NOTHING SACRED

SELECTED WRITINGS

ANGELA CARTER

NOTHING SACRED

Selected Writings

Angela Carter

A *Virago* Book

Published by Virago Press 2000

First published by Virago Press Limited 1982
Reprinted 1985, 1987, 1992, 1993

The 1992 revised edition included five new pieces:
'The Recession Style', 'Frida Kahlo', 'Louise Brooks',
'Love in a Cold Climate' and 'Alison's Giggle'

A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library

ISBN 0 86068 269 2

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

Virago
A Division of
Little, Brown and Company (UK)
Brettenham House
Lancaster Place
London WC2E 7EN

VIRAGO
CLASSIC NON-FICTION

Angela Carter

Angela Carter (1940–1992) was born in Eastbourne and brought up in south Yorkshire. One of Britain's most original and disturbing writers, she read English at Bristol University and wrote her first novel, *Shadow Dance*, in 1965. *The Magic Toyshop* won the John Llewellyn Rhys Prize in 1969 and *Several Perceptions* won the Somerset Maugham Prize in 1968. More novels followed and in 1974 her translation of the fairy tales of Charles Perrault was published, and in the early nineties she edited the *Virago Book of Fairy Tales* (2 vols). Her journalism appeared in almost every major publication; a collection of the best of these are published by Virago in *Nothing Sacred* (1982). She also wrote poetry and a film script together with Neil Jordan of her story 'The Company of Wolves'. Her last novel, *Wise Children*, was published to widespread acclaim in 1991. Angela Carter's death at age fifty-one in February 1992 'robbed the English literary scene of one of its most vivacious and compelling voices' (*Independent*).

Also by Angela Carter

THE SADEIAN WOMAN

'Neither ordinary nor timid, the tone is one of intellectual relish . . . rational . . . refined . . . witty' – *Hermione Lee, New Statesman*

'The boldest of English women writers' – *Lorna Sage*

'Sexuality is power' – so says the Marquis de Sade, philosoph and pornographer extraordinaire. His virtuous Justine keeps the rules laid down by men, her reward rape and humiliatio his Juliette, Justine's triumphantly monstrous antithesis, viciously exploits her sexuality.

But now Sade has met his match. With invention and geniu Angela Carter takes on these outrageous figments of his extreme imagination, and transforms them into symbols of o time – the Hollywood sex goddesses, mothers and daughte pornography, even the sacred shrines of sex and marriage li devastatingly exposed before our eyes.

Angela Carter delves in the viscera of our distorted sexualit and reveals a dazzling vision of love which admits neither o conqueror nor of conquered.

By Angela Carter

Fiction
Shadow Dance
The Magic Toyshop
Several Perceptions
Heroes and Villains
Love
The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman
Fireworks
The Passion of New Eve
The Bloody Chamber
Nights at the Circus
Black Venus
Wise Children
American Ghosts And Old World Wonders

Non-fiction
The Sadeian Woman: an Exercise in Cultural History
Nothing Sacred
The Virago Book of Fairytales (editor)
Expletives Deleted

CONTENTS

Acknowledgements
1 FAMILY ROMANCES
The Mother Lode 3
My Father's House 20

2 ORIENTAL ROMANCES – JAPAN
Tokyo Pastoral 29
People as Pictures 33
Once More into the Mangle 38
Poor Butterfly 44
A Fertility Festival 51

3 ENGLAND, WHOSE ENGLAND?
Industry as Artwork 61
The Donnie Ferrets 65
Bath, Heritage City 71
Poets in a Landscape 77

4 LOOKING
Notes for a Theory of Sixties Style 85
The Recession Style 90
The Wound in the Face 95
Frida Kahlo 100
The Bridled Sweeties 106
A Well-Hung Hang-Up 111
At the Zoo 116
Fun Fairs 121

5 SCREEN AND DREAM
Femmes Fatales 131
Louise Brooks 136
Acting it up on the Small Screen 143
Japanese Erotica 149
'Spend, Spend, Spend' 153
The Belle as Businessperson 159

6 BOOKS AND BOOKPERSONS
Love in a Cold Climate 165
Lovely Linda 180
The Sweet Sell of Romance 183
Alison's Giggle 189
The Life of Katherine Mansfield 204
Lorenzo the Closet-Queen 207
Colette 215

