.”

Jeanette continues to meditate on truth as she remembers the phone call with Mrs. Winterson. Her mother “objected to what [Jeanette] had put in” the book, but Jeanette feels that what she left out “says just as much.” What she had left out of her novel was the story’s “silent twin.” She has turned to fiction as a way to stop herself from being silenced—what her mother always wanted her to be. “Unhappy families,” Winterson writes, “are conspiracies of silence, [and] the one who breaks the silence is never forgiven.”

*Jeanette describing her mother as a kind of giant will have larger implications later on in the book, as Jeanette compares her own life to the story of Jack and the Beanstalk and describes her mother as a “monster.” In this scene, Jeanette confronts her mother over their latest difference of opinions, which revolve around Jeanette’s success as a novelist. Clearly this disagreement has not escaped the effects of the tumultuous and painful relationship they shared during Jeanette’s childhood. It’s also notable that Jeanette’s mother read her daughter’s devastating autobiographical novel and could only feel anger and embarrassment, instead of empathy and remorse for what she put her daughter through.*



*Jeanette’s mother does not understand her or her struggle. In order to cope with her suffering and loneliness, Jeanette has had to invent a fictionalized version of her childhood, which shows how storytelling enables Jeanette to process and overcome trauma. Here, Jeanette suggests that her novel was a sanitized version of her actual suffering, which is portrayed more fully in this memoir.*



*Jeanette examines the ways in which the insecurities given to her by Mrs. Winterson’s cruel words about “the wrong crib” have affected her for her entire life—not just in her adult relationships, but in her childhood friendships, as well.*



*In breaking the silence about her family, Jeanette took one major step in her life’s journey of pursuing happiness. However, that book was still fiction. In revealing the “silent twin” of her novel through this memoir, Jeanette continues that work and is able to reckon with her past in a more direct way.*





Though God, for many, is forgiveness, Jeanette writes that the God of her mother's house was the Old Testament God, and "there was no forgiveness without a great deal of sacrifice." Her mother was unhappy and waiting for the Apocalypse—her mother saw her life as a "Vale of Tears, a pre-death experience." Mrs. Winterson prayed for death "every day," which Jeanette comically proclaims was "hard on [her] and [her] dad."

When Jeanette was naughty as a child, her mother told her the story of the Devil and the crib: there had been a little boy in the crib next to Jeanette when Mr. and Mrs. Winterson had adopted her, and his name had been Paul. Paul was the paragon of goodness against which Jeanette was always held up.

Jeanette recalls a memory in which she is gardening with her grandfather. She wears a cowboy outfit—her favorite outfit—and a strange woman comes up to the garden gate. Jeanette's grandfather tells her to go inside and find Mrs. Winterson. Mrs. Winterson and the woman argue terribly at the front door, and Jeanette senses that both women feel "animal fear." Once the woman leaves, Jeanette asks whether the woman who came to the door was her real mother, and Mrs. Winterson hits her so hard she falls to the ground. When Jeanette returns to the garden, her grandfather is working peacefully.

## CHAPTER 2: MY ADVICE TO ANYBODY IS: GET BORN

Jeanette Winterson recounts the history and geography of the place of her birth—Manchester, England, which is in the "south of the north" of the country. Jeanette describes the region as "untamed and unmetropolitan [but] connected and worldly." As Manchester was "the world's first industrial city"—and, until WWI, the place where 65% of the world's cotton was processed—it was influential on industrial cities and towns the world over. Manchester was and is "all mix"—both radical and repressive, utilitarian and utopian. Manchester life in the late mid-1800s was difficult, grimy, and "raw," and even Charles Dickens wrote of the plight of the working class there, describing factory workers and their children as "ragged [and] filthy horde[s]." The despicable conditions "pitched Manchester into radicalism."

*Religion controlled Jeanette's circumstances from an early age. Her household was a strict and unforgiving one, just as her mother's vision of God was strict and unforgiving. Jeanette's desire to pursue happiness perhaps grows out of her desire to overturn her mother's idea that life could not have any happiness in it at all.*



*Because Jeanette was always told that she was the wrong choice, the displacement she felt as a result of her adoption was magnified. The cruelty of projecting goodness onto this unknown infant in order to make Jeanette feel ashamed is profound.*



*This mysterious memory from Jeanette's childhood will ultimately be a part of what drives her, later in life, to search for her roots. The fact that so much of Jeanette's own life was kept from her, or misrepresented, also has had an influence on Jeanette's desire to be a storyteller—to control and change the narrative of her own life for once.*



*Jeanette wants for her readers to understand the world from which she comes. She describes Manchester as a gritty and grimy place which ultimately rose above its own circumstances—as Manchester was radicalized, it took control of its own narrative. Jeanette herself has done this with her own life, and, as she will soon explain, she believes that without the example of her birthplace she might not have gained such control.*



Jeanette argues that “where you are born stamps who you are.” Her birth mother was a factory worker and her adoptive father was a manual laborer—Jeanette’s history, both biological and adoptive, is the history of the working class. Jeanette “dreamed of escape” from an early age, and now as an adult she wonders what happens to society when individualism and escapism win out over community.

Jeanette describes the route between Manchester, where she was born, and the town of Accrington, where she was raised—the Pennines, a “wild rough low mountain range” is in view during the journey one might take between the two points, offering an “[un]easy beauty.” Jeanette describes the landscape as “taciturn [and] reluctant.”

Jeanette was born in August of 1959 and adopted on the 21st of January, 1960. Jeanette does not know—and “never will”—whether Mrs. Winterson was unable to have children or just unwilling to “put herself through the necessaries.”

Jeanette’s adoptive parents, the Wintersons, had purchased their home in 1947. Before they found religion, they smoked and drank—after they become Pentecostal Evangelicals, both quit drinking but continued smoking. Her mother smoked in secret, and allowed her husband only a few cigarettes a week, describing them as “his only pleasure.” Jeanette laments her father’s restricted and sexless life.

Jeanette writes that she screamed nonstop until she was two years old. As child psychology “hadn’t reached Accrington,” her adoptive parents failed to realize that perhaps she was experiencing “the trauma of early separation from the love object that is the mother,” and instead proclaimed her a “Devil baby.” As a child, Jeanette was “very often full of rage and despair,” and her parents fought often—the battle between the three of them “was really the battle between happiness and unhappiness.” Jeanette turned to the Bible, which told her that even if she was unloved on Earth, “there was God in heaven” who loved her enormously. In spite of all the traumas of her childhood, Jeanette says, she “was and [is] in love with life.”

*Jeanette, like the city of Manchester, has risen above her circumstances and changed the narrative of her life. As she ponders whether individualism is a detriment to community, she realizes that the two are linked—she is who she is because of where she comes from, but she does not have to surrender herself to the “story” of her life—she can make a new one for herself.*



*The land between Manchester and Accrington and its “uneasy beauty” is symbolic of the gap between where Jeanette was born—and who she was born to be—and where she was raised, and how.*



*This passage illustrates how little Jeanette knows, even as an adult, about her mother. She will never know whether her mother was struggling with infertility or was simply too pious and afraid of pleasure (or possibly even asexual, as is later suggested) to attempt to bear her own children.*



*Jeanette’s parents led strict and solemn lives, but she especially feels for her father, who she believes would have chosen pleasure and happiness if he had been able to.*



*Jeanette was singled out as a tool of the Devil from infancy—her parents did not perceive her as her own person, and they were unequipped to cater to their daughter’s needs. As Jeanette grew older, the battle for “unhappiness” to take over the Winterson household raged on, and Jeanette fought back at every turn.*



Mrs. Winterson, on the other hand, did not love life. She saw the only escape from her misery as the Apocalypse. She kept her War Cupboard, full of emergency supplies, intact, planning to use it as a bunker when the end of the world arrived. Mrs. Winterson told Jeanette that an angel would come to collect them, and Jeanette realized that her mother's mind was totally occupied with "elaborate interpretations" of the Apocalypse and its aftermath. Jeanette writes that she and her mother had both lost things in life, and were "matched" in their feeling of being "dislodged" and wanting to go "Home."

Jeanette writes that she was "excited" about the Apocalypse as a child, but "secretly hoped" that she would live to adulthood in order to see what the world had to offer her. She reflects on her lifelong goal of pursuing happiness, and describes the right to the pursuit of happiness as "the right to swim upstream, salmon-wise." Jeanette believes that the pursuit of happiness is not the same thing as being happy, and that happy times will always pass. Pursuing happiness, however, is a "quest stor[y]" which is "life-long and not goal-centered."

*Jeanette and her mother were entrapped in similar feelings of being out of place in their own worlds. However, a vast chasm remained between them, and they were never able to bond over their "matched" feelings. Mrs. Winterson was too obsessed with the end of the world, and with acting strict and pious in order to hopefully herald its arrival.*



*Jeanette's "upstream" quest throughout her entire life started at an early age. In the midst of a deeply unhappy childhood, she dreamed of a better existence, and the entire driving force of her life has been to embark upon—and enjoy—the journey toward happiness. Though Jeanette is still unsure about happiness as a state of being, she believes that the pursuit is worth everything.*



### CHAPTER 3: IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE WORD

Mrs. Winterson, Jeanette writes, was "in charge of language." Mr. Winterson was nearly illiterate, having left school at twelve to work at the Liverpool docks, and all Mrs. Winterson read was the Bible. "She read [it] as though it had just been written," and from this quality of her mother's Jeanette understood "that the power of a text is not time-bound."

Jeanette describes the role of the Bible—specifically the 1611 version—in the lives of working-class families. The elevated language was the language of Shakespeare, and in the nighttime classes for working-class men at the Mechanics' Institute and other such places the men—often poorly educated—read Shakespeare with ease. When the elevated language of the Bible was "stripped out," Jeanette says, "uneducated men and women had no more easy everyday connection to four hundred years of the English language." Even Mrs. Winterson, Jeanette recalls, quoted John Donne and Shakespeare from memory with ease.

"A working-class tradition is an oral one, not a bookish one," Jeanette writes. She recalls that while she was growing up, "books were few [but] stories were everywhere." Mrs. Winterson loved stories, and told tales of her past, expressed dreams of her future (after the Apocalypse, of course) and miracle stories—stories, for instance, about "an extra pound [appearing] in your purse when you needed it most."

