MODERN · NOVELISTS

Angela Carter

LINDEN · PEACH

MACMILLAN MODERN NOVELISTS

ANGELA CARTER

Linden Peach

St. Martin's Press
New York

ANGELA CARTER

St. Martin's Press, Scholarly and Reference Division,
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10010

First published in the United States of America in 1998

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources.

Printed in Malaysia

ISBN 0–312–17626–0

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Peach, Linden, 1951–
Angela Carter / Linden Peach.
p. cm. — (Modern novelists)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0–312–17626–0 (cloth)
1. Carter, Angela, 1940– —Criticism and interpretation.
2. Women and literature—England—History—20th century. I. Title.
II. Series.
PR6053.A73Z83 1998
823'.914—dc21 97–13615
CIP

Acknowledgements

The author and publishers wish to thank the Estate of Angela Carter, c/o Rogers, Coleridge and White Ltd, 20 Powis Mews, London W11 1JN, for permission to use copyright material from *Shadow Dance*, © Angela Carter 1966; *The Magic Toyshop*, © Angela Carter 1967; *Several Perceptions*, © Angela Carter 1968; *Heroes and Villains*, © Angela Carter 1969; *Love*, © Angela Carter 1971; *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*, © Angela Carter 1972; *The Passion of New Eve*, © Angela Carter 1977; *Nights at the Circus*, © Angela Carter 1984; and *Wise Children*, © Angela Carter 1991.

General Editor's Preface

The death of the novel has often been announced, and part of the secret of its obstinate vitality must be its capacity for growth, adaptation, self-renewal and self-transformation: like some vigorous organism in a speeded up Darwinian ecosystem, it adapts itself quickly to a changing world. War and revolution, economic crisis and social change, radically new ideologies such as Marxism and Freudianism, have made this century unprecedented in human history in the speed and extent of change, but the novel has shown an extraordinary capacity to find new forms and techniques and to accommodate new ideas and conceptions of human nature and human experience, and even to take up new positions on the nature of fiction itself.

In the generations immediately preceding and following 1914, the novel underwent a radical redefinition of its nature and possibilities. The present series of monographs is devoted to the novelists who created the modern novel and to those who, in their turn, either continued and extended, or reacted against and rejected, the traditions established during that period of intense exploration and experiment. It includes a number of those who lived and wrote in the nineteenth century but whose innovative contribution to the art of fiction makes it impossible to ignore them in any account of the modern novel; it also includes the so-called 'modernists' and those who in the mid- and late twentieth century have emerged as outstanding practitioners of this genre. The scope is, inevitably, international; not only, in the migratory and exile-haunted world of our century, do writers refuse to heed national boundaries – 'English' literature lays claim to Conrad the Pole, Henry James the American, and Joyce the Irishman – but geniuses such as Flaubert,

Dostoevsky and Kafka have had an influence on the fiction of many nations.

Each volume in the series is intended to provide an introduction to the fiction of the writer concerned, both for those approaching him or her for the first time and for those who are already familiar with some parts of the achievement in question and now wish to place it in the context of the total *oeuvre*. Although essential information relating to the writer's life and times is given, usually in an opening chapter, the approach is primarily critical and the emphasis is not upon 'background' or generalisations but upon close examination of important texts. Where an author is notably prolific, major texts have been made to convey, more summarily, a sense of the nature and quality of the author's work as a whole. Those who want to read further will find suggestions in the select bibliography included in each volume. Many novelists are, of course, not only novelists but also poets, essayists, biographers, dramatists, travel writers and so forth; many have practised shorter forms of fiction; and many have written letters or kept diaries that constitute a significant part of their literary output. A brief study cannot hope to deal with all of these in detail, but where the shorter fiction and non-fictional writings, private and public, have an important relationship to the novels, some space has been devoted to them.

NORMAN PAGE

Contents

1

Introduction

Be advised . . . this writer is no meat-and-potatoes hack; she is a rocket, a Catherine Wheel.

(Salman Rushdie, introduction to *Burning Your Boats*)

I

When Angela Carter died of cancer in 1992, aged only 51, she became, as Nicci Gerrard (1996) observed four years later, 'one of our most missed, lost contemporaries' (p. 20). Her early death has coloured the way in which her writing is now received. Paul Barker (1995) has wryly recalled:

> She dies untimely, and everyone suddenly bursts out weeping. The obituaries give her better notices than anything she ever received in her lifetime. Her books sell out within three days of her death. She becomes the most read contemporary author on English university campuses. Her last story, finished during her final illness, sells 80,000 copies in paperback. She has arrived. But she is dead. (p. 14)

It does not matter how much of this is exact. We do not need evidence that within months of her death she became the most read author on English university campuses. Neither is it necessary to point out that not all her reviewers had given her worse notices

than her obituaries. For Barker's point is that Angela Carter, having died young, has been canonised. Rather like Angela Carter herself, Barker's primary concern here is with perception rather than fact.