Acknowledgements

All the following pieces were originally published in New Society, with the exception of these: 'The Mother Lode', which first appeared in the New Review; 'The Belle as Businesswoman', which first appeared in the Observer; the review of Anthony Alpers' biography of Katherine Mansfield, which first appeared in the Guardian; and the study of Colette, and the book review of Louise Brooks which originally appeared in the London Review of Books; 'Alison's Giggle' was first published in The Left and The Erotic, Lawrence and Wishart, 1983; 'Frida Kahlo' was first published by Redstone Press, 1989; 'Love in a Cold Climate' was given as a paper at a conference on the Language of Passion, University of Pisa, 1990.

I would like to thank both Paul Barker, and also Tony Gould, of New Society, who, over a period of fifteen years or so, never batted an eyelid and always corrected my spelling. Thank you.

Illustrations

The photograph on page 1 is of Angela Carter with her mother in 1944; the illustration on page 27 is a drawing from a Japanese comic; on page 59 is a photograph of Angela Carter in 1967 taken by Gil Chambers; on page 83 an advertisement from a Frederick's of Hollywood catalogue; on page 129 Louise Brooks, Lulu in G.W. Pabst's film Pandora's Box; on page 163 D.H. Lawrence as a baby.

The Mother Lode

The first house in which I remember living gives a false impression of our circumstances. This house was part of the archaeology of my mother's mother's life and gran dug it up again and dived back within it when the times became precarious, that is, in 1940, and she took me with her, for safety's sake, with this result: that I always feel secure in South Yorkshire.

This first house of my memory was a living fossil, a two-up, two-down, red-brick, slate-tiled, terraced miners' cottage architecturally antique by the nineteenth-century standards of the rest of the village. There was a lavatory at the end of the garden beyond a scraggy clump of Michaelmas daisies that never looked well in themselves, always sere, never blooming, the perennial ghosts of themselves, as if ill-nourished by an exhausted soil. This garden was not attached to the cottage; the back door opened on to a paved yard, with a coal-hole beside the back gate that my grandmother topped up with a bit of judicious thieving for, unlike the other coal-holes along the terrace, ours was not entitled to the free hand-out from the pits for miners' families. Nor did we need one. We were perfectly well-off. But gran couldn't resist knocking off a lump or two. She called this activity: 'snawking', either a dialect or a self-invented word, I don't know which.

There was an access lane between the gate of the yard and the gate of the garden, so it was a very long trip out to the lavatory, especially in winter. We used chamber-pots a good deal – 'jerries' – cause of much hilarity due to the hostilities. My mother had a pastel-coloured, Victorian indelicacy which she loved to repeat: 'When did the queen reign over China?' This whimsical and harmless scatalogical pun was my first introduction to the wonderful world of verbal transformations, and also a first

perception that a joke need not be funny to give pleasure.

Beyond the brick-built lavatory, to which we used to light our way after dark with a candle lantern, was a red-brick, time-stained, soot-dulled wall that bounded an unkempt field; this field was divided by a lugubrious canal, in which old mattresses and pieces of bicycle used to float. The canal was fringed with willows, cruelly lopped, and their branches were always hung with rags tied in knots. I don't know why. It was a witchy, unpremeditated sight. Among the tips where we kids used to play were strange pools of oleaginous, clay-streaked water. A neighbour's child drowned in one of them.

The elements of desolation in the landscape give no clue to the Mediterranean extraversion and loquacity of the inhabitants. Similarly, all this grass-roots, working-class stuff, the miners' cottage and the bog at the end of the garden and all, is true, but not strictly accurate. The processes of social mobility had got under way long before I had ever been thought of, although my mother always assured me I had never been thought of as such, had simply arrived and, as I will make plain, somewhat inconveniently, too.

We took this trip back, not to my mother's but to *her* mother's roots because of the War. My grandmother had not lived in her native village herself since she was a girl and now she was an old woman, squat, fierce and black-clad like the granny in the Giles' cartoons in the *Sunday Express*; because she, an old woman, took me back to her childhood, I think I became the child she had been, in a sense, for the first five years of my life. She reared me as a tough, arrogant and pragmatic Yorkshire child and my mother was powerless to prevent it.