*Jeanette's love of words began with her mother's influence and with the Bible. There was a strong relationship between storytelling and control in Jeanette's youth—a relationship that she sought to complicate and challenge as she grew older.*



*Jeanette once again wants for her readers to understand the larger cultural atmosphere in which her hometown and her religious community was situated. The heightened language of the most widely-used version of the Bible at that time allowed her parents and their contemporaries to feel connected to the English language, a connection that was "stripped" away as the Bible was adapted. It didn't need to be changed to be more widely readable in the first place, is Jeanette's main point—though uneducated, the working-class members of her community were able to understand more "complex" texts through the lens of their version of the Bible.*



*Jeanette's life was saturated with storytelling not just in the form of her mother's obsession with the Bible, but in the form of her community's commitment to and love of storytelling more broadly. Stories were what connected, reassured, and bonded the community of Accrington.*



## CHAPTER 4: THE TROUBLE WITH A BOOK...

There were only six books in the Winterson home, Jeanette writes. Mrs. Winterson said that “The trouble with a book is that you never know what’s in it until it’s too late.” Jeanette read in secret throughout her childhood, drawing strength from stories of transformation, trickery, and belonging in one’s world.

Despite her strict no-books rule, Mrs. Winterson herself read murder mysteries voraciously, and sent Jeanette to the Accrington Public Library to collect and return books for her. Eventually, on one of these trips, Jeanette began reading fiction, starting alphabetically. Jeanette concedes that her mother was, in a way, right about stories being dangerous: “A book is a door. You open it. You step through. Do you come back?”

Jeanette recalls being sixteen and about to be “throw[n] out of the house forever”—Mrs. Winterson has found out that Jeanette is a lesbian. Jeanette recalls a trip to the library during this period to collect one of her mother’s books—[Murder in the Cathedral](#) by T.S. Eliot, which her mother mistook for a murder mystery. The book was a book of poetry, and Jeanette opened it and began to read it even though she was strictly working her way through “ENGLISH LITERATURE IN PROSE A-Z.” Jeanette began to cry reading Eliot’s lines, and felt that though she was confused about everything in her life at that point, poetry offered her “tough language” and a “finding place” that helped her to push through.

Also during this time period, Jeanette was working at the Accrington market on Saturdays, and putting the money she earned there towards buying her own books and hiding them away beneath her bed. One night, Mrs. Winterson came into her room and saw a corner of a paperback—it was D.H. Lawrence. Believing Lawrence to be a “Satanist and a pornographer,” Mrs. Winterson threw the book out the window and then ransacked Jeanette’s secret collection. She took Jeanette’s books into the other room, over to the stove, and lit them on fire. The books, in that moment, were being destroyed, but also provided the literal light and warmth that they had always represented to Jeanette. Jeanette believes this incident had an effect on the way she writes—“collecting scraps, uncertain of continuous narrative...[in Eliot’s words,] *These fragments have I shored against my ruin...*”

*Jeanette knew that certain stories were restricted, and this made the world of books and storytelling even more appealing. Stories were Jeanette’s refuge in a time of isolation, and she pursued the happiness and solace they offered doggedly.*



*The inequality and unfairness between Jeanette and Mrs. Winterson is highlighted in this passage. Jeanette’s mother did have a love of literature, but refused to pass that along to her daughter consciously—rather, she made Jeanette’s love of reading an inevitability by making it something that was restricted in the first place. Jeanette concedes that her mother was right about the power of books and the role that storytelling would come to play in her life.*



*Literature—not just stories, but poetry and language—have been a refuge for Jeanette in the worst moments of her life. Even in times of despair, when she felt as if she would never escape her mother’s controlling world, words were what gave Jeanette a sense of purpose, hope, and community.*



*Mrs. Winterson’s attempt to control Jeanette’s world so stringently, and to keep her from the things she loved, only made Jeanette more resolute in her desire to seek her own happiness and fulfill her own wishes for herself and her life. The moment when the burning scraps of Jeanette’s books provide her, for just a moment, with the literal warmth and comfort they have been metaphorically giving her over the years, is symbolic of the irrefutable value and meaning of literature in Jeanette’s life. Stories are the only things keeping her from “ruin.” At the same time, the image of burning books shows just how tyrannical Mrs. Winterson truly is.*



The book-burning incident also forced Jeanette to confront that anything physical could be taken from her—only the things inside of her were safe. She began memorizing poetry and prose, believing them to be “medicines.” She felt pain, but also joy, and she one day realized that “there was something else [she] could do”—she could write a book of her own.

*Jeanette steeled herself against further punishment and disappointment by realizing that she needed to internalize everything that was important to her—and that she could generate material from her own sorrow and trouble.*



## CHAPTER 5: AT HOME

Jeanette describes her childhood home on Water Street in Accrington. It was a narrow house with an outside toilet known as the “Betty.” Until she was fourteen, Jeanette slept in the same room as her parents—when she was fourteen, they divided the space and added a bathroom upstairs.

*The Winterson home was small and antiquated, and Jeanette was given no privacy within it for much of her life.*



Though the outside toilet was a “good” place—clean, whitewashed, compact, and the perfect place for reading books in secret, the coal-hole outside—the family’s underground coal bunker, which they used to store the coal needed to heat their house—was “not a good place.” Jeanette was often locked down there as a punishment—sometimes, she says, “a whole day went by before punishment was meted out, and so crime and punishment seemed disconnected.” As a result, she hated Mrs. and Mr. Winterson “with the hatred of the helpless; a flaring, subsiding hatred that became the bed of the relationship.”

*Jeanette’s punishments are revealed to have been cruel and unusual—the family’s reliance on coal provided them with a claustrophobic and dirty space, a space that they made into a hellish chamber for Jeanette. Because her punishments were doled out so long after her “crimes,” she was unable to connect her actions with their consequences. The story of her life thus became one of a single unending and unfair punishment.*



Jeanette describes the north of England—historically largely working-class—as a “routinely brutal world” in which physical abuse and punishment were widely accepted. To this day, Jeanette writes, she experiences violent tendencies of her own when angry, but thinks “it is better to [be aware of] who you are, what lies in you, what you might do under extreme provocation.”

*Jeanette has a holistic view of herself, her past, and the circumstances of the place she grew up in, which allows her to know who she is and what she is capable of, and to understand the story of herself.*



Some time after Mrs. Winterson died (which occurred when Jeanette was an adult), Mr. Winterson married his second wife, Lillian. A few years after the marriage, Jeanette recalls, he began hitting Lillian. One day Lillian called Jeanette to tell her that they had been throwing things at each other. Jeanette had never seen her father hit Mrs. Winterson, and he only ever hit Jeanette under Mrs. Winterson’s instructions. When Jeanette arrived at her father’s house, there was broken crockery all over, and Lillian was visibly bruised and upset. Lillian told Jeanette that there was no crockery left, as she had forced Mr. Winterson to throw out Mrs. Winterson’s extensive collection of **Royal Albert china** when they married and start over.

*The influence of violence and the desire for control continues to plague the Winterson family even after the death of Mrs. Winterson. Lillian has made an effort to rid her and Mr. Winterson’s relationship of any remaining symbols of Mrs. Winterson, but the effects of the Wintersons’ strict and claustrophobic life together remain.*



Jeanette took Mr. Winterson out on a drive, and when she asked him about the fight, he stayed silent for half an hour before breaking down in tears and beginning to tell Jeanette about the war—he had been in the D-Day landings. After explaining his difficulty recovering from the violence of the war, he worries aloud to Jeanette that Mrs. Winterson will not forgive him for remarrying—he confesses that he is “frightened,” and Jeanette thinks he seems like “a little boy,” and realizes that perhaps he always has been.

Jeanette takes Lillian shopping for more crockery. Lillian disparages Mrs. Winterson’s old **china**, and berates her for having abused both Jeanette and Mr. Winterson.

Jeanette writes that her mother “married down,” and as a result wanted to find a way to show everyone around her that “even though [she wasn’t] better off, [she was] better.” The **Royal Albert china** was an easy way to do so—and as Mrs. and Mr. Winterson saved their pennies to purchase more and more china, Jeanette, too, found herself swept up in “Royal Albert fever.” The china was one of the only things that made her mother happy, though “happiness was still on the other side of a glass door” for Mrs. Winterson.

Jeanette describes her home life as “a bit odd.” She did not go to school until she was five years old—her grandmother, her mother’s mother, was dying, and the Wintersons were living with Mrs. Winterson’s parents. Jeanette adored her grandmother, and was the one who found her when she died. The Wintersons soon moved back to their narrow home on Water Street, and Jeanette says that this is when she believes her mother’s depression began. Jeanette describes her “odd” childhood and home life in a series of vignettes meant to illustrate the chaotic and distrustful nature of the “Winterson-world.” Mr. Winterson was always either at the factory or at church, while Mrs. Winterson stayed home depressed and languorous most days and sat up awake all night most nights, reading the Bible or baking. Jeanette’s mother watched her constantly for “signs of possession,” and when Jeanette began masturbating around the same time she lost hearing in her ears (due to a problem with her adenoids), her mother blamed the affliction on Jeanette’s badness. When Jeanette was in the hospital having her adenoids out, she was seized with panic, as she believed her mother was taking her to have her “adopted again.”

*Though Mrs. Winterson is not the sole cause of Mr. Winterson’s continuing misery, her memory continues to haunt him. As Mr. Winterson tells Jeanette the story of his life, Jeanette realizes that her father has never “grown up” out of the fear and misery that he retained for so many years, and she feels a burst of compassion and pity for him.*



*Lillian continues to lament the effect that Mrs. Winterson has had on both Jeanette and Mr. Winterson—and also mocks the china, the physical symbol of Mrs. Winterson’s influence.*



*The one thing that brought Mrs. Winterson happiness was the Royal Albert China—however, it only made her happy because it was a way for her to assert her dominance over those around her. Moreover, Mrs. Winterson had to keep the china locked up in a cabinet—she picked as an object of her happiness something that she could not interact with daily, and something that could be easily shattered.*



*As Jeanette delves into the peculiarities and problems of her home life, she attempts to pin down the root of her mother’s depression—and, by proxy, to impose a narrative on the story of her mother’s suffering, and thus her own as well. Jeanette was always eyed with suspicion, and as she grew older and discovered her body, she began to fear—due to her previously-mentioned inability to intuit the link between her behavior and her severe, abusive punishments—that she would once again be “dislodged” from the only place she knew as home.*



Jeanette did eventually start school a year late, though her mother believed schools were a “Breeding Ground” for sin. Jeanette was a “bad” child and was given bad reports in school, and often spent her time doodling “picture of Hell which [she] took home for [Mrs. Winterson] to admire.” Jeanette left the school after burning down the play kitchen, and her headmistress told Mrs. Winterson that Jeanette was “domineering and aggressive.” Mrs. Winterson, as she had when Jeanette was a baby screaming day in and day out, once again came to believe that Jeanette was “demon possessed.”