As the author of a collection of essays entitled *Nothing Sacred*, Carter would probably have found her own canonisation amusing. She would have found less amusing, however, that as a result she is frequently misunderstood. She may be one of the most read contemporary writers on English university campuses but she is not always the best read. As Gerrard (1996) points out, her 'mocking iconoclasm' has sometimes been reduced to something more comfortable and less radical. It is sometimes forgotten as, Gerrard says, that she has 'more in common with Salvador Dali than Virginia Woolf' (p. 22).

Carter completed nine novels. Although most of them are relatively short, they are crammed with an extraordinary range of ideas, themes and images: *Shadow Dance* (1966; reprinted in America as *Honeybuzzard*, 1966), *The Magic Toyshop* (1967), *Several Perceptions* (1968), *Heroes and Villains* (1969), *Love* (1971), *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* (1972; reprinted in America as *The War of Dreams*, 1977), *The Passion of New Eve* (1977), *Nights at the Circus* (1984) and *Wise Children* (1991). She was, however, more than a novelist; she was a prolific writer of short stories and non-fiction and a teacher of writing.

In addition to the novels, she published several collections of short stories, *Fireworks: Nine Profane Pieces* (1974), *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* (1979), *Black Venus's Tale* (1980), *Black Venus* (1985; reprinted in America as *Saints and Strangers*, 1987) and, posthumously, *American Ghosts & Old-World Wonders (1993)*. Of her non-fiction the most relevant to an appreciation of her novels are *The Sadeian Woman: An Exercise in Cultural History* (1979; reprinted in America as *The Sadeian Woman and the Ideology of Pornography*, 1979), *Nothing Sacred: Selected Writings* (1982) and *Expletives Deleted: Selected Writings* (1992). There are also four collections of children's stories, a work in verse entitled *Unicorn* (1966) and four radio plays. The fact that she edited fairy stories is particularly important to an appreciation of her fiction. She edited and translated *The Fairy Tales of Charles Perrault* (1977) and *Sleeping Beauty and Other Favourite Fairy Tales* (1982) and also edited two collections for Virago: *The Virago Book of Fairy Tales* (1990) and *The Second Virago Book of Fairy Tales* (1992).

Despite Paul Barker's contention that Carter received better notices after her death, her work won favourable reviews as well as prizes during her lifetime. Carter's second novel, *The Magic Toyshop*, won the John Llewellyn Rhys Prize, and *Several Perceptions*, her third novel, the Somerset Maugham Award. *Nights at the Circus* was the joint winner of the James Tait Black Memorial Prize in 1985. In the same year, the film, *Company of Wolves* based on *The Bloody Chamber* and a rewriting of 'Red Riding Hood' was released. During the period 1976–8, Angela Carter was Arts Council of Great Britain Fellow in Sheffield. Further recognition of her work and her skill as a teacher of writing came with prestigious appointments which included Visiting Professor at Brown University, Rhode Island, USA; tutor on the MA in Writing at East Anglia University, UK; and writer-in-residence at the University of Adelaide, South Australia. Soon she achieved international recognition as a teacher as well as a writer, holding writing residencies at Austin, Texas; Iowa City, Iowa; and Albany, New York State in America.

There are many aspects, then, to Carter's life as a writer. It is always difficult to separate out the various strands in an author's biography and this is especially difficult in Carter's case. While her non-fiction, short-fiction, children's fiction and novels all interconnect, Carter was always interested, too, in blurring the boundaries between them, challenging our perceptions of what we mean, for example, by a short story or a novel. Not surprisingly, much of the criticism of Carter's work has ranged over the whole of her *oeuvre* and while it has tried to do justice to the totality of her intellectual life, Carter's engagement with, and contribution to the development of particular genres, has tended to get lost.

The subject of this book is Carter's contribution to the development of the novel. In this introduction, I have tried to highlight some of the contexts and frameworks which are particularly appropriate to a discussion of her work. Inevitably, there are features of Carter's novels which it is impossible to overlook such as their contentious and subversive nature. However, as I will argue shortly, we must be wary of applying convenient critical labels, such as 'magic realism', to Carter's non-realistic, philosophical writing which explores the 'actualities' in which many of us live. Indeed, in the following pages, I have tried to draw attention to some of the implications for literary criticism of the cultural critique in Carter's work. These include the need to recognise how her novels

deconstruct the processes that produce social structures and shared meanings, evident, for example, in her recurrent demythologising of the mother figure and in the way in which the manifestation of the female body in her work disrupts the social construction of women as Woman.

