

Angela (Olive) Carter (1940-1992)



Unbidden, she comes.



Life and works in short

- Angela Olive Stalker – 1940
Eastbourne, South London, Sussex
- Anorexia in adolescence
- 1960 marriage to Paul Carter and
move to Bristol
- University of Bristol / bohemian life
- 1960s works: “detective story”
Shadow Dance (1966); *The Magic
Toyshop* (1967) – themes of sexual
fantasy, interest in fairy tales and
Freudian unconscious –; *Several
Perceptions* (1968); *Heroes and
Villains* (1969)

"I can date to that time and to that sense of heightened awareness of the society around me in the summer of 1968, my own questioning of the nature of my reality as a woman. How that social fiction of my 'femininity' was created, by means outside my control, and palmed off on me as the real thing"

- 1968 – Roland Barthes' *The Death of the Author*
- “Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing”
- “We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single ‘theological’ meaning (the ‘message’ of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space”

- 1970 divorce and move to Japan – the “other”; friendship with French surrealists
- *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* (1973) – diabolic doctor who wants to demolish the structures of reason with giant generators
- *The Passions of New Eve* (1977) – focus: change in gender roles, sexual hybridity
- *The Sadeian Woman* (1979) vs culturally accepted views of sexuality, defence of the Marquis de Sade's images of women
- 1970s-80s involvement in debates about feminist pluralism and post-modernism

- *The Bloody Chamber* (1979), followed by her screenplay for “The Company of Wolves” (1984)
- Canon revision (Virginia Woolf, Adrienne Rich, Elaine Showalter, Susan Gubar, Sandra Gilbert and Regina Barreca)
- Feminist rewriting of fairy tales through parody: Angela Carter, A. S. Byatt, Anne Sexton, Margaret Atwood
- New image of woman (vs Belle Dame sans Merci // Angel in the house)

“My intention was not to do [...] adult fairy-tales, but to extract the latent content from the traditional stories”

“The wolf may be more than he seems”

“Reading is just as creative an activity as writing and most intellectual development depends on new reading of old texts. I am all for putting new wine in old bottles, especially if the pressure of the new wine makes the old bottles explode”

- Journalism collected in *Nothing Sacred* (1982)
- *Nights at the Circus* (1984)
- *Black Venus* (1985) - fictionalization of historical characters (e.g. Baudelaire's syphilitic mistress)
- *Wise Children* (1991) – on two twins, illegitimate daughters of a Shakespearean actor; **Shakespeare revised and parodied**

- “*English literature has lost its high sorceress, its benevolent witch queen*” (Salman Rushdie, 1992)
- Posthumous: *Burning Your Boats* (1996 short-story collection); *Shaking a Leg* (1998, collected journalism)

“Angela Carter's life – the background of social mobility, the teenage anorexia, the education and self-education, the early marriage and divorce, the role-playing and shape-shifting, the travels, the choice of a man much younger, the baby in her forties – is the story of someone walking a tightrope. It's all happening ‘on the edge’, in no man's land, among the debris of past convictions. By the end, her life fitted her more or less like a glove, but that's because she'd put it together by trial and error, bricolage, all in the (conventionally) wrong order.” (Lorna Sage, "Death of the Author", *Granta*, No. 41, Autumn 1992)

Central concerns

- Magic realism and the *unheimlich*
 - “A good writer can make you believe time stands still”
 - “Though it took me a long time to realise why I liked them, I’d always been fond of Poe, and Hoffman – Gothic tales, cruel tales, tales of wonder, tales of terror, fabulous narratives that deal directly with the imagery of the unconscious – mirrors; the externalised self; forsaken castles; haunted forests; forbidden sexual objects”

Demythologizing vs remythologizing

- “I'm basically trying to find out what certain configurations of imagery in our society, in our culture, really stand for, what they mean, underneath the kind of semireligious coating that makes people not particularly want to interfere with them”
- Vs myths of Western culture: e. g. patriarchal imagery of sexuality
- Strategies: mimicry, parody and irony (rejection and re-appropriation)

“I also like to argue”, or TO EPLORE

- “A narrative is an argument stated in fictional terms” – vs postmodernist obsession with metanarration (yet cf p. 260)
- “All art is political and so is mine. I want readers to understand what it is that I mean by my stories” – BUT no fixed political agenda
- “I would see [the moral function of a novel] as a moral compunction to explicate and to find out about things. I suppose I would regard curiosity as a moral function”