When Jeanette switched to a school farther from home, she did not come home for lunch—instead she took slices of white bread and cheese with her, as the Wintersons had no money for school lunches. Jeanette notes that no one at her school thought this odd—“there were plenty of [other] kids who didn’t get fed properly.”

In the Winterson house, a coal fire provided heat, and Jeanette was in charge of getting it started up in the mornings. Mrs. Winterson would stay up all night, and sleep during the days. Jeanette describes her mother as a “solitary woman who longed for one person to know her,” and wonders if the fact that she now feels she knows her mother, years after her mother’s death, is too little, “too late.”

Jeanette reflects upon the fact that her home “did not represent order and did not stand for safety,” and that she left it at the very young age of sixteen. Just as her mother was unable to build a home for her, Jeanette finds that it is now difficult for her to share a home with anyone else. She has a terrible need for “distance and privacy” because Mrs. Winterson “never respected” her privacy while she lived at home. She never had a key to the narrow house on Water Street, and was entirely dependent on her mother’s mood to be let in or allowed out. Now, in her adult life, Jeanette says that the door to her home is most always open.

Mrs. Winterson, Jeanette says, lived in the same home from 1947 until she died in the year 1990. Her mother “hated the small and the mean, and yet that is what she had.” Jeanette then describes the series of large houses she has bought for herself in adulthood—houses that she says she has bought for herself, and “for the ghost of [her] mother.”

*Jeanette was growing up in her mother’s image—she was “domineering and aggressive” and obsessed with images and ideas of Hell, just like Mrs. Winterson. But rather than recognizing her own behaviors reflected back at her in Jeanette, Mrs. Winterson believed that Jeanette was “possessed,” and blamed it all on the Devil rather than take any responsibility for her daughter’s development and actions.*



*Poverty was rampant in Jeanette’s working-class hometown, and while she felt different from her classmates in other ways, her lack of “proper” nutrition was not any particular source of shame or stigma, as it was in many ways the norm.*



*Jeanette has come to understand a story of her mother’s life in which Mrs. Winterson was a complicated figure—however, Jeanette does not know if it’s redemptive or useful to be able to see her mother and know her in this way so many years after the dissolution of their relationship, as well as Mrs. Winterson’s death.*



*Though Mrs. Winterson attempted to create a controlling, ordered environment for Jeanette to grow up in, her actions had the effect of throwing the entire Winterson household into a cycle of despair and chaos. The effects of this continue to plague Jeanette as an adult, though she has done and continues to do all she can to counteract them and pursue her own sense of security and happiness in the homes she has lived in as an adult.*



*Everything in Mrs. Winterson’s life seemed to turn out opposite to how she hoped or dreamed it would. By attempting to exert so much control over her own life—and the narrative of her own life—Mrs. Winterson actually created a lot of pain for herself and inspired both revolt and revulsion in her only daughter. Only after Mrs. Winterson’s death has Jeanette been able to, in some way, seek to honor her mother’s “ghost.”*



Jeanette feels that the house of her childhood is “held in time or outside of time,” and reflects on the difference between locked and unlocked time, as well as the repetition of religious and cultural rituals that allow a certain moment in time to be entered again and again.

*As an adult, Jeanette is unable to fully escape the orbit of her childhood traumas. Time is something she thinks about a lot, and the ways in which humans seek to recreate, reexamine, or reenter periods of time that are long gone is a motif throughout the remainder of the text.*



When she left home at the age of sixteen, Jeanette writes, she bought herself a rug, and the rug became a staple of wherever she lived as she bounced from place to place. She knew that the “safe place” of her home could not help her anymore. Though leaving was not the “sensible” thing to do, and though she experienced a time of “mourning, loss, [and] fear,” it was a risk she had to take.

*Jeanette has learned how to make a home for herself over the years, despite the initial fear and risk in striking out on her own as a young teen. She has had to recreate the story of her own life as one she could live with—and through.*



## CHAPTER 6: CHURCH

Jeanette Winterson describes the Elim Pentecostal Church in Accrington—a place which was “the center of [her] life for sixteen years.” An unconventional place of worship, “it had no pews, no altar, no nave or chancel, no stained glass, no candles, no organ.” Instead it had fold-up wooden chairs for congregants to sit on, and a pit that could be filled with water for baptismal rites in order to fully immerse those being baptized.

*The Elim Pentecostal Church was a place for raw worship, not done up in elaborate décor or filled with any distractions from the task at hand: witnessing God and being saved. It also noticeably reflects the general poverty of its congregation.*



Jeanette describes Mrs. Winterson’s belief that bodily resurrection was “unscientific,” despite the fact that she believed fully in the reality of the apocalypse. Mrs. Winterson claimed that witnessing the effects of the atomic bomb forced her to see that life is made of energy, not mass. Mrs. Winterson failed to realize, Jeanette comments, that her life on earth “did not need to be trapped in mass” either.

*Jeanette points out the cruel irony of her mother’s life: Mrs. Winterson believed that she would be delivered in the afterlife, and took no care to make her life on earth feel as if she were anything other than “trapped.”*



Jeanette returns to describing the baptismal ritual, in which the candidate was covered in a white sheet, fully submerged in the water, and then treated to a hearty supper. Infants were not baptized—only adults, who understand the weight of giving their lives over to Jesus Christ. Jeanette considers the advantages and pitfalls of the “second birth”—on the one hand, the congregant chooses consciously, through self-reflection, the religious path; on the other hand, Jeanette writes, “the whole process [can] very easily become another kind of rote learning where nothing is chosen at all.” Jeanette writes that religion allowed the members of her working-class town to live fuller, deeper lives—as they were uneducated, the Bible was what “worked their brains.” Every life needs “some higher purpose,” she argues.

*Religion served an important purpose in Jeanette’s hometown, and the idea that members of the Elim Pentecostal Church were able to choose their faith consciously contributed to the devoted, Evangelical atmosphere within the congregation.*





Commonplace incidents—a fox in the henhouse, rain after hanging laundry out to dry—were seen as signs, and bad omens were remedied with collective prayer. Mrs. Winterson, however, always prayed alone—and standing up rather than on her knees. Jeanette remembers church, during her childhood, as “a place of mutual help and imaginative possibility,” and notes that no one there, including Jeanette herself, “felt trapped or hopeless.” The promise of eternal life kept her otherwise poor, downtrodden community uplifted.

The church held events every single night, and Jeanette attended them all except for Thursday night meetings, which were for men. In the summertime, the congregation traveled with the “Glory Crusade,” a tent revival which took trips to other nearby churches. Jeanette describes “the fact of being in a tent [with other churchgoers]” as “a kind of bond.” The tent was a time when “ordinary rules didn’t apply,” and a “common purpose” overtook those within the tent. Jeanette, as a child, was an active and willing participant in these Glory Crusades.

Jeanette writes that there were many contradictions in the church’s role—there was camaraderie and “simple happiness,” but also “the cruelty of dogma [and a] miserable rigidity,” and that these contradictions are admittedly difficult to understand “unless you have lived them.” She loved traveling to the Glory Crusades by bike, while her mother rode a coach “so that she could smoke.” One day, Mrs. Winterson brought a Methodist convert called Auntie Nellie to the revival—Auntie Nellie lived in a tenement, was unmarried, and had no family to speak of. She fed local children when they had nothing to eat, and was a generally loved member of the community. One day, Auntie Nellie was found dead, and had to be cut out of the coat she always wore—she wore no clothes beneath it, and Jeanette and the church-women who attended to her could not find any clothes at all in her apartment. The women taught Jeanette how to prepare a body, and Jeanette writes that she would never “give up [her] body to a stranger to wash and dress” as Auntie Nellie’s body was given to strangers. Preparing the body of the kind, generous Auntie Nellie, Jeanette writes, was her “first lesson in love.”

*As Jeanette contrasts the way her mother prayed versus the way the religious community she was a part of prays, Jeanette further illustrates how alone Mrs. Winterson always was—because of her own choices. There was refuge, community, and help to be found in the Church, but Mrs. Winterson excluded herself from others and created a world only for herself.*



*It makes sense that the bright spots in Jeanette’s childhood—the tent revivals—were marked by an abandonment of “ordinary rules” and a sense of community. Jeanette was constantly immobilized by her mother’s many rules, and isolated from others—so the times in her life when these things broke down and gave way to community and freedom were joyous ones for her.*



*Through her description of Auntie Nellie, Jeanette reveals that it is not only those who exclude themselves and see themselves as better than those around them who suffer and die alone. In contrast to Mrs. Winterson, Auntie Nellie was a devoted member of both her religious and secular local communities, and she died in poverty and squalor without anyone at her side. Jeanette receives her first lesson in love and compassion from witnessing Auntie Nellie’s tragic end—a major point in her story, as there are very few “lessons in love” to be learned in the Winterson household.*



Though “unconditional love is what a child should expect from a parent, it rarely works out that way,” Jeanette writes. Unable to relax at home or to make friends at school, and with her whole life saturated with visions of the apocalypse, Jeanette felt unsure of her mother’s love, and never asked Mrs. Winterson whether or not she loved her. Jeanette writes that Mrs. Winterson loved her “on those days when she was able to love.” This unreliable sense of love led to Jeanette developing the assumption that “the nature of love [is] to be unreliable.” Jeanette wonders whether her mother’s love of the vengeful Old Testament God, “who demands absolute love from his ‘children’ but thinks nothing of [harming] them” led to Mrs. Winterson’s poor treatment of Jeanette, her only child. Mrs. Winterson “never did reform or improve,” unlike the God of the Old Testament, and would instead make Jeanette a cake after striking her, or take her for fish and chips after locking her out of the house all night. Jeanette writes that she developed a “wildness” that made love “reckless, dangerous, [and full of] heartbreak”; she grew up with “no idea that love could be as reliable as the sun.”

One day, after a prayer meeting at church, an older girl named Helen kisses Jeanette. Jeanette describes it as her “first moment of recognition and desire.” She fell in love at fifteen years old, and the two girls met secretly, passed notes, dreamed together of running away, and slept together at Helen’s house. One night, the two spent the night at Jeanette’s. After the girls had fallen asleep together in Jeanette’s bed, Mrs. Winterson came into the room with a flashlight—“it was a signal,” Jeanette writes, of “the end of the world.” Jeanette willed herself to believe that nothing had happened—what she did not know was that Mrs. Winterson had agreed to let Helen sleep over in an attempt to “look for proof” after intercepting the girls’ letters.