I have also thought it important to highlight early in this book the significance of Carter's perception of post-war Britain – a trope in several of her works including her last novel, *Wise Children* (1991) – even suggesting that it may repay reading in psychoanalytical terms. The recalcitrant 1960s, in which Carter's early work is set, clearly provided an important initial context for her fiction. However, the differences between the 1960s and the 1950s may have proved a more significant influence on her creative imagination than either one of those decades as such.

Although the starting point of my discussion is the recalcitrant, mocking iconoclasm of Carter's fiction, I recommend throughout the book that this aspect of her work be approached as an intellectual strategy in tandem with the unusually dense, allusive nature of her texts. Subsequent chapters examine the hybrid nature of individual novels and how this is a literary device that Carter deliberately mines and exploits, often as part of a wider intertextuality in which traditions, mythologies and conventions are subjected to scrutiny. Through a consideration of Carter's use of different and competing frameworks within her fiction, I argue that intertextuality becomes a boldly thematised part of her work, in which her own culture is rendered as 'foreign'. As I suggest toward the end of this introduction, we need to reassess the commonly held view of the period which Carter spent in Japan as a watershed in her literary career. It should be seen in terms of continuities as well as discontinuities. Primarily, Japan provided valuable confirmation of the ways in which she was developing intellectually and as a writer and cultural critic. Its impact upon her writing was pronounced because it encouraged those aspects of her work, such as the sense of the foreignness of her own culture and her interest in the blurred boundaries between realism and illusion, which were already making her novels distinctive in the late 1960s. Without an appreciation of the period which Carter spent in Japan, it would be impossible to understand fully the nature of the short fiction which followed or of the novels which are set outside Britain.

II

Even with hindsight, Carter's novels are unusually provocative. Indeed, one critic, Elaine Jordan (1992), has admitted: 'I'll please no one least of all her, by trying to say she's not offensive' (p. 120). Generally regarded as one of the most important post-1945 English novelists, responses to her work have sometimes been extreme – at both ends of the critical continuum – and contradictory. Whilst John Bayley (1987), writing mainly with reference to *Love*, can criticise Carter's novels as vehicles for hard-line feminist ideologies and the fashionable perceptions of the moment, Suzanne Kappeller (1986) can take issue with Carter's depiction of Juliette in *The Sadeian Woman* for ignoring her complicity in a system that oppresses women.

The representation of women in Carter's work certainly seems to have been a bone of contention among critics. Paulina Palmer (1989) is critical of the female characters in *The Passion of New Eve* who seek to liberate themselves from qualities associated with feminity in the early 1970s – such as dependency, passivity and masochism – but are 'composed of attributes which are predominantly "masculine"' (p. 16). Robert Clark (1987) has criticised Carter for unwittingly repeating the 'self-alienation' to which patriarchal power relationships give rise. Even Jordan (1992), a self-confessed devotee of Carter who takes Clark to task, admits: 'Reading back through Angela Carter's work from the Sixties on, I had my moment of horror and cold feet at what I was letting myself in for . . . she started out writing as a male impersonator, with a strong streak of misogyny' (p. 16). In reading *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* (1972), Sally Robinson (1991) too had her moment of cold feet, but it seemed to have passed with further consideration. Although she found that 'there is, quite simply, *no place* for a woman reader in this text', she is prepared to argue that the novel challenges 'the reader to occupy a position on the outside of that narrative' (p. 105). Perhaps the extent to which Carter set out to be provocative is indicated in a note she sent to Elaine Jordan, referring to two leading feminist writers: 'If I can get up Suzanne Kappeller's nose, to say nothing of the Dworkin proboscis, then my living has not been in vain' (Sage, 1994, p. 332).

The purpose of the Macmillan Modern Novelists Series is to examine how modern novelists 'continued and extended, or reacted

against and rejected' the traditions created by their predecessors. Although this would appear to be an apposite approach to a writer as innovative as Carter, it is also one of the most difficult. Carter's literary career defies summary and her novels deny, resist and subvert definitions and frames of all kinds – literary, cultural, social, sexual, religious, ontological. She does not write from a particular worldview and throughout her work sociohistorical assumptions and conventions which have prescribed and organised our thinking are disrupted. As she argues in *The Sadeian Woman* (1979):

> Fine art, that exists for itself alone, is art in a final state of impotence. If nobody, including the artist, acknowledges art as a means of *knowing* the world, then art is relegated to a kind of rumpus room of the mind and the irresponsibility of the artist and the irrelevance of art to actual living becomes part and parcel of the practice of art. (p. 13)

