

## 2006/April JEANETTE WINTERSON - Publishing News

There is a very interesting mix of the old and the new in Spitalfields. Georgian houses, some beautifully refurbished, others not, cheek by jowl with, or at least facing off, the glass, chrome and oh-so-neat brickwork of charmless modern developments. History looking across the street at the future.

Award-winning author Jeanette Winterson lives here in a lovingly restored 18<sup>th</sup> century building, complete with her own functioning shop on the ground floor. It's the kind of place you'd imagine someone who eschews most if not all of the techno-fripperies might live, that it would be home to a writer who uses a pen and is actually responsible for proper manuscripts. But you'd be wrong. Winterson produces her books courtesy of her imagination and a brace of Macintosh laptops.

Her latest book, to be published by Bloomsbury Children's Books, is called *Tanglewreck* and, like the area where she lives, it's also an interesting mix of the old and the new. This, though, is not her first children's book - that was *The King of Capri*, illustrated by Jane Ray, which came out in 2003 - but it is her first full-length novel for children, and once again written for her godchildren, Eleanor and Cara.

"The kids are always the engine that starts me on a story; they stay with me every other weekend and we play word games and we make up poems together and out of that came some characters and ideas that made Eleanor ask me to write another story for them." Winterson is something of a language maven, words being not just her business but her pleasure, too, and this love of language and words is something she's very keen to pass on to today's children. "I think now, with TV and computers, children need an injection of muscular, strong language which they won't get otherwise."

There's a generational difference, Winterson continues, in that nowadays children are exposed to a media barrage from a very early age, which she thinks ought to be balanced with stories. And she's a fan of stories of the good, old-fashioned type, which you can tell by the structure and content of her novel. *Tanglewreck* is a big, sprawling story that plays with Time,

language, history, poetry and science; an epic, in many ways, with echoes of Dickens and a direct link to the *New Scientist*, a magazine she's been subscribing to, she says, for as long as she can remember.

"I read a lot of non-fiction, and general, popular science, like John Gribben and John Barrow. I like it, and I get all my facts checked by a friend who's an astrophysicist, who tells me all my science is right in the book and all the science fiction is fine. So I know I'm not misleading the children!" Sitting in front of a fire, drinking tea on this cold March morning, Winterson is as keen to discuss entanglement theory, and its possible application in teleportation, as she is to talk about her writing.

The story of Silver, Abel Darkwater and the quest for the Timekeeper has a distinctly traditional feel to it, characters like the Morlokesque Throwbacks speaking an obscure, enigmatic dialect which is as much a reversion as they themselves are. And Winterson is delighted that it should be seen in this way. "I wanted to go back to something that was absolutely solid and very well made; I didn't set out to write a 'children's classic', but wanted to use everything that's current now, because kids are so much more aware and alert about the world and about science, in many ways better taught than we were. They demand a kind of synthesis with their world and this unknown, mysterious world. That's what I wanted to make for them, as well as, for me, a book that adults would find satisfying, too, when they read it to their kids...I wanted it to be something they are enthusiastic about."

There is, says Winterson, no difference between the way she writes for adults and the way she does for children. She doesn't write sequentially, she doesn't number the pages till the end and she doesn't worry about any linear thread. This last might seem surprising, she says, in a book like *Tanglewreck*, which moves so very clearly from a beginning, quite definitely to an end. "I simply write a piece when I want to write it, and later on, when it takes its place, things obviously have to be tied in to make it fit into the story." Like a shooting a movie? "No, they have a script before they start to film, but I don't know where I'm going. That's exciting, though, because every day I go into my studio and think 'What are we going to do

today...where are we going?'. So for me there's a journey and a level of curiosity, it's not like painting with numbers and the story itself will shift the levers and go off somewhere I wasn't expecting. Only at the end do I bring in a very conscious editorial element...it stays in kit form right up until that point."

The excitement in and connection to what she's done is very obvious, and Winterson has enjoyed writing this book more than somewhat, that's for sure. At one point she says that she "loves that little book", and then immediately corrects herself, saying that it is actually twice as long as anything she ever written for adults. "I thought at first, when I printed it out, that I must have changed the font size, and when I realised I hadn't, I was a bit embarrassed by the length. But then I thought it'd be good for long car journeys. And, if the readers like it, I'm looking forward to writing the second part, because I know where I want to go and I know that I have a lot to explore, if we get to go there."