The “air raid” happened on a Sunday morning at church—when Jeanette walked in, the entire congregation was looking at her, and soon the pastor’s speech turned to Romans 1:26: “The women did change their natural use into that which is against nature.” Helen burst out of the church crying, and Jeanette was sent out with the pastor, who informed her that “there was going to be an exorcism.” Jeanette insisted that she was not possessed by a demon—that she loved Helen—but this only “made things worse.” Helen admitted to having a demon, and Jeanette “hated” her for not having stood up for their love.

*As Jeanette reflects on the tumultuous, unloving relationship she had with Mrs. Winterson, she delves into larger questions of how people model the love they give on the love they have seen demonstrated. Just as Mrs. Winterson modeled her love on the Old Testament God—perhaps the only source of “love” she had ever known—Jeanette has come to model love on what her mother’s love was, which was selfish, unreliable, volatile, and noncommittal.*



*Jeanette’s love affair with Helen provides her with her first moment of self-recognition, but the happiness she feels is short-lived and will ultimately come at a great price. Mrs. Winterson draws Jeanette into a trap, looking for proof of sin in the daughter she has mistrusted and maligned since infancy.*



*The fallout of Jeanette and Helen’s choice to pursue a relationship results in their public shaming and private torture. Jeanette is angry and hurt when Helen denies their love and instead blames it on demon possession—more than that, she is left alone in her defiance of the church and her commitment to the truth of her feelings and the pursuit of her own happiness.*



Jeanette was forced to undergo an exorcism: she was “locked in the parlor of the Winterson house with the curtains closed and no food or heat for three days.” She was prayed over and deprived of sleep, and was beaten by one of the church elders, who also sexually assaulted her—he taunted her for liking girls and when he attempted to kiss her, she bit his tongue, blacked out, and woke up in her room. Mrs. Winterson brought Jeanette food, told her that her birth mother “was going with men at sixteen... ‘What’s bred in the bone comes out in the marrow.’” Mrs. Winterson made Jeanette promise never to see Helen again, and Jeanette agreed.

That night, Jeanette goes to Helen’s house. Helen tells Jeanette that she confessed everything, and when Jeanette asks Helen to kiss her, Helen refuses, and sends her away. Jeanette asks Helen to write to her, but Helen again refuses. Jeanette, speaking from the present day, writes that Helen eventually married an ex-army man training to be a missionary—she saw Helen again, just once, and she had become “smug and neurotic.” After the exorcism, Jeanette writes, she “went into a kind of mute state of misery”—her parents, too, were “unhappy [and] disordered.” The three of them, she writes, “were like refugees in [their] own life.”

## CHAPTER 7: ACCRINGTON

Jeanette describes the history and geography of her hometown, Accrington. Once, the land, as described in ancient English texts, was an “oak-enclosed space” with rich and heavy soil. Accrington eventually made its money in the cotton industry, though it didn’t make much—the town and its neighboring settlement, Oswaldtwistle, were both very poor towns. There was a dog biscuit factory in Oswaldtwistle, and many girls at Jeanette’s school would bring dog biscuits to eat for lunch.

When Jeanette and Mrs. Winterson would walk through town, Mrs. Winterson would point out the vice and sin all around them—in every shop front, on every street corner. Jeanette loved visits to the Accrington market, where prices were never set, though her mother hated to be seen bargain-hunting. On trips to the Palatine restaurant, Jeanette’s mother would order beans on toast and dream of Jeanette’s future, longing for her daughter to grow up to be a missionary and go far away from Accrington. “She longed for me to be free,” Jeanette writes, “and did everything she could to make sure it never happened.”

*Jeanette was essentially tortured in her own home by members of her religious community. The attack was approved by her mother, who was also responsible for orchestrating the exposure of Jeanette and Helen’s affair. Mrs. Winterson, in the aftermath of the exorcism, further berates Jeanette as well as her birth mother, attempting to demoralize Jeanette and shame her even further.*



*In the aftermath of the exorcism, Jeanette is profoundly hurt and disappointed by everyone around her—Helen, her church, and her parents. Mr. and Mrs. Winterson, she writes, are both subject to the emotional consequences of the ordeal, too, and the Winterson household becomes an even more miserable and “disordered” place.*



*Jeanette contrasts ancient descriptions of her hometown as a fertile and lush place with the reality of what she knew of it as a child—which was an impoverished and industrialized northern town.*



*Jeanette grew up conscious of her mother’s fear and hatred of everything around them. Mrs. Winterson was full of contradictions when it came to her feelings about Accrington—she hated it, but would not leave, and she openly spoke of her desire for Jeanette to leave and see the world, but did everything she could to keep Jeanette confined and chained down.*



Jeanette found small refuges in the town library and in the second-hand rummage shop “somewhere under the viaduct which was the last relative of the nineteenth-century rag-and-bone shops.” Down there, Jeanette purchased armfuls of books, got lost in the wonders of other people’s secondhand objects, and listened to music.

Jeanette recalls the nervous “egg custard mornings” during which Mrs. Winterson would make a custard and then disappear. Jeanette would have to let herself into the house through the back. Her mother would always return, but Jeanette never knew where she’d gone and never asked, though she suspects she might have gone to the Odeon Cinema to watch movies in secret. To this day, Jeanette says, she does not eat egg custard.

There was a sweet shop in town run by two women who Jeanette now realizes were more than likely lovers. Jeanette was eventually forbidden from visiting the shop—the owners “dealt in unnatural passions,” Mrs. Winterson said, a statement that made the young Jeanette wonder whether the two women put chemicals in the candy.

Jeanette would also visit liquor stores on her mother’s behalf, to purchase cigarettes. Jeanette would return bottles there for money, and found the shops—where all kinds of men and women congregated to talk and laugh about adult things—exciting.

The few things Mrs. Winterson actually seemed to love were the Gospel Tent, **Royal Albert China**, and Christmas. Christmas was a time of luxury and celebration, and “the one time of year” when Mrs. Winterson did not act as if the world was a “Vale of Tears.” Mrs. Winterson would attend Jeanette’s school concerts at this time of year. One year, when a friend of Jeanette’s pointed out Mrs. Winterson during the concert and asked if she was Jeanette’s mother, Jeanette replied: “Mostly.”

Jeanette describes a day, years later, when she was returning to Accrington after her first term at Oxford. As she neared her parents’ home, she saw her mother through the window playing a song called “In the Bleak Midwinter” on an electronic organ. She recalls looking through the window and thinking that Mrs. Winterson was both her mother and not her mother, before ringing the bell to be let inside.

*Jeanette’s main sources of comfort throughout her difficult childhood were books and objects from the past. She could lose herself in the stories books had to offer, or the stories of the antique and secondhand objects she browsed through at the rummage shop.*



*Mrs. Winterson remained a mystery to Jeanette for much of her life, and the “egg custard mornings” stood out as one of Mrs. Winterson’s most bizarre behaviors. The abandonment, uncertainty, and strangeness of these disappearances have a lasting effect on Jeanette, as she somewhat comically compartmentalizes these fears into the form of an aversion to eating egg custard.*



*Mrs. Winterson’s bigoted and fearful views prevented Jeanette from enjoying something as simple as candy from a local shop.*



*The idea that Mrs. Winterson sent her daughter to the liquor store to buy her cigarettes but would not let her visit a candy shop run by two women who may or may not have been romantically involved is played up to comic effect.*



*Mrs. Winterson was a woman of very few pleasures, and Jeanette recalls Christmas time as the time of year when she was closest to her mother. Even at this time, though, Jeanette only ever felt that Mrs. Winterson was “mostly” her mother.*



*This image of Mrs. Winterson is locked in Jeanette’s mind, and represents a moment in which she was separated from Mrs. Winterson by time and distance but was once again approaching home—Mrs. Winterson existed in an in-between space, at arms’ length, and seemed to be both significant to Jeanette and not significant at all.*



## CHAPTER 8: THE APOCALYPSE

Mrs. Winterson did not often welcome guests to her home, Jeanette writes—“part of the problem was that we had no bathroom and she was ashamed of this.” An even larger “challenge” were the Bible quotes written out and scattered throughout the house. Jeanette would be sent to school with Bible quotes tucked in her boots and in her lunches by Mrs. Winterson—“cheery or depressing,” Jeanette writes, it was reading, and “reading was what [Jeanette] wanted to do.”

Mrs. Winterson did like to answer the door when Mormons came to call, in order to wave her Bible at them and “warn them of eternal damnation.” On the rare occasion that Mrs. Winterson did occasionally invite visitors, Jeanette hid upstairs with a book. Jeanette recalls that her mother did read to her when she was young, but as Jeanette got older, Mrs. Winterson hid the books she’d once read to her. Jeanette searched for the books, and notes that she and her mother were “endlessly ransacking the house looking for evidence of one another,” constantly circling one another feeling “wary, abandoned, [and] full of longing.”

Once Jeanette did find a hidden book: a 1950s sex manual entitled *How to Please Your Husband*. Jeanette describes the tone of the book as “terrifying,” but realizes, flipping through it, that it is “flat, pristine,” and likely unread. Jeanette thinks that her parents never—or very, very rarely—had sex, and her mother always told her to “never let a boy touch [her.]” Jeanette wonders if, had she fallen for a boy rather than a girl, would her mother have been as enraged—she thinks yes, because her mother was fearful of and disgusted by sex. After Jeanette’s relationship with Helen, Mrs. Winterson waited and watched anxiously for Jeanette to take another lover, and “inevitably,” Jeanette writes, “she forced it to happen.”

Jeanette entered a technical college to prepare for her A levels, or college entrance exams, and Mrs. Winterson insisted she could only go if she worked nights in order to bring in some money. As Jeanette’s desire to live her life flared, Mrs. Winterson attempted to “wall [her] in.”

Jeanette’s family always went on an annual holiday trip to the seaside, but the year of her exorcism, Jeanette was ill, and asked to stay home. She walked her parents to the bus station, and then asked for the key to the house—Mrs. Winterson told her she could not have it, and instructed her to go stay with the pastor instead. Mr. and Mrs. Winterson boarded the coach and left Jeanette behind.

