

BOOKS

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By novel's end it's up to interpretation whether the physical world ever existed or if Ali created the entire story in cyberspace. The answer is possibly both. With Winterson, you always have the power to write your own story.

She came to town Nov. 9 as part of the Portland Arts & Lectures series. Her diminutive size—I'm guessing 5-foot-2—belies the powerhouse performance she delivers. The crowd is an interesting mix of Portland's social elite and dyke on the street, and she ropes them all in early on.

I caught up with Winterson at a hotel a few hours before she took to the stage.

Lisa Bradshaw: Your lecture is titled "What Is Art For?" Can you summarize that a little and explain why you chose that topic for your U.S. tour?

Jeanette Winterson: I thought it was a timely moment when science is pretending that it's going to give us the answer to everything and that if we just wait long enough, the men in the white coats will solve all our moral, ethical and spiritual dilemmas. I think it's a moment when art needs to speak up and say: "Look, the raw material of art is human beings, human beings is what we have to deal with, and human beings is what we are. The place to look is inside, not outside, for the answers...." Art also forces you to ask yourself big questions. It's always questioning the current reality; that's why it's so useful. It's always there as a counterculture and as a different vision to the kind of world we live in. When we live in a money culture like this, we need something that stands up and says: "No, there are other things. There are imaginative realities. There's more to life than materiality."

LB: I've sensed a tension about technology in your previous work. But *The PowerBook* is largely set in cyberspace. Have you changed your mind about technology, or have you always been thinking you could interact art with the Internet?

JW: Well, art is interactive. Reading itself is interactive; as soon as we pick up a book, we put ourselves into it. We begin to rewrite the story. Long after the book's finished, we go on imagining what would have happened. Reading's not a passive act; it's one of involvement where the text is always changing. Strong texts can take this; it's why you can have a hundred million versions of Shakespeare, and it's still Shakespeare. If the text is strong, a writer needn't worry about any kind of interactive view. For me, art is about communication, and if the Web is going to further communication, then I'm for it, I'm not against it. I don't want to stand on the sidelines of my own time, carping and criti-

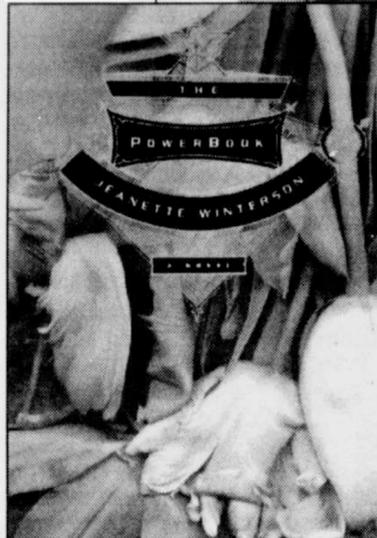
cizing.... When writers talk about it, they think it's going to be the end of the book; they think it's going to be the end of the authority of the author.

LB: And you don't.

JW: No, I don't. I think it's possible to work with it in a way that keeps your own work and your own vision authentic but expands the broad-band of communication. What interests me, too, is to reconcile disparate positions. We live in a world of dualisms and binary oppositions—you know, black/white, light/dark, gay/straight, male/female—but they're only definitions, they're tools. We often mistake a way of labeling and defining as an objective understanding of the world. All of my work has been trying to destroy false contradictions and to show through those contradictions the underlying unity. It's why I play with gender so much. It's also why, say, in *Gut Symmetries* and *The PowerBook*, I've refused a split between technology and humanism, between science and the arts. It's only in the superficials that everything seems so separated.

LB: There's a passage in *The PowerBook* that reads: "There is always the danger of automatic writing.... There is a fatefulness and a loss of control that are somehow comforting. This was your script, but now it writes itself." It's disguised as a lesson in writing but also seems to be about transition and identity.

JW: People get very fatefully caught up in their lives, and they find it hard to see that they are, in fact, the writer of the drama. There's a sort of inevitability and loss of control that a lot of people partly welcome because they can say: "It's not my fault all this happened to me. What can I do?" Which is a sort of relief at the same time it's an agony. I've always felt that is not the case and that we are in control, and it's really a question of telling the story again. I think sometimes it's a good idea to see yourself as a fictional character, because then you can write your way out of a plot. It's something that art gives you. You say:



"Yes, I can change the story. I am the story," as it says in the beginning of *The PowerBook*.

LB: Although I know you've been grilled about this a hundred times by as many people, I can't let the chance go by to talk to you directly about the stereotypes about single lesbians and wives and why husbands are nervous about it. What is it about lesbians and married women?

JW: I think the trouble with married women is that they're often fascinated by what sex with another woman would be like, and they don't think that it's quite the sin or the betrayal it would be if they went to bed with another guy. Which is not so great, because it reveals their true views on the matter in that it's trivial—that it's not as important. But I think the fascination is there, and they think, "Well, I could just do this and it wouldn't do any harm, would it?" I can't bear being with those straight women who just think you're going to leap on them at any moment. They make me so ner-

vous. [Laughs] But actually there's quite a lot of them, and you can only assume that they're thinking about it a lot more than you are.

LB: Would this theme be in so much of your fiction if you had not met and fallen in love with Peggy Reynolds, who was married at the time?

JW: I think it doesn't really make any difference. I'm endlessly fascinated by triangle situations, situations where people are pulled. It's much more interesting than a straight, linear situation. I think, too, that playing with sexual difference between heterosexual love and queer love gives the thing a wider perspective. You can never know what's going to happen when you start playing with sex, when you start playing with passion; you just don't know what the outcome is going to be. So I've just weighed it up and run it through so many permutations. In *The PowerBook*, I was much more sympathetic to the woman who wanted to stay in the marriage. We've moved on a bit from *Written on the Body*, where I said that marriage is a plate glass window just begging for a brick.

LB: Some of your devoted fans are critical of *The PowerBook* because it's the same issues, the same themes and the same messages we've seen in your writing before.

JW: *The PowerBook* is the end of a cycle. It finishes a series of work which starts with *Oranges*, and it really does stop here; I know that. The seven books make a picture, and you can't take any of them out; they all fit together. I see them all as pauses, chapters, in something which is a whole cycle of work. But it's finished now, that's it, the end.... I think this is the best book I've written. It's me at the best I can do after 15 years of doing it. [Laughs] But that's why it's the end; there's no further to go for me with this and in this method. What I do next will have to be a completely different way of working. If it isn't going to be that, it's not going to be anything at all. [J]

LISA BRADSHAW is a free-lance writer who thinks interviewing Jeanette Winterson is pretty dam cool.

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