

The Holy Roll, or Closet?

*Pentecostal religions are showcases for women
to author Jeanette Winterson.*

B Y W . C . M c R A E

The travails of Jimmy and Tammy Bakker have exposed us to the inner hypocrisy of televangelism. Lest we become too smug, Jeanette Winterson's wonderfully evocative and funny novel, *Oranges are not the only fruit* (Pandora, \$6.00, paper), is a necessary corrective to a facile dismissal of revivalist religion. For Winterson, Pentecostal religions are showcases for strong women, and outlets for lesbian consciousness in otherwise incongruous environments.

I recall my surprise when I learned that Christianity was the backbone of the patriarchy. Until that point, religion seemed to me almost exclusively to represent the will and prerogative of women. It is now much more common to believe that, throughout history, women have been held in unwilling religious bondage to a male order, and that Christianity is antithetical to the female nature. But in this uncritical exuberance about women's spirituality, there seems to be an increasing element of revisionism.

Winterson in *Oranges* . . . describes the evangelism of her youth as almost totally a female phenomenon. The woman-dominated Pentecostal churches that Winterson — and I — grew up in are establishments of female-effacement. On the one hand, women are the church — the preachers, the promoters, and the parishioners. But these are churches whose congregations of women throng to hear the message of their subordination to a male order. The women in *Oranges* . . . are not merely contributing to their own oppression. They exult in the opportunity to constrain themselves, and others, to patriarchal norms.

Winterson's narrator is a young woman adopted into a poor evangelical family in the English Midlands. She grows up glorying in the hearty female spirituality of the tent revival, while increasingly appreciating the pleasures of loving young female converts. In different hands, *Oranges* . . . could have been a self-aggrandizing story

of a young lesbian defining herself against the constraints of a seemingly hostile religion. However, for the narrator, the conflict between appreciating religious women and being a lesbian, is mediated by the combination of love and bafflement that she feels for her mother (easily one of the unique characters I've encountered in fiction).

The narrator's liberation is not just freedom from, but freedom to.

As a result, *Oranges* . . . is not a harsh or bitter work, but a novel filled with understanding, and great humor. Winterson explores the folly of her characters, without exploiting it.

Winterson recently edited *Passion Fruit: Romantic Fiction with a Twist* (Pandora, \$6.95, paper), a volume of short stories by twelve women writers. Winterson's selections here are anti-romantic romances: Post-feminist love stories involving people who, though knowing better, continue making the wrong decisions about love. In these stories, self-knowledge doesn't lead to informed decisions, it only makes for self-aware fiction. In one story, a woman and her cross-dressing husband preserve their freedom from the Broadmoor Hospital for the Clinically Insane by compulsively maintaining the normalcy of their marriage. In another, a woman loves a man who increasingly cannot separate the reality of their life together from his memories of Viet Nam. In one of the best stories, by Marge Piercy, a young philosophy teacher crosses social and class barriers to love a young, untutored student: "He takes her gingerly, and afterward, it is as if sex were something he had stepped in."

Many of the stories in *Passion Fruit* are difficult and unglowing, and address unfamiliar issues from unexpected perspectives. Winterson has chosen her stories to explore a kind of Third World of romantic experience, extracted from the seamless normalcy of "love" that pretends to engulf us.

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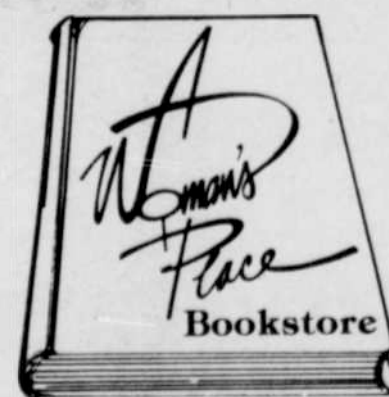
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