*Mrs. Winterson made her home hostile to guests and strangers to the family, while insulating the members of her household with nonstop religious dogma. Jeanette was okay with the constant barrage of religious aphorisms and Bible quotes, though, as she loved stories and words of any kind (and had never lived in a home without them).*



*The idea that Jeanette and her mother were constantly circling one another, looking for ways to understand the other, speaks to the claustrophobic but non-communicative dynamic between them. They were obsessed with one another, but unable to love one another, and thus unable to fulfill what the other needed in any way.*



*The ways in which Mrs. Winterson demonstrated—or rather failed to demonstrate—what healthy romantic and sexual love should look like impacted Jeanette’s approach to her own relationships, which were always secretive. Jeanette writes that her mother “forced” her into the relationships she had with other girls by refusing to educate Jeanette or communicate with her, and by attempting to exert an anxious kind of control over Jeanette, which of course backfired.*



*The bizarre struggle between Jeanette and Mrs. Winterson continues, as Mrs. Winterson both tells Jeanette she needs to get out of the house and broaden her horizons but continues to attempt to control Jeanette. Mrs. Winterson prizes work over education, and doesn’t allow Jeanette to freely pursue her own dreams.*



*Mrs. Winterson continues her pattern of stringent control over Jeanette’s life. Jeanette is not welcome in her own home, and neither of her parents trust her.*



Jeanette went to her friend Janey's house, and told Janey and her family what had happened—Janey's mother agreed to let Jeanette sleep in their camper van. Later on, Janey suggested to Jeanette that the two of them go over to Jeanette's house anyway, and break in—the two girls broke in, ate food, and drank sasparilla. After a while, the front door opened, and two Dobermans entered the kitchen barking, followed by Mrs. Winterson's brother—Uncle Alec. Mrs. Winterson had paid a neighbor to telephone her at the seaside if they saw Jeanette breaking into the house. Uncle Alec told Jeanette and Janey to leave, and when Jeanette refused, he struck her. Uncle Alec went outside and told Jeanette she had five minutes to meet him out front—she grabbed clothes and food and went out with Janey over the back wall.

That night, Janey and Jeanette slept together in the camper van, and confessed their love for one another. Janey told her mother about the relationship between them, and her mother accepted the two of them. A few days later, Janey and Jeanette rode their bicycles to the seaside town where the Wintersons were vacationing so that Jeanette could ask why Mrs. Winterson locked her out. Mrs. Winterson replied that Jeanette was no longer her daughter. Jeanette and Janey returned to Accrington and carried on their relationship. After the Wintersons returned home, Jeanette attempted to make peace with Mrs. Winterson, but to no avail—when she brought her mother a bouquet of flowers, Mrs. Winterson cut off the heads of the flowers and threw them in the fire. Mrs. Winterson finally confronted Jeanette outright about her lesbianism, and when Jeanette confessed her love for Janey, and the happiness they shared, Mrs. Winterson kicked her out of the house. As Jeanette packed a bag to leave, Mrs. Winterson asked her: "Why be happy when you could be normal?"

## CHAPTER 9: ENGLISH LITERATURE A-Z

At the time she is kicked out of the house, Jeanette is steadily working her way through the English Literature in Prose A-Z section of the Accrington public library, but is making time for poetry as well. She takes inspiration from the poetry of Andrew Marvell, and decides that she will put "all she can" into finding "a room of her own" and participating in the world outside of Accrington. She feels companionship with the writers whose work she reads, realizing that "writers are often exiles, outsiders, runaways, and castaways." She feels that the great writers are there in Accrington with her. She takes refuge in the work of Gertrude Stein, Virginia Woolf, and Charlotte Bronte, fascinated by stories about identity and how one defines oneself. She learns the value of "reading [her]self as a fiction as well as a fact" in order to keep the narrative of her life from running away with itself "toward an ending no one wants."

*Jeanette and Janey go on what is supposed to be a fun, rebellious adventure to reclaim Jeanette's space in her own home. However, Mrs. Winterson, desperate for control, is always a step ahead of Jeanette, and the fearsome Uncle Alec arrives with his two dogs as a symbol of Mrs. Winterson's ferocious, vengeful wish for total control—even when she is not directly present.*



*Janey and Jeanette become a team, and Jeanette feels supported by Janey as she attempts to press her own mother for answers as to why she is treated like a second-class citizen in her own home. When Jeanette attempts to go the other route and make peace with Mrs. Winterson, Mrs. Winterson rejects her efforts. As Mrs. Winterson and Jeanette finally communicate about Jeanette's sexuality and her desire for happiness, Mrs. Winterson spews the absurd question which serves as the memoir's title, revealing Mrs. Winterson's desperate commitment to "normalcy" though she herself is a neurotic, vengeful, and narcissistic person—and very far from "normal" herself.*



*Jeanette's love of literature is more important than ever as she prepares to strike out on her own—it is her company in the face of her family's utter rejection, and also her lens for viewing the world (as shown in Jeanette's use of "a room of her own," a reference to Virginia Woolf's famous essay A Room of One's Own, in describing her goal to become a writer and more fulfilled human being). Jeanette begins to understand what it is to conceive of herself as a character and her life as a story—a narrative which will one day come together and make sense, even if things are hazy and difficult at the present moment.*



Jeanette feels she has been “tricked or trapped” into leaving home by the “dark narrative” of her life with Mrs. Winterson. She wonders what it would have meant to be happy with her mother—what life could have been like if her mother had not wished for them to be in a world where there were only the two of them, and in which they could only ever fail the other. The only thing that keeps her going in the wake of having left home is the idea that one day she will find her mirror—her “almost-twin”—and find happiness.

After days of sleeping in shelters and in public, Jeanette decides to live in her **Mini Cooper**. The car has been given to her by a boy from church whose parents believe he should learn how to drive, though he is terrified of it. Jeanette reads and eats in the front of the car and sleeps in the back, and drives the Mini around despite the fact that she does not have a license. She spends each Saturday with Janey and continues to work at the Accrington market.

Jeanette is on the letter “N” in her journey through literature, and is reading Nabokov’s *Lolita*. She is disgusted by it, and asks her two English teachers what they think of Nabokov. One teacher, a man, defends Nabokov. But when she asks the question of the head of English at her school, Mrs. Ratlow—a flamboyant and unpredictable teacher who is deeply devoted to literature—it leads to a conversation in which Jeanette confesses everything—the fact that she is living in her **Mini** and reading her way through English Literature A-Z. Mrs. Ratlow tells Jeanette she can stay at her house, gives her a key, and tells her that she must pay for her own food and maintain quiet after 10 p.m. Jeanette confesses that she has never had a key before. Mrs. Ratlow tells Jeanette that she must finish *Lolita*, but does not have to continue reading alphabetically.

After school Jeanette goes to the Accrington library, where she is helping the librarian to re-shelve some books. She notices a book by Gertrude Stein, and begins perusing it. The librarian asks Jeanette how her journey through English Literature in Prose A-Z is going, and Jeanette confesses that she is struggling with the letter “N.” The librarian suggests that Jeanette return to *Lolita* when she is older if she doesn’t like it now, and explains the ways in which one can derive comfort from the Dewey Decimal System—“trouble,” the librarian says, is often “just something that has been filed in the wrong place.”

*Jeanette wants independence, but nonetheless feels that it is unfair she should have to vacate her home just to feel safe. She is angry at her mother for not having been able to expand their world or allow for any differences, and recognizes the destructive and obsessive dynamic between them—but still longs for someone who will be her mirror, and who will complete her.*



*Jeanette’s Mini Cooper is a symbol both of her independence and her imprisonment within that independence. She is on her own, but she is living in unsustainable and unhealthy conditions, and doesn’t have the option to not be on her own.*



*Mrs. Ratlow extends Jeanette an enormous show of kindness—they bond over their love of words, and soon Jeanette is given a key to Mrs. Ratlow’s house, no strings attached, no questions asked. While not exactly a mother figure for Jeanette, Mrs. Ratlow is certainly an emblem of the kinds of love and happiness that are possible to attain. Jeanette, never even having had a key to her own home, is amazed by Mrs. Ratlow’s faith and trust in her, and in the idea that now she has both independence and safety outside of the bounds of her parents’ home.*



*The librarian’s advice to Jeanette to return to the books she dislikes now as an adult is symbolic of what Jeanette’s larger journey, not just through literature, but through life and love as well, will look like. Jeanette will constantly have to return to her past in order to reexamine it if she wants to fully understand and appreciate all that has happened.*



Jeanette leaves the library with Gertrude Stein's *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*—a book written by Stein about her female lover—and then drives her **Mini Cooper** over to Mrs. Ratlow's house. She is grateful that Mrs. Ratlow is “giving [her] a chance,” though she has no idea whether anything she is doing is “the right thing to do.” That night, Jeanette reads *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. Gertrude and Alice are taking a road trip through France, and Gertrude refuses to read maps or drive in reverse. Alice, frustrated, explains that the two of them are on the wrong road, and “Gertrude drives on. She says, ‘Right or wrong, this is the road and we are on it.’”

*As Jeanette reads about Gertrude and her lover Alice continuing down the road they have chosen—even if it is not the “right” road—this inspires her to realize that she has set a course for her life, and that whatever the outcome might be, she has at least made a choice which reflects her control over her own circumstances and her desire to move forward.*



## CHAPTER 10: THIS IS THE ROAD

Jeanette decides to apply for an English degree at Oxford University “because it [is] the most impossible thing [she] could do.” She knows few women with real jobs, and even Mrs. Ratlow, a widow, still cooks and cleans for her two sons and never takes vacations. Feminism has not reached Accrington. As a working-class woman who loves other women, Jeanette forms a personal politics based on “chang[ing her life beyond] all recognition.”

*Jeanette is defiant and ambitious as always, and seeks to grow out of the bounds of her working-class hometown. Her love of literature drives her forward, as it always has, and her desire to see herself succeed as a writer and as a woman forms her radical commitment to change.*



Jeanette obtains an interview at Oxford, and travels there on a bus. She feels that she “looks and sounds wrong,” and does poorly in her interviews. Weeks later, she finds that she has not been accepted. Though Mrs. Ratlow encourages her to consider other options, Jeanette feels there are “no other options.” She and Janey travel to Oxford and camp at a campsite outside town. Jeanette secures an appointment with a senior tutor, and though she once again finds herself babbling in the interview, explains the details of her life and her desire to write her own books. She realizes during the interview that there are both “pleasures and prejudices” at Oxford, and, after her meeting, wonders whether as a woman she will be forced to be “an onlooker and not a contributor.” Jeanette is given a place at Oxford, deferred for one year.

*Though Jeanette's initial application to Oxford does not result in her admission, she feels that Oxford, despite the fact that it isn't a perfect place or “happy ending” for her, is all that she wants in this moment. Her determination and drive to pursue her own personal happiness push her forward, and eventually she obtains an offer of admission after using her way with words and her gift for storytelling to express who she is and what she wants to her interviewer.*



A year later, as Jeanette drives out of Accrington toward Oxford, she comes across Mr. Winterson in the street. She does not stop to speak to him.