It would be a mistake, however, to confuse Carter's concept of *knowing* the world with social realism, an elision that is often made in discussing the novel as a literary form. Even though realism is based on a particular, historically located mode of awareness as partial as any other, over the last few hundred years it has been the preferred mode for writers with a commitment to social change who, in depicting society, have been concerned to bring out the social forces within it. Carter's novels, however, are essentially ludic, characterised by linguistic play. Even the more 'realistic' early texts are parodic, allusive and, sometimes, elusive. Such artistic innovation has been regarded by social realist Marxist critics and writers, such as George Lukacs, as too decadent, introverted and 'bourgeois'. However, as myself and Angela Burton have argued elsewhere (Peach and Burton, 1995), writers like Dennis Potter have recognised that as society changes, so different strategies and techniques are needed to write effective social critiques (p. 31). Social realist fiction 'naturalises' what it portrays so that we trust what we are reading. Non-realistic fiction distances, or even alienates, us so that we are disturbed, puzzled, confused and possibly very critical of what we are reading. As a student of English at Bristol University, Carter would have been familiar with 'alienating techniques' through the work of Bertolt Brecht and through his writings on Chinese theatre where he found that 'everything put forward' has 'a touch of the

amazing' (Willett, 1964, p. 92). Certainly in Carter's fiction, as in Brecht's work, everyday things are 'raised above the level of the obvious and automatic' (ibid.).

Non-realistic fiction usually presents the reader with new insights into how society is structured, into the forces behind it and into how it is organised according to the interests of particular powerful groups. In *Heroes and Villains* to some extent but especially in the post 1970 novels, as I shall discuss later, Carter acknowledges that the mode of awareness which in the last three hundred years or so has been associated with realism is breaking down. Although these novels do not offer any clear, coherent alternatives, they are written from the realisation that many of the traditional principles which have governed our perception and organisation of 'reality' have been brought into question by modern and post-modern European and Euro-American thinking.

As Jordan (1992) points out, 'there are no naturalistically credible imitations of experience in Carter's work and no role models either, not in any simple sense' (p. 121). Helen Carr (1989), believing this has posed a particular problem for Carter's readers, has even suggested that 'Carter's novels became much more acceptable in Britain after the discovery of South American magic realism: her readers discovered that she was writing in a genre that could be named' (p. 7). Associating Carter with 'magic realism', however, creates more problems of definition than it solves. Carter herself has explained that the kinds of social forces that produced Gabriel García Márquez, who is most often associated with this mode of writing, were very different from those that produced her (Haffenden, 1985, p. 81). Even if we were to accept the term 'magic realism' as unproblematic, it would be misleading to apply the same label to all of Carter's work. For example, 'magic realism' seems a more appropriate description of the later fiction written in the 1970s than the earlier work. The early novels of the 1960s employ a fusion of realist, Gothic and fantasy conventions, but, as Marc O'Day (1994) points out, they nevertheless 'invite readings in terms of quite traditional literary criticism' (p. 24).

This distinction between the fiction written in the 1960s and Carter's subsequent work is one that readers will encounter frequently in criticism on Carter's work. Often the later work is referred to as 'speculative fiction' as if all writing were not speculative to some degree. In Carter's case, such distinctions are

problematic because all her novels, including the early works, blur the boundaries between fiction and philosophy. Nevertheless, if 'speculative fiction' is taken to mean 'non-realistic philosophical fiction' then it may be an appropriate way of describing her post-1960s writing. For the later work is more intensely theoretical than the earlier writing and Carter's interest in cultural myths did develop into a more pronounced exploration in her fiction of the part they have played, are playing and are likely to play in the transformation and break-up of conventional social structures.

The label 'magic realism', however, even when applied to the novels of the 1970s and 1980s because they are less 'realist' and more intensely philosophical than the earlier work, creates difficulties. Admittedly, Isabel Allende's definition of magic realism suggests some of the characteristics of Carter's later work: 'Magic realism really means allowing a place in literature to the invisible forces that have such a powerful place in life . . . dreams, myth, legend, passion, obsession, superstition, religion, the overwhelming power of nature and the supernatural' (Lewis, 1993, p. 26). But the term, first coined by Franz Roh in 1925 in relation to post-expressionist art, has been applied slackly since the 1940s to Latin American writers and more recently to those from the Caribbean, Nigeria and India to emphasise their difference from mainstream Euro-American culture. It has not been rigorously defined or adequately distinguished from related literary concepts such as fabulation, the fantastic and the uncanny.