Gender and feminism

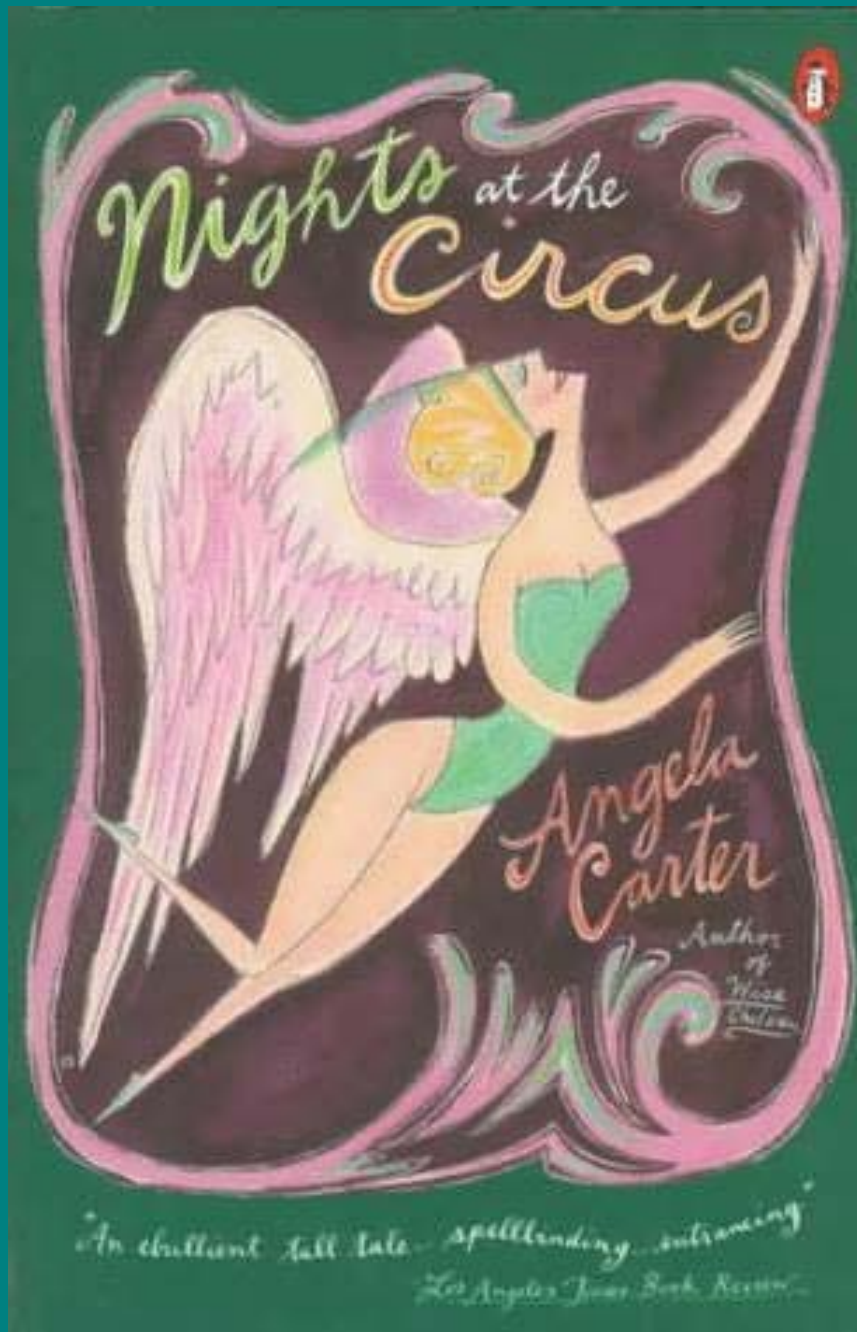
- Joining other British feminists in their concern for the material conditions of women's lives – e.g. whores in *Nights at the Circus*; socialist ideology vs patriarchal capitalism
- YET idiosyncratic feminism
 - Interest in heterosexual rather than homosexual relationships (politics of sexual relationships)
 - vs feminist consolatory fictions - myth of maternal superiority and mythic versions of women
 - Adoption of magic realism and the fantastic instead of realism

Speculative thrust: “what if...?”

- Writer-reader dialogue: deconstructive communion
- “I feel myself challenged by the world. [...] I also ask myself a number of questions, but it’s like answering questions in an exam: there are no right answers.”
- “I was trained to read books as having many layers” YET “From *The Magic Toyshop* onwards I’ve tried to keep an entertaining surface to the novels, so that you don’t have to read them as a system of signification if you don’t want to”

Fiction of ideas?

- Theories interwoven with fiction
 - Freud, Marx, Adorno, Barthes, Fanon, Foucault, Lacan, Benjamin, Gramsci, Bakhtin....YET often she “writes back” against them through parody (e.g. castrated male protagonists and renewed subjectivities in *The Passion of New Eve*)
 - Seductive power of the storyteller



***Nights
at the Circus
(1984)***

What kind of novel?