*Jeanette is ready to leave her stifling family life behind completely.*





## CHAPTER 11: ART AND LIES

At Oxford, Jeanette realizes that there is rampant inequality in her college, and that the women in her class will in large part “have to educate [them]selves.” But it doesn’t matter, she says, because “books were everywhere and all we had to do was read them.” She discovers modern and contemporary feminist writers and feels she has found a “new Bible.” Despite the challenges and inequalities at Oxford, she takes refuge in the university’s “seriousness of purpose” and devotion to “the life of the mind.”

As Jeanette reads more and more widely, she begins to feel more connected to other lives across time, and her isolation lessens. She also begins to think about visiting Mrs. Winterson, and wonders whether she herself can make peace with their shared past in order to weather a journey home—she looks to literature to see if she can find the answer. She knows that the answer to “reconcil[ing her] life with itself” lies in love, but only in a “very dimly lit way.”

Jeanette writes to Mrs. Winterson to ask if she can come home for the holidays and bring a friend. Mrs. Winterson replies “yes,” which Jeanette thinks is “unusual.” Mrs. Winterson does not ask what her daughter has been up to, and Jeanette does not attempt to explain.

Jeanette arrives home with her platonic friend Vicky Licorish—Vicky is black, and Jeanette has “warned” Mrs. Winterson of this. Mrs. Winterson has asked her missionary friends who are “veterans of Africa” what “they”—meaning black people—eat, and for some reason her friends have told her “pineapples.” Jeanette writes that Mrs. Winterson was “not a racist,” and “would not hear slurs against anyone on the grounds of color or ethnicity.”

Mrs. Winterson makes a plethora of pineapple-themed meals for the girls’ first couple days in town—but eventually Vicky confesses that she doesn’t like pineapple. Mrs. Winterson then experiences a drastic change in mood, and becomes antagonistic toward the girls. Vicky and Jeanette are working as volunteers at a local mental hospital while they are in town, and feel that “the atmosphere [at the Winterson] home [is] crazier than anything at work.”

*Despite the sexist culture at Oxford, Jeanette is in heaven—she is able to read whatever she wants, whenever she wants, and she is nourished by the books that surround her everywhere. Her discovery of a “new Bible” represents a new way forward and a new doctrine which bolsters her even in the face of inequality and unfairness, to which even Oxford is not immune.*



*Jeanette draws so much strength from literature, and is thinking so deeply about the way human lives impact one another, that she feels empowered to be able to visit Mrs. Winterson for the holidays. She wants to come to terms with her difficult childhood, and feels the way to do this is through love—though she doesn’t know exactly how love will connect to her “reconciliation” with her past.*



*Jeanette feels a spark of hope that Mrs. Winterson has released some of her need for control, and will not attempt to “ransack” Jeanette’s life while she is home for the holidays.*



*Though Mrs. Winterson condemns hateful speech and seems to want very badly to make Vicky feel comfortable, she harbors some racist tendencies which alarm and alienate both Vicky and Jeanette.*



*When Vicky speaks up politely about her own tastes, Mrs. Winterson is deeply offended and flies off into one of her moods. Jeanette is aware of what is going on, but Vicky is a newcomer in the Winterson household, and it becomes clear that things there are not normal or stable in any way.*



Mrs. Winterson refuses to talk to the girls for nearly a week, but as Christmas approaches, Mrs. Winterson's mood seems to improve. One night, Vicky finds that her pillowcase has no pillow in it, and is instead stuffed with "religious tracts about the Apocalypse."

When Jeanette walks in on her mother making egg custard in the kitchen and muttering darkly to herself about the nature of sin, Jeanette tells Vicky that it is time to leave and return to Oxford. The next morning, Jeanette announces their departure to Mrs. Winterson, who replies with the words "You do it on purpose." Jeanette tells her mother goodbye, and leaves—she will never see Mrs. Winterson again.

*As the situation at the Winterson household worsens, Mrs. Winterson returns to her passive-aggressive, domineering method of communication through Bible verses and other religious materials.*



*Jeanette realizes that the situation has worsened beyond her control or help, and decides to get herself and Vicky out before things really fly off the rails. She does not know that this is the last time she will ever see her mother, and they part while Mrs. Winterson is angry and resentful, and Jeanette herself is wary and fearful.*



## INTERMISSION

In her own work, Jeanette writes, she has "pushed against the weight of clock time, calendar time, [and] linear unravelings." She is, as a writer and as a person, more interested in the whys of things than the whens. She argues that "Creative work bridges time because the energy of art is not time-bound"—in other words, she is able to exist outside of time, in a way, through her own writing. She enjoys "reading [her]self as a fiction [rather] than as a fact," and accepts that her writing about herself will always be disjointed from both time and reality.

*Jeanette examines the role of time in her work, and in her life. As she prepares to bridge the two major sections of her novel, which are separated by over twenty years, she reflects on the ways that separating her work from the place it exists in time allows her to see the "fiction" of her life unfold.*



## CHAPTER 12: THE NIGHT SEA VOYAGE

As a child playing a game in which "the rug [was] a sea and the drawer was a ship," Jeanette climbed into a drawer and found a birth certificate bearing the names of her parents. She never told anyone, and never had an interest in finding her parents. When adapting her novel *Oranges* for television, Jeanette renamed the main character "Jess"—her birth mother's name had been Jessica. *Oranges* won several high-profile awards in England, at Cannes, and all over the world. Jeanette believed that her birth mother would see the film and "put two and two together," but this did not come to pass.

*Jeanette has been longing for years for a way to connect with her birth parents, but a combination of fear—and Mrs. Winterson's repeated warnings that Jeanette's birth mother had been a bad person, and was already dead—kept her from ever putting more than a small amount of attention toward the search.*



In 2007, Jeanette has done nothing to discover her past except to “repaint” it and write over it. She is in a “rocky and unhappy” relationship, struggling to write a book, and helping Mr. Winterson to deal with the death of his second wife, Lillian. Jeanette goes to Accrington to help him clear out his house so that he can move into an assisted living facility. In a locked trunk, Jeanette discovers a cache of her mother’s **Royal Albert china**, her father’s war medals, letters from her mother to her father, and her own formal adoption papers. Her name has been “violently crossed out,” and the top of the form has been torn off—she cannot read the name of the doctor who evaluated her or the adoption society which brokered the adoption. Jeanette feels trapped, and wonders why her parents would never have given her any keys to her “biography [or] biology.” She has been writing “love and loss narratives” all her life, and wonders if she will ever be able to find her lost mother again. She contemplates a line from Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale*, which refers to “that which is lost”—not “that which was lost” or “that which has been lost.” Loss is serious and present, Winterson argues, and “still wound[s] each day.”

Jeanette writes that soon after she finds the ruined birth certificates, she begins to go mad. She separates from her partner, unable to “make [a] home with someone,” and, in the wake of this new abandonment, is thrown backward into a regressive state. She wakes in the middle of the night, sweating and calling for “Mummy,” and finds herself unable to leave her house. The only rope connecting her to sanity is poetry and literature, but she is unable to write her own work—“language [has] left” her.

After a while, Jeanette is able to write, and publishes a children’s story which is turned into a picture book. She flees to Paris, where she lives and works above the famous Shakespeare and Company bookshop, but she is still not getting any better. In fact, she is getting worse.

Jeanette decides to commit suicide, and writes notes to her friends. She decides to gas herself in the garage with the help of her Porsche—she does not “want to vacate life,” but feels it is “too precious not to live fully.” She thinks that if she cannot live fully, she must die. She attempts to kill herself in February of 2008 but is unsuccessful.

*In the middle of a very difficult moment in her life, marked by loss, tumult, and difficulty in love, Jeanette finds a clue to her own past. Though the adoption form has been mutilated, it represents both a way forward and a reminder of her dark, claustrophobic past. Jeanette ruminates on the nature of her life’s work and finds that it is centered around loss, love, and loss of love—she knows intimately that loss has the power to resonate throughout one’s life for years and years, and to destroy everything that attempts to fill the gap it has made.*



*Jeanette’s loss of the only remaining stable thing in her life—which she admits was not very stable to begin with—pushes her over the edge of a precipice she perhaps didn’t even know she was on. She clings to literature, as she always has, but even stories are not enough now to keep Jeanette afloat as she succumbs to the demons of her past.*



*Though Jeanette experiences some positives in her career and writing life, she cannot fool herself: she is struggling, and failing to keep herself afloat.*



*Jeanette loves life so deeply that she wants to end hers—she feels that not living it fully is an affront to life itself. The pursuit of happiness and love has always been so important to her, and her inability to continue in that pursuit makes her feel as if life is not even worth living.*



Lying on the ground after her failed attempt on her own life, Jeanette hears a voice: “Ye must be born again,” it says. Recognizing the quotation as a Bible verse, Jeanette contemplates the fact that though she has already been technically twice born, she must now choose again to be alive.

By March, Jeanette has begun to recover, and contemplates the suppression of feelings that occurs every day for many people, but specifically for herself—“it takes courage to feel the feeling,” she writes. She realizes that there is a damaged, hateful piece of herself that has been hiding away, ready to “stage a raid on the rest of the territory” of her body. Jeanette begins to grapple with that self as she begins writing a story for children. Jeanette is unsurprised to be working in children’s literature, as “the demented creature [inside is] a lost child.”

Jeanette begins to talk to the “creature” inside of herself, though it is strange, difficult, and, she admits to herself, “mad.” The talks work to contain Jeanette’s fears, though, and she no longer experiences night terrors. She attempts to go to therapy, though the “creature” tells her that therapy is a waste of time. She finds a “priest-turned-shrink” who helps her to better communicate with the creature inside, and, eventually, by referring to the creature as an “us,” not a “you,” Jeanette is able to convince herself that together, she and the creature “will learn how to love.”

## CHAPTER 13: THIS APPOINTMENT TAKES PLACE IN THE PAST

Jeanette begins to look into her adoption records, but feels rattled by the process. She endures several confusing communications with the court—she describes all of the court’s correspondence as being conducted in the “dead and distant language of the law.” Jeanette finds the protocol that must be obeyed “difficult to follow,” and she wishes the process were “simpler and less insensitive.” She wants to stop the process, but with the support of her new partner—a psychoanalyst and writer named Susie Orbach—she presses on. “Adoption begins on your own... Therefore, the journey back should not be done alone,” she writes. Susie stands by her side each day of the difficult ordeal.

