THE COLLECTED ANGELA CARTER

Burning Your Boats

STORIES

ANGELA CARTER

With an Introduction by
Salman Rushdie

Chatto & Windus
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BY ANGELA CARTER

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Come unto these Yellow Sands:
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INTRODUCTION

The last time I visited Angela Carter, a few weeks before she died, she had insisted on dressing for tea, in spite of being in considerable pain. She sat bright-eyed and erect, head cocked like a parrot's, lips satirically pursed, and got down to the serious teatime business of giving and receiving the latest dirt: sharp, foulmouthed, passionate.

That is what she was like: spikily outspoken – once, after I'd come to the end of a relationship of which she had not approved, she telephoned me to say, '*Well*. You're going to be seeing a *lot* more of me from now on' – and at the same time courteous enough to overcome mortal suffering for the gentility of a formal afternoon tea.

Death genuinely pissed Angela off, but she had one consolation. She had taken out an 'immense' life insurance policy shortly before the cancer struck. The prospect of the insurers being obliged, after receiving so few payments, to hand out a fortune to 'her boys' (her husband, Mark, and her son, Alexander) delighted her greatly, and inspired a great gloating black-comedy aria at which it was impossible not to laugh.

She planned her funeral carefully. My instructions were to read Marvell's poem *On a Drop of Dew*. This was a surprise. The Angela Carter I knew had always been the most scatologically irreligious, merrily godless of women; yet she wanted Marvell's meditation on the immortal soul – 'that Drop, that Ray / Of the clear Fountain of Eternal Day' – spoken over her dead body. Was this a last, surrealist joke, of the 'thank God, I die an atheist' variety, or an obeisance to the metaphysician Marvell's high symbolic language from a writer whose own favoured language was also pitched high, and replete with symbols? It should be noted that no divinity makes an appearance in Marvell's poem, except for 'th'Almighty Sun'. Perhaps Angela, always a giver of light, was asking us, at the end, to imagine her dissolving into the 'glories' of that greater light: the artist becoming a part, simply, of art.

She was too individual, too fierce a writer to dissolve easily, however: by turns formal and outrageous, exotic and demotic, exquisite and coarse, precious and raunchy, fabulist and socialist, purple and black. Her novels are like nobody else's, from the transsexual coloratura of *The Passion of New Eve* to the music-hall knees-up of *Wise Children*; but the best of her, I think, is in her stories. Sometimes, at novel length, the

distinctive Carter voice, those smoky, opium-eater's cadences interrupted by harsh or comic discords, that moonstone-and-rhinestone mix of opulence and flim-flam, can be exhausting. In her stories, she can dazzle and swoop, and quit while she's ahead.

Carter arrived almost fully formed; her early story, 'A Very, Very Great Lady and Her Son at Home,' is already replete with Carterian motifs. Here is the love of the gothic, of lush language and high culture; but also of low stinks – falling rose-petals that sound like pigeon's farts, and a father who smells of horse dung, and bowels that are 'great levellers'. Here is the self as performance: perfumed, decadent, languorous, erotic, perverse; very like the winged woman, Fevvers, heroine of her penultimate novel *Nights at the Circus*.

Another early story, 'A Victorian Fable,' announces her addiction to all the arcana of language. This extraordinary text, half-*Jabberwocky*, half-*Pale Fire*, exhumes the past by exhuming its dead words:

> In every snickert and ginnel, bone-grubbers,
> rufflers, shivering-jemmies, anglers, clapperdogeons,
> peterers, sneeze-lurkers and Whip Jacks with
> their morts, out of the picaroon, fox and flim
> and ogle.

Be advised, these early stories say: this writer is no meat-and-potatoes hack; she is a rocket, a Catherine Wheel. She will call her first collection *Fireworks*.