David Punter (1991) has suggested that if Carter is to be described as a 'magic realist' then it must be recognised that 'magic realism', often associated with magical or boundary-breaking events in everyday reality, has to do 'with seeing the recognisable world . . . through transformed eyes' (p. 143). Whilst this is a valid proposition, what is at the heart of 'magic realism', and Carter's work, as Allende's elaboration of her definition suggests, is the representational code of realism locked in a continuous dialectic with that of fantasy. As Selmon (1989) argues, the term 'magic realism' signifies 'resistance to central assimilation by more stable generic systems' (p. 10). Although both these explanations of 'magic realism' suggest that the term might prove appropriate to Carter's writing after all, they are also suggestive of Brecht's work – a much more likely influence on Carter – and especially his essay, 'The Popular and the Realistic', in which he argues that 'reality can be

represented in a factual or a fantastic form' (Willett, 1964, p. 110). However, even though Brecht was probably an important influence on Angela Carter's fiction, Carter is more prepared to stress the dialectic between the two codes of representation which for Allende is central to 'magic realism'. Thus while we might acknowledge the influence of Brecht on Carter's work, pushing Carter toward what has been called 'magic realist', her fiction cannot even be labelled Brechtian. Moreover, while in Carter's work generally the conflation of the fantastic and the factual inscribes a tension between the 'the representational code of realism' and fantasy, in the later novels there is also tension between the celebration of that dialectic – through the figure of Fevvers, for example, in *Nights at the Circus* – and a subversive, analytic framework that cannot accept even that celebration at face value.

It is difficult to quarrel with Margaret Atwood (1992), who observed in her obituary, with only a hint of exaggeration, that Carter 'was born subversive'. Even readers who come to Carter with only a limited knowledge of the English novel, will recognise, as Gerrard (1995) has said, that she was 'the one-off'. And what makes her 'the one-off' is the subversive nature of her 'strange, ribald novels': 'undecorous, overripe and mocking tales in which nothing is sacred and nothing natural' (p. 20). The latter is again a feature which Carter's work shares with Brecht's. As he explained, 'the new alienations are only designed to free socially conditioned phenomenon from the stamp of familiarity which protects them against our grasp today' (Willett, 1964, p. 192). Carter's fiction encourages us to perceive for ourselves the processes that produce social structures, sociohistorical concepts and cultural artefacts. For example, Carter persistently demythologises the idealisation of the mother figure. In *The Sadeian Woman*, she not only argues that 'maternal superiority is one of the most damaging of all consolatory fictions' (p. 106) but maintains:

> All the mythic versions of women, from the myth of the redeeming purity of the virgin to that of the healing, reconciling mother, are consolatory nonsenses; and consolatory nonsense seems to me a fair definition of myth, anyway. Mother goddesses are just as silly a notion as father gods. (p. 5)

Desiderio, the narrator of *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor*

Hoffman (1972), relates how an African chief described his army of women:

> examine the bases of the traditional notions of the figure of the female, you will find you have founded them all on the remote figure you thought you glimpsed, once, in your earliest childhood, bending over you with an offering of warm, sugared milk, crooning a soft lullaby while, by her haloed presence, she kept away the snakes that writhed beneath the bed. Tear this notion of the mother from your hearts. Vengeful as nature herself, she loves her children only in order to devour them. (p. 160)

Although the African chief's account of his army is mediated through Desiderio's masculinised worldview, Carter's work regularly includes descriptions of women, albeit ironically or parodically, that cut across conventional mythic representations. It is frequently critical of essentialising notions such as the eternal feminine, the benevolent or destructive mother, the virgin and the whore, because, as Robinson (1991) says, they obscure 'a socially conditioned female subjectivity and sexuality under a blanket of myth' (p. 118).

The emphasis throughout Carter's work, as in her depictions of women, on manifestations of the body is a product of the dialectic between the representational code of realism and fantasy which Allende identifies as characteristic of 'magic realism' but which is also a feature of Brecht's work. Such an emphasis emerges, however, as Fredric Jameson (1986) argues, when larger historical perspectives lose their validity and older more complex narratives are neutralised. Carter's work, in which conventional narratives are deconstructed and their lack of relevance exposed, would seem to confirm Jameson's thesis. According to Jameson, in such situations when everything else appears to have been stripped away, only 'body manifestations are retained' (p. 321).

The appearance of the body, Jameson argues, is potentially one of the most important disruptive elements in narratives. Although it disturbs the logical progression of realist narrative, the disruption is checked by the fetishisation of the body as image. In narratives which question the validity of grand narratives such as civilisation and progress, however, the appearance of the body, according to Jameson, usually produces 'an awakening of fresh sight' which