*While Jeanette doesn’t reconnect with the concept of being twice-born in a religious sense, she does reclaim the notion of being born-again for herself and her own sense of purposes. She recommits to living her life and to pursuing happiness with the strength and vigor she once did.*



*As Jeanette confronts the creature within herself, she builds up “courage”—the lack of which has kept her from really connecting with the truth of herself and her past. As she realizes that it is her own inner child which impedes her path forward in the pursuit of her own happiness, she wonders how to appease the child inside and conquer her demons once and for all.*



*Jeanette’s commitment to conquering her inner demons forces her to descend all the way into her madness in order to work her way back out. As she makes peace with the destructive, childlike force within herself, she recognizes that that force is a part of her, not a separate entity—this allows her to work together with it, and reorient herself in her pursuit of love, happiness, and understanding.*



*Jeanette highlights the difficult process of reconnecting with one’s heritage in order to show that many obstacles still stand between her and her birth mother—despite all the personal emotional work Jeanette has done to make sense of her past and her relationship to loving and being loved. There is more to the pursuit of happiness, she is demonstrating, than one’s personal journey—other things can crop up, get in the way, and need to be overcome.*



Also at Jeanette's side is Ruth Rendell, a longtime friend. Jeanette refers to her as the "Good Mother." Ruth is well connected, and reaches out to her friends in the government on Jeanette's behalf. All of her connections believe Jeanette should "proceed with the utmost caution" due to her public profile in the UK, lest a journalist uncover Jeanette's mother before she does. Ruth helps arrange a meeting with the chief of the UK children and family court advisory service, who meets with Jeanette and agrees to help her track down her mother "without the risk of the whole thing leaking." Jeanette gives Anthony the names of her parents—Jessica and John, and their surnames. Weeks later, Anthony calls to tell Jeanette that her file has been found, but that the names of her birth parents do not match the names she gave him. Jeanette wonders whose birth certificate she found in the drawer.

Next, Jeanette must meet with a social worker at the Home Office. She and Susie meet with Ria Hayward, who looks through the documents that Jeanette has, and reassures her that her mother always wanted her. She passes Jeanette a piece of paper with her birth mother's name on it. Jeanette contemplates her lifelong struggle to learn how to love, and is overwhelmed by the love that is all around her now and her own struggle to "dissolve the calcifications around [her] heart."

On the train home, Jeanette is shell-shocked and stunned, and turns to a remembered Thomas Hardy poem in order to "find the feeling" she needs to have.

Ria helps Jeanette to put forward another request for information in to the court that might hold Jeanette's original adoption records. The court locates the file, but must place Jeanette's request to see it before a judge. Jeanette is upset and angry. A few weeks later, another letter from the same local court arrives; the judge has issued a clinical advisement for Jeanette to fill in the "usual form" and send it back. The letter also advises Jeanette to hire a lawyer. Jeanette is overwhelmed with frustration and confusion, and wets herself in a panic. After calming herself down, Jeanette contacts Ria, who comforts her and tells Jeanette she will take matters into her own hands. Jeanette remains enraged by the court's "legalese" and unwillingness to help her. She has been "thrown back into a place of helplessness."

*Jeanette must reconcile her desire to investigate her own past with the fact that, as a public figure, someone else might get the answers to her heritage before she can. Luckily, Jeanette has connections that allow her to proceed discreetly. Once she receives her first answer, yet another mystery begins to unfold—the mystery of whose birth certificate her parents have held onto all these years.*



*Jeanette has put up walls to combat the years of intense trauma she was subjected to as a child. Now that she has love in her life—love all around her—she is beginning to learn how to accept that love, and how to accept the fact that just because she was given up for adoption does not mean she was not wanted in the world. Jeanette must rewrite the stories she has told herself about herself for so many years.*



*Once again, Jeanette finds refuge in storytelling and literature.*



*As the search for her adoption records becomes more and more fraught and difficult, Jeanette fears she will give into the worst parts of herself—the violent, insecure bits of herself that she has just begun to really reckon with. Jeanette has worked so hard to get to the point she is at in her emotional and artistic life, and the feelings of "helplessness" that marked her childhood, as they resurge now in her adult life, are even more flattening and debilitating.*



Ria, Jeanette, and Susie continue to struggle against the courts, who demand that Jeanette follow strict and obscure procedures. Jeanette and Susie make an appointment at Accrington Court, where an official has all of Jeanette's papers but will not allow her to see them. Jeanette experiences a "pre-language physical pain," but Susie talks them both through negotiations with the court manager, who agrees to tell Jeanette the name of the adoption society which handled her case. When Jeanette presses him for more information, he clams up, unsure of what he is and is not allowed to tell the women, and Susie instructs Jeanette to leave the room. Jeanette leaves the courthouse and stands on the sidewalk outside, wondering for the umpteenth time who the woman in the garden from her childhood could have been.

Susie extracts a promise from the court manager to meet with the judge in session, find out what he is allowed to tell the two of them, and meet up again in forty-five minutes. Jeanette and Susie head to a café that used to be the Palatine—Mrs. Winterson's favorite. Jeanette has not been here since Mr. Winterson's funeral some years ago. Jeanette interrupts the narrative to reminisce about her father's funeral—after her check payment for his burial wasn't received, she had to convince the cemetery that she was not going to stiff them—she produced a copy of her novel [Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit](#) from her purse (she had intended to bury her father with it but changed her mind), the men were impressed, and they allowed Jeanette to write a new check on the spot. Mr. Winterson was buried with his second wife Lillian, far away from the plot that held Mrs. Winterson's body.

Susie and Jeanette meet with the court manager once again. He is able to tell Jeanette her birth mother's age at the time of her birth, but not her mother's actual birth date. Her birth mother was seventeen—the same age that Mrs. Winterson had always told her. As the two women drive back to Manchester, Jeanette wonders if every woman she sees is her mother—and whether her mother is even still alive, as Mrs. Winterson had always told Jeanette she was dead.

After hitting more and more dead ends, Jeanette takes her search into her own hands via the internet, and wonders what made her birth parents give her away. She says it had to have been her birth father's fault, "because [she] couldn't let it be her [mother's.]" The adoption society eventually contacts Jeanette and tells her they will allow her social worker—not Jeanette herself—to view her file. Jeanette begins to worry that her birth mother is dead, and that her whole search will have been in vain.

*As Jeanette continues to struggle against the courts in search of her adoption records, she regresses to a kind of pain and sorrow that is "pre-language." The stories and poems that have helped Jeanette to cope have no bolstering effect on her now—she is feeling a deep, primal frustration at being denied the right to understand where she comes from. When Susie shoulders the burden for Jeanette, it is an act of love and support which is still new to Jeanette, relatively speaking.*



*As Jeanette visits and reminisces about the familiar places in her hometown, she is taken back into different stages of her past. As she remembers her father's funeral, she recalls how it was her own role as a celebrated storyteller which allowed disaster to be averted. The symbolism of Mrs. Winterson lying in a grave far from her husband confirms that she was isolated from everyone around her not just in life, but in death as well.*



*Jeanette must attempt to sort out what information Mrs. Winterson gave her that was true, versus what information was false. Jeanette still must negotiate against her mother's word even years after Mrs. Winterson's death.*



*Jeanette realizes that just as she has always been in charge of her own happiness and her own story, she must take charge of this chapter of it as well.*



On a trip to New York City, Susie tells Jeanette that Jeanette doesn't know "how to be loved." Jeanette admits that she does not trust Susie to love her, but admits she must do the "love-work" of allowing herself to stay with Susie. This conversation echoes Ria's entreaty of Jeanette to believe that she was always "wanted."

Jeanette meets with Ria in Liverpool. Ria divulges details about her birth father, and also reveals Jeanette's mother's date of birth. Ria reveals that the Wintersons had planned to adopt a baby boy named Paul—Mrs. Winterson had already purchased baby boys' clothes, and Jeanette, for the first few months of her life, had no doubt been dressed in those clothes. Jeanette finds humor in the situation, and when she relays it to Susie, a psychoanalyst, Susie tells her that "mothers do everything with boy babies differently," and that if Mrs. Winterson had "psychologically prepared herself for a boy, she would not have been able to shift her internal gear when she got a girl." Jeanette and Susie believe that this, combined with the abandoned baby Jeanette's attempts to survive a loss, might have shaped Jeanette's identity from an early age. Jeanette feels "freed" by this information, but is "no nearer" to finding her birth mother.

One of Jeanette's friends, attempting to help her by combing through ancestry websites, eventually is able to contact an uncle of Jeanette's. Jeanette develops a cover story and calls the man, who tells her that her mother, Ann, is alive. Jeanette, whose "whole identity [has been] built around being an orphan," now has a mother and perhaps a whole family. She writes a letter to Ann, and sends it to her through the uncle she contacted. A week later, she receives a text which begins "Darling Girl"—Susie leaves the room with Jeanette's phone, calls the number, and then comes back upstairs to announce that she has just gotten off the phone with Jeanette's mother.

A letter arrives several days later with a baby photo of Jeanette enclosed. The letter explains that Ann was sixteen when she got pregnant, looked after Jeanette for six weeks after her birth, and had a very difficult time giving her up. Ann writes in the letter that Jeanette was "always wanted."

*Everyone in Jeanette's life tries to show her the ways in which she is good, loved, and wanted. Jeanette is still working to allow herself to be loved in the wake of her massive mental breakdown years earlier.*



*The revelation that Paul was not merely in another crib, but was the baby her parents had planned to adopt all along, is "freeing" to Jeanette because it allows her to see the ways in which her earliest moments with Mrs. Winterson entrapped her in a vicious cycle of attempting to please a woman who could, by default, never be pleased. The information, however, does not influence Jeanette's search—it is merely another filled-in gap in the story of Jeanette's life.*



*As Jeanette closes in on the search for her mother, she grows more and more nervous. She is afraid to actually meet the woman who gave birth to her, but is also afraid to interrupt or change the narrative of her own life. Having always told herself one story about herself, she must now begin to consider that that story is on the verge of changing completely.*



*The confirmation that she was loved from birth and "always wanted" provides Jeanette with proof, in a way, that she deserves to be able to "love well," and always has.*



## CHAPTER 14: STRANGE MEETING

Jeanette discusses Mrs. Winterson with her friend Beeban Kidron, who directed the TV adaptation of *Oranges*. Beeban wonders what Jeanette would have been without Mrs. Winterson. Jeanette believes she would always have lived a larger-than-life existence, and describes a vision of her life in which she is on her “second or third husband, with a Range Rover [and] a boob job and kids [who aren’t] speaking to [her.]” Her whole life has been an exercise in refusing to take no for an answer, and Jeanette believes she would have been this way with or without Mrs. Winterson. She believes there is an “inevitability” to who she is.