- 18th-century **picaresque** structure set in 1899 – three-ringed, three-act circus (London, St. Petersburg, and Siberia)
- **Polyphonic novel**: huge gallery of characters, each with a singular voice
- **Feminist novel** / “female comedy”:
 - ❖ how female identity can be asserted beyond the male gaze that turns woman into an object – cfr. Fevvers’s infectious final laughter debunking Walser’s gaze

(p. 295) The spiralling tornado of Fevvers' laughter began to twist and shudder across the entire globe, as if a spontaneous response to the giant comedy that endlessly unfolded beneath it, until everything that lived and breathed, everywhere, was laughing. Or so it seemed to the deceived husband, who found himself laughing too, even if he was not quite sure whether or not he might be the butt of the joke. Fevvers, sputtering to a stop at last, crouched above him, covering his face with kisses.

- ❖ Fevvers's resistance vs male authorities (sexual politics subplots: vs Rosicrucian maniac; vs Grand Duke; vs Shaman; role-reversal with Walser) – from object in men's eyes to independent subject
- ❖ Subplots on inhumanity of man to woman
 - Story of Mignon: her father killed her mother and she fell victim of the Ape-Man
 - Story of little Ivan: his mother, after many beatings, killed his father with an axe
- ❖ Lesbian relationship between Mignon and the Princess of Abyssinia (cf scene p. 155)

❖ New Women, Whores and Suffragists

- Fevvers: the fantastical “New Woman” using Walser as amanuensis “of all those whose tales we’ve yet to tell him, the histories of those women who would otherwise go down nameless and forgotten, erased from history as if they had never been ...” (p. 285)
- Lizzie: socialist feminist embodying radical working-class tradition – she will use Walser as means for sending back to England reports on the political struggle in Russia (as she promised to a man at the British Museum: Marx?)

- ❖ Yet: also critique of certain feminism
- Republic of free women (ex-convicts founding a female Utopia in the taiga) (pp. 240-241) “What’ll they do with the boy babies? Feed ’em to the polar bears? To the *female* polar bears?” demanded Liz, who was in truculent mood and clearly thought herself back in Whitechapel at a meeting of the Godwin and Wollstonecraft Debating Society.

➤ “[A] true conception of the relation between the sexes will not admit of conqueror and conquered” (*The Sadeian Woman*)

- Postmodern novel

- ❖ Dozens of intertexts (e.g. Shakespeare, Freud, Poe, Foucault, Marx, De Sade, fairytales...)

- ❖ High and low culture (mainly popular performative art, including cinema: Fevvers – Mae West)

- ❖ Heteroglossia

- ❖ Genre hybridity: gothic, magic realist, realist, *Bildungsroman*....

The Heroine

“One of the original ideas behind the creation of that character was a piece of writing by Guillaume Apollinaire, in which he talks about Sade's Juliette. He's talking about a woman in the early twentieth century [...]. He's talking about the new woman, and the very phrase he uses is, ‘who will have wings and will renew the world’. And I read this, and like a lot of women, when you read this kind of thing, you get this real ‘bulge’ and think, ‘How wonderful...How terrific’, and then I thought, ‘Well no; it's not going to be as easy as that’. And I also thought, ‘Really, how very, very inconvenient it would be for a person to have real wings, just how really difficult’”.

- “How inconvenient to have wings, and by extension, how very, very difficult to be born so out of key with the world. Something that women know all about is how very difficult it is to enter an old game. What you have to do is to change the rules and make a new game, and that's really what [Fevvers]'s about.”
- Fevvers is simply conjured up, flesh-and-blood and magic (wings and sword) ⇒ the reader suspends his disbelief

- Archetypal Carter heroine: large, sexy, bawdy and with voracious appetites, a bird woman and an enchantress, both goddess and fallen angel (rebel)

*“Like Lucifer, I fell. Down, down, down
I tumbled bang with a bump on the
Persian rug below me...”* [p. 30]

- Surreal figure and yet extremely real, down-to-earth

- Larger-than-life character vs Walser, a Ishmael “with an expense account, and, besides, a thatch of unruly flaxen hair, a ruddy, pleasant, square-jawed face and eyes the cool grey of scepticism [...]. In all his young life, he had not felt so much as one single quiver of introspection. If he was afraid of nothing, it was not because he was brave; like the boy in the fairy story who does not know how to shiver, Walser did not know how to be afraid.” (p. 10)

- Symbol of intersection between history and myth, human and divine – *Leda and the Swan*



Central themes

- Wings (“fevvers”) and flying – freedom from slavery (under both men and women like Mme Shreck) – vs imprisoning shell
- New Women and New Men