Several of the *Fireworks* stories deal with Japan, a country whose tea-ceremony formality and dark eroticism bruised and challenged Carter's imagination. In 'A Souvenir of Japan' she arranges polished images of that country before us. 'The Story of Momotaro, who was born from a peach.' 'Mirrors make a room uncosy.' Her narrator presents her Japanese lover to us as a sex object, complete with bee-stung lips. 'I should like to have had him embalmed . . . so that I could watch him all the time and he would not have been able to get away from me.' The lover is, at least, beautiful; the narrator's view of her big-boned self, as seen in a mirror, is distinctly uncosy. 'In the department store there was a rack of dresses labelled: "For Young and Cute Girls Only". When I looked at them, I felt as gross as Glumdalclitch.' In 'Flesh and the Mirror' the exquisite, erotic atmosphere thickens, approaching pastiche – for Japanese literature has specialised rather in these heated sexual perversities – except when it is cut through sharply by Carter's constant self-awareness. ('Hadn't I gone eight thousand miles to find a climate with

enough anguish and hysteria in it to satisfy me?' her narrator asks; as, in 'The Smile of Winter', another unnamed narrator admonishes us: 'Do not think I do not realize what I am doing,' and then analyses her story with a perspicacity that rescues – brings to life – what might otherwise have been a static piece of mood-music. Carter's cold-water douches of intelligence often come to the rescue of her fancy, when it runs too wild.)

In the non-Japanese stories Carter enters, for the first time, the fable-world which she will make her own. A brother and sister are lost in a sensual, malevolent forest, whose trees have breasts, and bite, and where the apple-tree of knowledge teaches not good and evil, but incestuous sexuality. Incest – a recurring Carter subject – crops up again in 'The Executioner's Beautiful Daughter', a tale set in the kind of bleak upland village which is perhaps the quintessential Carter location – one of those villages where, as she says in the *Bloody Chamber* story 'The Werewolf', 'they have cold weather, they have cold hearts'. Wolves howl around these Carter-country villages and there are many metamorphoses.

Carter's other country is the fairground, the world of the gimcrack showman, the hypnotist, the trickster, the puppeteer. 'The Loves of Lady Purple' takes her closed circus-world to yet another mountainous, Middle-European village where suicides are treated like vampires (wreaths of garlic, stakes through the heart) while real warlocks 'practised rites of immemorial beastliness in the forests'. As in all Carter's fairground stories, 'the grotesque is the order of the day'. Lady Purple, the dominatrix marionette, is a moralist's warning – beginning as a whore, she turns into a puppet because she is 'pulled only by the strings of Lust'. She is a female, sexy and lethal rewrite of Pinocchio, and, along with the metamorphic cat-woman in 'Master', one of the many dark (and fair) ladies with 'unappeasable appetites' to whom Angela Carter is so partial. In her second collection, *The Bloody Chamber*, these riot ladies inherit her fictional earth.

The Bloody Chamber is Carter's masterwork: the book in which her high, perfervid mode is perfectly married to her stories' needs. (For the best of the low, demotic Carter, read *Wise Children*; but in spite of all the oo-er-guv, brush-up-your-Shakespeare comedy of that last novel, *The Bloody Chamber* is the likeliest of her works to endure.)

The novella-length title story, of overture, begins as classic *grand guignol*: an innocent bride, a much-married millionaire husband, a lonely Castle stood upon a melting shore, a secret room containing horrors. The helpless girl and the civilised, decadent, murderous man: Carter's first variation on the theme of Beauty and the Beast. There is a feminist twist:

instead of the weak father to save whom, in the fairy tale, Beauty agrees to go to the Beast, we are given, here, an indomitable mother rushing to her daughter's rescue.

It is Carter's genius, in this collection, to make the fable of Beauty and the Beast a metaphor for all the myriad yearnings and dangers of sexual relations. Now it is the Beauty who is the stronger, now the Beast. In 'The Courtship of Mr Lyon' it is for the Beauty to save the Beast's life, while in 'The Tiger's Eye', Beauty will be erotically transformed into an exquisite animal herself: '. . . each stroke of his tongue ripped off skin after skin, all the skins of a life in the world, and left behind a nascent patina of hairs. My earrings turned back to water . . . I shrugged the drops off my beautiful fur.' As though her whole body were being deflowered and so metamorphosing into a new instrument of desire, allowing her admission to a new ('animal' in the sense of *spiritual* as well as *tigerish*) world. In 'The Erl-King', however, Beauty and the Beast will not be reconciled. Here there is neither healing, nor submission, but revenge.