Ruth Rendell calls Jeanette, and tells her to “go [meet Ann] and get it over with.” Jeanette, who trusts Ruth and always listens to her, agrees. She takes a train to Manchester. She stays in a hotel where she last stayed on the night before Mr. Winterson’s funeral.

On the way to Ann’s, Jeanette speaks to Susie on the phone. She is nervous as she travels through the outskirts of Manchester, which have been “slum-cleared” to reflect the population’s “changing fortunes.” As she exits the cab and approaches Ann’s house, she is frightened and feels “physically sick.” A man opens the front door—Jeanette knows him to be her half-brother, Gary. Ann appears at the door, apologizing for not having finished the washing-up before Jeanette arrived. Jeanette thinks that this is “just what [she] would say [her]self.”

Ann knows about Jeanette’s life already, she says. Jeanette sent Ann a DVD copy of *Oranges*, the story of which distressed Ann. She apologizes to Jeanette for having left her, and assures her that she didn’t want to at all. Jeanette, however, does not blame Ann—Mrs. Winterson gave Jeanette a “dark gift but not a useless one.”

Ann is “straightforward and kind,” and this baffles Jeanette, who believes “a female parent is meant to be labyrinth-like and vengeful.” When Jeanette reveals that she is a lesbian, both Ann and Gary are accepting. Jeanette flashes back to a memory of Mrs. Winterson, in which Jeanette tries to tell her that she is in love—she is already living away from home, and will soon be going off to Oxford. She confesses that she loves women and always will, and a varicose vein in Mrs. Winterson’s leg bursts, splattering blood all over the ceiling of the living room. Jeanette wonders what her life would have been like if Mrs. and Mr. Winterson had been accepting of her.

*Jeanette’s fantasies of alternate versions of her life in which she is more repressed and more “normal” amuse her—she feels that there is an inevitability to who she is at her core, and she believes that where she grew up and how would not have been able to change her desire for a big, bold existence.*



*Jeanette experiences the intersection of the stories of her past, present, and future as she returns to the place where she was born.*



*Jeanette is intensely nervous to meet her birth mother, and distracts herself with observations on the changing landscape. She is relieved, however, when she finally arrives at Ann’s house, to see herself already reflected in Ann’s first words to her. This is a kind of homecoming for Jeanette, albeit a very late and very strange one.*



*Jeanette is grateful to Ann for taking an interest in the story of her life, as well as for her apologies—but assures Ann, and herself, that they are not needed. Jeanette’s life with Mrs. Winterson proved useful in ways that she never could have seen while she was in the depths of her childhood misery.*



*Jeanette is unsure of how to react in the face of kindness and acceptance, and the patterns she falls into with her partners—the patterns of feeling she does not deserve to love or be loved—reemerge here as she meets with Ann and her family. She tells a comic and macabre story about Mrs. Winterson in order to contrast the madness of the Winterson-world with the serenity and peace of the new story of her life.*





Ann asks Jeanette if Mrs. Winterson had been a “latent lesbian,” and Jeanette nearly chokes on her tea. Ann herself has had four husbands, a fact which she reveals to Jeanette with a smile—Jeanette notes that Ann “doesn’t judge herself and doesn’t judge others.” Ann describes her relationship with Jeanette’s biological father, and Jeanette notes that she and Ann are both optimistic and self-reliant.

After five hours, Jeanette decides to go. Though her new family has proven easy to talk to, she is exhausted. Ann embraces her and tells her how grateful she is that Jeanette has found her. Jeanette “can’t think straight [and is unable] to say what [she] want[s] to say,” and returns to London in a daze. When she arrives home, there is a text from Ann on her phone: “*I hope you weren’t disappointed,*” it says.

*As Jeanette begins to feel even more calm, welcome, and free of judgment in Ann’s household, she and Ann open up to one another. She sees herself in her birth mother, and revels in the details of Ann’s life story.*



*Jeanette is overwhelmed, and when it is time to go, she has difficulty accessing or expressing her feelings. The idea that Ann was worried she would be a disappointment to Jeanette—Jeanette who, due to her status as a constant disappointment to Mrs. Winterson, always worries about being a disappointment to others—comforts her and bonds the two of them even further.*



## CHAPTER 15: THE WOUND

Jeanette writes that Ann “had to sever some part of herself to let [Jeanette] go.” Jeanette says that she herself has “felt the wound ever since.” Jeanette ruminates on famous “wound stories,” like the story of Odysseus, whose wife recognizes him when he returns to Ithaca by a scar on his thigh, as well as the story of Prometheus, who stole fire from the gods and was punished by having an eagle peck out his liver each morning—the wound healed each night, but the eagle came back and the punishment repeated each day—and the story of the disciple Thomas, who had to touch the resurrected Jesus’s wounds to believe that he was real. Wounds are “symbolic and cannot be reduced to any single interpretation,” Jeanette writes, but adds that she believes that “wounding [is] a clue or a key to being human,” that a wound is a “blood-trail” to one’s roots, and that a child is both “a healing and a cut, the place of lost and found.”

Jeanette feels she has “worked from the wound” all her life, and now, with Ann in her life, Jeanette recognizes that Ann too is and has been wounded. Mrs. Winterson, too, Jeanette writes, was “gloriously wounded. Suffering was the meaning of her life.”

Jeanette wonders what was the truth of the afternoon that the strange woman came to the door of her house—she feels it is connected to the birth certificate she found in her father’s things. She has learned throughout her life, she says, to “read between the lines, to see behind the image”—her mother used to hang paintings backwards on the wall to avoid exposing her family to “graven images.”

*By examining familiar “wound stories,” Jeanette connects the emotional wounds she and Ann have had to bear with the physical wounds of major mythological figures. Wounds, in literature as in life, are a way of recognizing another person, of punishing another person (and of reliving a certain punishment again and again), and of accepting another person as they are. She examines her own role in her birth mother’s “wound,” and her birth mother’s role in her wounds.*



*All three women—Jeanette, Ann, and Mrs. Winterson—are bound by the wounds they sustained at one another’s hands through the years.*



*Some things are still a mystery to Jeanette, even though she tries to impose a narrative on everything that happens to her and around her in order to understand things. She comes to accept that some things defy narrative, defy being a part of a story, and must just be accepted.*



Ann tells Jeanette that she ordered [Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit](#) from the library, and proudly told the librarian that Jeanette Winterson was her daughter. Jeanette remembers Mrs. Winterson telling her that she had had to order the book under a false name.

*The contrast between her two mothers' responses to her soul-baring autobiographical novel pains but also bolsters Jeanette. She finally has the support she wanted all her life, but it has of course come very late—perhaps too late.*



“Happy endings,” Jeanette writes, “are only a pause.” She reflects on the three types of “big endings: Revenge, Tragedy, [and] Forgiveness.” She believes that forgiveness “redeems the past [and] unblocks the future,” and forgives Ann for throwing her from the wreckage of her own life into another unknowable, unforeseeable kind of wreckage. Jeanette feels she has been “repeating the leaving” of her mother’s body over and over throughout her life, but is finally practicing forgiveness, and is “not leaving any more.”

*Jeanette’s faith in the power of forgiveness has allowed her to accept her past, forgive those who have harmed her, and make way for whatever the future brings. Jeanette has finally been able to achieve a measure of rest and peace, and no longer needs to repeat the endless leaving and searching that have dogged her throughout her life.*



## CODA

Jeanette writes that when she began writing *Why Be Happy*, she had “no idea how it would turn out”—she was writing in real time as she was “discovering the future” and attempting to reconnect with her birth mother.

*Jeanette, as skilled a storyteller as she is, is still unable to see how the threads of her own life will come together sometimes. The story of *Why Be Happy* was one being written in real time—Jeanette was aware that it would be a story in its own right, but didn’t know what the outcome or lesson would be.*



Jeanette still doesn’t know how she feels about having found Ann. She says that “the TV-style reunions and pink mists of happiness” that often surround adoption stories are unrealistic, and that every adopted child who finds their birth family will react differently.

*Jeanette makes an important statement about unrealistic expectations of adoption stories—and reunion stories— by admitting that she is still uncertain about her own.*



Jeanette describes having met Ann for a second time in Manchester, one-on-one. At their lunch, Ann reveals that Jeanette’s father had wanted to keep her, but had been living in awful conditions. At the time of Jeanette’s birth, Ann had worked in a factory making overcoats, and her boss at the factory had helped her find a mother and baby home. Ann’s memories are imperfect, and Jeanette notes that “memory loss is one way of coping with damage.”

*As Jeanette begins to understand Ann’s whole story, she is able to see that Ann never wanted to abandon her, but was working through and trying to minimize “damage” of her own.*



Jeanette believes that Ann would like her to “let [Ann] be [her] mother,” but Jeanette does not feel that having rediscovered Ann means she has an “instant family.” Jeanette is “warm but wary,” while Ann blames herself—and Mrs. Winterson—for Jeanette’s terrible upbringing. Jeanette actually believes herself “lucky,” and is grateful for her life, but is afraid that this will “undervalue” Ann’s feelings.

*Jeanette is full of complicated feelings about her adoption, her childhood, and her rediscovery of Ann. Unable to receive feelings of instant gratification from her new “family” after years of trauma at the hands of her own, she lingers in an in-between space in which she contemplates how “lucky” she has actually been in the larger scheme of things.*



Jeanette struggles with the fact that Ann is her mother, but “also someone [she doesn’t] know at all.” Jeanette does not feel any particularly strong emotional connection to Ann. Jeanette attempts to “respect [her] own complexity,” and accept the fact that she might never feel “right”—always caught between two worlds, and two mothers.

Ann comes to London, a move that Jeanette describes as a “mistake.” The two fight, and lament the lack of love in both their lives. Jeanette reflects on the difficulties and possibilities of love itself—the point at which “everything starts [and to which] we always return.” Jeanette proclaims that she has “no idea what happens next.”

*There is no instant connection between Ann and Jeanette, and Jeanette tries to allow herself to feel whatever she needs to feel without telling herself that her reaction to any situation is wrong (echoing Gertrude Stein’s quote about the road in Chapter 9). Jeanette accepts that perhaps the answer to her feelings will never be an easy or straightforward one.*



*Jeanette ends the book on a note of cautious hope—just as when she left her home at the age of sixteen, she is uncertain of what comes next, but knows that she has a better foundation for the loving relationships in her life than she had then.*





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