“You said yourself he was unhatched, Lizzie; very well - I'll sit on him, I'll hatch him out, I'll make a new man of him. I'll make him into the New Man, in fact, fitting mate for the New Woman, and onward we'll march hand in hand into the New Century” (p. 281)

- The magic of storytelling

"Her voice. It was as if Walser had become a prisoner of her voice, her cavernous, sombre voice, a voice made for shouting about the tempest, her voice of a celestial fishwife." [p. 43]

- Blurring or change of identity through inversion, masks and alternative forms / remakes – metaphor of the freak (male/female; human/animal; deformed beings)

(p. 61, *Fevvers to Walser*) What is 'natural' and 'unnatural', sir? The mould in which the human form is cast is exceedingly fragile. Give it the slightest tap with your finger and it breaks.

- ❖ The subject's boundaries may be redrawn YET sense that nothing essentially changes in the end: e.g. *Fevvers* rises at the expense of *Walser* – power relations are reversed rather than deconstructed (she's "on top")

- Vs conventional definitions established by language and patriarchal culture

(p. 198, Liz to Fevvers) “You never existed before. There’s nobody to say what you should do or how to do it. You are Year One. You haven’t any history and there are no expectations of you except the ones you yourself create”.

- Paradox: yearning for this freedom vs impossibility to escape historical determinism (Jeremy Bentham – *panopticon*; Michel Foucault – how institutions shape man)

(p. 240) “But this grievous condition has nothing to do with the soul, or [...] ‘human nature’. [...] What we have to contend with, here, my boy, is the long shadow of the *past historic* [...] that forged the institutions which create the human nature of the present in the first place”.

❖ Fevver's success depends on her adoption of the star system promoted by the arch-capitalist Colonel Kearney

“One doesn't have here a power which is wholly in the hands of one person who can exercise it alone and totally over the others. It's a machine in which everyone is caught, those who exercise power just as much as those over whom it is exercised” (Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 1980)

- Hope for and possibility of social change YET no positive answer is eventually provided
- ⇒ Fevvers doesn't so much destabilize the machine as improve her position within it
- ⇒ By imposing on Walser her vision of herself, she reverses but doesn't dissolve the existing power structures

- Fevvers's optimistic progressivism vs Lizzie's pragmatic sense and historicism (pp. 285-86) "The dolls' house doors will open, the brothels will spill forth their prisoners, the cages, gilded or otherwise, all over the world, in every land, will let forth their inmates singing together the dawn chorus of the new, the transformed"
- "It's going to be more complicated than that [...] this old witch sees storms ahead, my girl. When I look at the future, I see through a glass, darkly." – novel pointing to the future in the past

Reader at play

- “Part of the point of the novel is that you are kept uncertain. The reader is more or less kept uncertain until quite a long way through. When she is talking about being a new woman and having invented herself, her foster mother keeps on saying it's not going to be as simple as that”

- “Her narrative utopia – her idea of an idyll for the writer – is a dialogue with the reader, a sort of deconstructive communion, with the whole panorama and the enormous cast full of life and detail, and yet at the same time palpably unreal – merely a world populated by our changeful symbols, ourselves”
(Lorna Sage, *Angela Carter*, 1994)

- Narrative complexity
 - ❖ Third-person narrative apparently omniscient towards Walser (London and St Petersburg)
 - ❖ First-person past narrative(s) in dialogue (London) – capturing reader's attention
 - ❖ Third-person narrative conveying information about myriads of characters – multivocality (mainly in St Petersburg)
 - ❖ Shifting between third- and first-person narrative (Fevver's perspective)

- Stories generated out of stories, escaping closure \Rightarrow final explosion of the “O” of the circus ring / explosion of the train (another image of liberty like the explosion of the Siberian female penitentiary)
- How we understand life, our sense of ourselves, our relationships with others are stories – partly of our making, partly forced upon us by institutions (identity results from negotiating)

- Stories construct us but are also something we construct
- We are both the *objects* created by narratives and the *subjects* who (re)create them – clowns as “the object and yet – yet! also [...] the subject of laughter. For what we are, we have *chosen* to be” (p. 119)
- Narratives are *pedagogical* (taught to us) and *performative* (performed in all sorts of ways): shaping and shaped

(p. 122) “It is given to few to shape themselves, as I have done, as we have done, as you have done, young man, and in that moment of choice – lingering deliciously among the crayons; what eyes shall I have, what mouth ... exists a perfect freedom. But, once the choice is made, I am condemned, therefore, to be ‘Buffo’ in perpetuity. [...] And what am I without my Buffo’s face? Why, nobody at all. Take away my make-up and underneath is merely not-Buffo. An absence. A vacancy”.