Jeanette Winterson

- Born in Manchester in 1959
- Adopted and raised by Pentecostal Evangelical family in Accrington, Lancashire
- First lesbian love affair led to her banishment from the church at age fifteen

Sexing the Cherry

- Winterson’s fourth novel
- After Boating for Beginners and The Passion, Sexing the Cherry is third novel in which she experiments with historical settings (i.e. settings in the fairly distant past)

1) “I set this in the seventeenth century, around the beheading of Charles the First, because I had more to do exploring the past as energetic space. I wanted to build another word-dependent world, not restricted either by realism or contemporaneity. The past is strange. We have never been there and we can never go there. I have never recognised the past as a document, rather I understand it as a kind of lumber room, full of trunks of old clothes and odd mementoes. There are as many narratives as there are guesses.” Jeanette Winterson, http://www.jeanettewinterson.com

- Sexing the Cherry is postmodernist in, among other factors, its representations of:
  - the boundaries between reality and fiction as blurred and unstable;
  - time and history as fragmented, artificially constructed and subjective;
  - gender and identity as constantly performed (rather than biologically determined and finite).

Reality & Fiction/ Realism & the Fantastic

- Modernists began challenge of established realist modes (cf. James Joyce’s Dubliners, for example)
- Postmodernists continue and take further this challenge by destabilising and openly questioning realism as well as the nature of the “reality” it aims to represent.

2) “It is more useful to identify realism in terms of the intended effect on the reader: realistic fiction is written to give the effect that it represents life and the social world as it seems to the common reader, evoking the sense that the characters might in fact exist, and that such things might well happen.” M. H. Abrams, A Glossary of Literary Terms (Boston: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2009), pp.302-305 (p.303)

- Novel makes it explicit that such attempts to represent reality are futile:

3) “Lies 6: Reality as something which can be agreed upon. Lies 7: Reality as truth.” Jeanette Winterson, Sexing the Cherry (London: Vintage, 2001), p.83
• Reality and truth as constructions, rather than a universal, collective experiences or facts;
• Multiple narrative voices highlight subjective nature of reality
• Reality is constructed, like fiction, through narratives and language:

4) “We experience the world as flat, even though we know it is round. Likewise, we experience the world as solid matter when we know from physics that it is mostly empty space. In other words, our perception of reality is a fiction we adopt.” Jan Rosemergy, ‘Navigating the Interior Journey: The Fiction of Jeanette Winterson’, British Women Writing Fiction, ed. by Abby P. Werlock (University of Alabama Press, 2000), pp.248-269 (p.264)

• Sexing the Cherry problematises relationship between reality and matter
• Narrative reveals a reality which has so far been invisible, like the secret writing in the Greek letters Jordan describes:

5) “For the Greeks, the hidden life demanded invisible ink. They wrote an ordinary letter and in between the lines set out another letter, written in milk. The document looked innocent enough until one who knew better sprinkled coal-dust over it. What the letter had been no longer mattered; what mattered was the life flaring up undetected ... till now.” Jeanette Winterson, Sexing the Cherry (New York: Random House, 1989), p.2

• Novel’s use of myth, fairy tale and the fantastic adds to this questioning of what we consider as “real”

Time & History
• History, like the “reality” it claims to represent, is a narrative construct
• Novel exposes traditional history as a realist narrative and rejects its claim to be an objective representation of “reality” or “truth”:

6) “History should be a hammock for swinging and a game for playing the way cats play. Claw it, chew it, rearrange it and at bedtime, ti’s still a ball of string full of knots.” Jeanette Winterson, Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit (London: Pandora, 1985), p.93

• Winterson renders history a complex narrative, both in terms of chronological structure and in terms of its narrative contents.
• Sexing the Cherry also challenges the artificial, coherent chronology of traditional history

7) “Lies 2: Time is a straight line. Lies 3: The difference between the past and the future is that one has happened while the other has not.” Winterson, Sexing the Cherry, p.83
• Our structuring of time into past, present and future is not natural but artificial; it is something we have constructed
• Jordan’s description of the language of the Hopi tribe illustrates how language is crucial in our conceptualisation of time and, by extension, to our lives:

8) “Most bizarre of all, they have no tenses for past, present and future. They do not sense time in that way. For them, time is one. The old man said it was impossible to learn their language without learning their world. I asked him how long it had taken him and he said that question had no meaning.” Winterson, Sexing the Cherry, pp.134-135

• Related but separate characters in different historical settings blur boundaries between past and present (Jordan and Dog Woman in seventeenth century, Nicholas and unnamed environmental activist in 1980s)

9) “The convergence of these two moments of anger at political and environmental corruption, with their acts in the name of the oppressed, characterizes Sexing the Cherry’s effort to interlace past and present, to conceive and enact an historical practice that challenges a linear history” Angela Marie Smith, ‘Fiery Constellations: Winterson’s Sexing the Cherry and Benjamin’s Materialist Historiography’, College Literature, 32: 3 (Summer 2005), pp.21-50 (pp.21-22)

• Despite connection between past and present, it is important to note that this connection is not established via a linear, chronological development
• Past is never finished or complete, but always exists in the present and influences it:

10) [Instead of presenting us with a “smooth continuum of history”], “Winterson depict[s] the seventeenth century as a period of crisis, instability and discontinuity within which we can identify the beginnings of much that is now recognisable in our modern world […]. Any sense of progress, however, is fractured and problematic.’ Diana Wallace, The Woman’s Historical Novel: British Women Writers, 1900 – 2000 (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2005), p.195

**History**
• Novel does not aim to narrate traditional history, but to question it and to create new histories

11) ‘I could tell you the truth as you will find it in diaries and maps and log-books. I could faithfully describe all that I saw and heard and give you a travel book. You could follow it then, tracing those travels with your finger, putting red flags where I went.’ Jeanette Winterson, Sexing the Cherry (London: Virago, 1989), p.2
• Again, use of multiple narrators facilitates this creation of multiple (hi)stories
• Traditional history represents experience of dominant social groups
• Novel creates alternative histories of the oppressed and marginalised, the invisible and unrecorded
• Use of fact and fiction facilitates reimagining of unrecorded (hi)stories

12) [Sexing the Cherry exposes] “the subjectivity of historical narratives and […] question[s] their ‘authority’ to represent ‘reality’. [It asks] instead how ordinary people can ‘authorise’ their own stories without an appeal to a ‘higher’ authority, whether God, King, Emperor or even an explorer and horticulturalist like John Tradescant. In doing so, [Winterson displays] the potential to […] challenge the consensual historical narrative established by the status quo.” Wallace, The Woman’s Historical Novel, p.194

13) “Memory 1: The scene I have just described to you may lie in the future or the past. Either I have found Fortunata or I will find her. I cannot be sure. Either I am remembering her or I am still imagining her. But she is somewhere in the grid of time, a co-ordinate, as I am.” Winterson, Sexing the Cherry, p.93

Historiographic Metafiction

14) “Historiography: The study of the writing of history, the way style, narrative, metaphors, and so on affect how the historical record is received and understood.” A Dictionary of Critical Theory

• Winterson’s novel is “historiographic” because it critically investigates the ways in which we write and understand history by consciously rewriting and challenging the kind of (linear, “factual”) history we know and have come to accept as “true”

15) “Metafiction: Fiction about fiction; or more especially a kind of fiction that openly comments on its own fictional status.” The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms

• Sexing the Cherry displays this self-awareness of itself as fiction
• Unlike realist narratives, it does not try to make us believe its narrative is “reality”
• Instead, it draws our attention to the fact that this is exactly what it does not do

16) “Historiographic metafiction refutes the natural or common-sense methods of distinguishing between historical fact and fiction. It refuses the view that only history has a truth claim, both by questioning the ground of that claim in historiography and by asserting that both history and fiction are discourses, human constructs, signifying systems” Linda Hutcheon, A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction (London: Routledge, 1988), p.93