The collection expands to take in many other fabulous old tales; blood and love, always proximate, underlie and unify them all. In 'The Lady of the House of Love' love and blood unite in the person of a vampire: Beauty grown monstrous, Beastly. In 'The Snow Child' we are in the fairy-tale territory of white snow, red blood, black bird, and a girl, white, red and black, born of a Count's wishes; but Carter's modern imagination knows that for every Count there is a Countess, who will not tolerate her fantasy-rival. The battle of the sexes is fought between women, too.

The arrival of Red Riding Hood completes and perfects Carter's brilliant, reinventing synthesis of *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*. Now we are offered the radical, shocking suggestion that Grandmother might actually be the Wolf ('The Werewolf'); or equally radical, equally shocking, the thought that the girl (Red Riding Hood, Beauty) might easily be as amoral, as savage as the Wolf/Beast; that she might conquer the Wolf by the power of her own predatory sexuality, her erotic wolfishness. This is the theme of 'The Company of Wolves', and to watch *The Company of Wolves*, the film Angela Carter made with Neil Jordan, weaving together several of her wolf-narratives, is to long for the full-scale wolf-novel she never wrote.

'Wolf-Alice' offers final metamorphoses. Now there is no Beauty, only two Beasts: a cannibal Duke, and a girl reared by wolves, who thinks of herself as a wolf, and who, arriving at womanhood, is drawn towards self-knowledge by the mystery of her own bloody chamber; that is, her menstrual flow. By blood, and by what she sees in mirrors, that make a house uncosy.

> At length the grandeur of the mountains becomes
> monotonous . . . He turned and stared at the mountain
> for a long time. He had lived in it for fourteen years
> but he had never seen it before as it might look
> to someone who had not known it as almost a part
> of the self. . . As he said goodbye to it, he saw it turn into so much
> scenery, into the wonderful backcloth for
> an old country tale, tale of a child suckled by
> wolves, perhaps, or of wolves nursed by a woman.

Carter's farewell to her mountain-country, at the end of her last wolf-story, 'Peter and the Wolf' in *Black Venus*, signals that, like her hero, she has 'tramped onwards, into a different story'.

There is one other out-and-out fantasy in this third collection, a meditation on *A Midsummer Night's Dream* that prefigures (and is better than) a passage in *Wise Children*. In this story Carter's linguistic exoticism is in full flight – here are 'breezes, juicy as mangoes, that mythopoeically caress the Coast of Coromandel far away on the porphyry and lapis lazuli Indian Shore'. But, as usual, her sarcastic common-sense yanks the story back to earth before it disappears in an exquisite puff of smoke. This dream-wood – 'nowhere near Athens . . . (it) is really located somewhere in the English Midlands, possibly near Bletchley' – is damp and waterlogged and the fairies all have colds. Also, it has, since the date of the story, been chopped down to make room for a motorway. Carter's elegant fugue on Shakespearean themes is lifted towards brilliance by her exposition of the difference between the *Dream's* wood and the 'dark necromantic forest' of the Grimms. The forest, she finely reminds us, is a scary place; to be lost in it is to fall prey to monsters and witches. But in a wood, 'you purposely mislay your way'; there are no wolves, and the wood 'is kind to lovers'. Here is the difference between the English and European fairytale precisely and unforgettably defined.

Mostly, however, *Black Venus* and its successor, *American Ghosts and Old World Wonders*, eschew fantasy worlds; Carter's revisionist imagination has turned towards the real, her interest towards portraiture rather than narrative. The best pieces in these later books are portraits – of Baudelaire's black mistress Jeanne Duval, of Edgar Allan Poe, and, in two stories, of Lizzie Borden long before she 'took an axe', and the same Lizzie on the day of her crimes, a day described with slow, languorous precision and attention to detail – the consequences of overdressing in a heat-wave, and of eating twice-cooked fish, both play a part. Beneath the hyper-realism, however, there is an echo of *The Bloody Chamber*; for Lizzie's is a bloody deed, and she is, in addition, menstruating. Her own

life-blood flows, while the angel of death waits on a nearby tree. (Once again, as with the wolf-stories, one hankers for more; for the Lizzie Borden novel that we cannot have.)

Baudelaire, Poe, *Dream*-Shakespeare, Hollywood, panto, fairy-tale: Carter wears her influences openly, for she is their deconstructionist, their saboteur. She takes what we know and, having broken it, puts it together in her own spiky, courteous way; her words are new and not-new, like our own. In her hands Cinderella, given back her original name of Ashputtle, is the fire-scarred heroine of a tale of horrid mutilations wrought by mother-love; John Ford's *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* becomes a movie directed by a very different Ford; and the hidden meanings – perhaps one should say the hidden natures – of pantomime characters are revealed.

She opens an old story for us, like an egg, and finds the new story, the now-story we want to hear, within.

No such thing as a perfect writer. Carter's high-wire act takes place over a swamp of preciousness, over quicksands of the arch and twee; and there's no denying that she sometimes falls off, no getting away from odd outbreaks of fol-de-rol, and some of her puddings, her most ardent admirers will concede, are excessively egged. Too much use of words like 'eldritch', too many men who are rich 'as Croesus', too much porphyry and lapis lazuli to please a certain sort of purist. But the miracle is how often she pulls it off; how often she pirouettes without falling, or juggles without dropping a ball.

Accused by lazy pens of political correctness, she was the most individual, independent and idiosyncratic of writers; dismissed by many in her lifetime as a marginal, cultish figure, an exotic hothouse flower, she has become the contemporary writer most studied at British universities – a victory over the mainstream she would have enjoyed.

She hadn't finished. Like Italo Calvino, like Bruce Chatwin, like Raymond Carver, she died at the height of her powers. For writers, these are the cruellest deaths: in mid-sentence, so to speak. The stories in this volume are the measure of our loss. But they are also our treasure, to savour and to hoard.

Raymond Carver is said to have told his wife before he died (also of lung cancer), 'We're out there now. We're out there in Literature'. Carver was the most modest of men, but this is the remark of a man who knew, and who had often been told, how much his work was worth. Angela received less confirmation, in her lifetime, of the value of her unique oeuvre; but she, too, is out there now, out there in Literature, a Ray of the clear Fountain of Eternal Day.

EARLY WORK

The Man Who Loved a Double Bass

A Very, Very Great Lady and Her Son at Home

A Victorian Fable (with Glossary)

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The Man Who Loved a Double Bass

All artists, they say, are a little mad. This madness is, to a certain extent, a self-created myth designed to keep the generality away from the phenomenally close-knit creative community. Yet, in the world of the artists, the consciously eccentric are always respectful and admiring of those who have the courage to be genuinely a little mad.

That was how Johnny Jameson, the bass player, came to be treated – with respect and admiration; for there could be no doubt that Jameson was as mad as a hatter.

And the musicians looked after him. He was never without work, or a bed, or a packet of cigarettes, or a beer if he wanted one. There was always someone taking care of the things he could never get around to doing himself. It must also be admitted that he was a very fine bass player.

In this, in fact, lay the seed of his trouble. For his bass, his great, gleaming, voluptuous bass, was mother, father, wife, child and mistress to him and he loved it with a deep and steadfast passion.

Jameson was a small, quiet man with rapidly receding hair and a huge pair of heavy spectacles hiding mild, short-sighted eyes. He hardly went anywhere without his bass, which he carried effortlessly, slung on his back, as Red Indian women carry their babies. But it was a big baby for one so frail-looking as he to carry.

They called the bass Lola. Lola was the most beautiful bass in the whole world. Her shape was that of a full-breasted, full-hipped woman, recalling certain primitive effigies of the Mother Goddess so gloriously, essentially feminine was she, stripped of irrelevancies of head and limbs.

Jameson spent hours polishing her red wood, already a warm, chestnut colour, to an ever deeper, ever richer glow. On tour, he sat placidly in the bus while the other musicians drank, argued and gambled around him, and he would take Lola from her black case, and unwrap the rags that padded her, with a trembling emotion. Then he would take out a special, soft silk handkerchief and set to work on his polishing, smiling gently at nothing and blinking his short-sighted eyes like a happy cat.

The bass was always treated like a lady. The band started to buy her coffee and tea in cafés for a joke. Later it ceased to be a joke and became a

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NIGHTS AT THE CIRCUS

VINTAGE