My mother learned she was carrying me at about the time the Second World War was declared; with the family talent for magic realism, she once told me she had been to the doctor's on the very day. It must have been a distressing and agitated pregnancy. Shortly after she began to assemble all the birthing bric-à-brac, the entire child population of our part of South London was removed to the South Coast, away from the bombs, or so it was thought. My brother, then eleven, was sent away with them but my mother followed him because my father quickly rented a flat in a prosper-

ous, shingle-beached resort. Which is why I was born in Eastbourne, not a place I'd have chosen, although my mother said that if Debussy had composed *La Mer* whilst sitting on Beachy Head, I should not turn my nose up at the place.

So off they all went, my mother and my embryonic self, my brother and my maternal grandmother went with them, to look after them all, while my father, in a reserved occupation, and who, besides, had served the whole term of the First World War, stayed behind in London to work but he came down whenever he could manage it and that was very often because he and my mother were very attached to each other.

My mother went into labour in Eastbourne but when she came out of it we were on the front line because Dunkirk fell while I was shouldering my way into the world; my grandmother said there was *one* place in the world the Germans would not dare to bomb so we all shifted ourselves to a cottage that my father now rented for us next door to the one in which my great-aunt, Sophia, my grandmother's sister, and her brother, my great-uncle, Sydney, lived. And though the Germans bombed hell out of the South Coast and also bombed the heart out of Sheffield, twenty odd miles away from where we had removed, not one bomb fell on us, just as she had predicted.

Uncle Syd worked down Manvers Main Colliery. He was a tall, gaunt man of a beautiful, shy dignity, who had, I understand, originally wanted to be a bookie but whose mother had not let him. I remember him all pigeon-coloured, soft greys touched with beige, the colour of the clothes he was wearing when I last saw him, when he came down south for my gran's funeral. And a pearl tie-pin. And a gold watch-chain, across his camel-coloured waistcoat.

Sophie was a teacher. She had no formal qualifications at all, I think, had simply never left school but stayed on to teach the babies the three R's and did so until she retired in the 1950s, qualified eventually by experience, natural aptitude and, probably, strength of character. Besides, by then she had taught several generations of the village to read and write, probably taught most of the education committee to read and write. She, too, had a great

deal of formal dignity; I remember how, unlike my grandmother, who had lived in London most of her life, Syd and Sophie both had very soft voices, country voices. Though we could hear Syd's cough through the wall, the dreadful, choking cough that all the men over forty in the village had.

The South Yorkshire coalfields are not half as ugly as they may seem at first glance. Rather like the potteries, they are somehow time-locked, still almost a half-rural society as it must have been in the early days of the Industrial Revolution. The wounded and despoiled countryside remains lush and green around the workings; sheep graze right up to the pit-heads, although the sheep I saw when I was a child were all black with soot, and Doncaster Market is far richer in local agricultural produce than the pretend-markets in Devon. There is a quite un-English pre-occupation with food; the pig is dealt with in a bewildering and delicious variety of ways but butter and cheese are good, too, and so is bread, the perfume of next morning's loaves nightly flavouring the air around the corner bakery.

The streets of the red-brick villages are laid out in grid-like parallels, cheapest of housing for working families, yet they manage to fold into the landscape with a certain, gritty reticence although it is one of gentle hills; there is none of the scenic drama of West Yorkshire, instead, a bizarre sense of mucky pastoral. The colliers were often famous poachers in their spare time. My granny taught me songs that celebrated the wily fox, the poacher's comrade, and his depredations of bourgeois farmyards:

> Old Mother Flipperty-flop jumped out of bed,
> Out of the window she stuck 'er 'ead –
> 'John, John, the grey goose is gone
> And the fox is off to his den, oh!'

It is almost the landscape of D.H. Lawrence, almost that of the Chatterleys, Mellors was as tough on the poachers as only a true class-traitor could be. Lawrence ratted on it all, of course, Lawrence, the great, guilty chronicler of English social mobility, the classic, seedy Brit full of queasy, self-justificatory class shame and that is why they identify with him so much in British univer-

sities, I tell you. I know the *truth*. Him and his la-did-dah mother.

But I read *The Rainbow* a little while ago, searching for some of the flavour of the lives of my grandmother and her family eighty years ago, ninety years ago, in a village not unlike Eastwood, only a little more gritty, and there was Sophie, teaching school like Ursula Brangwen but making a much better job of it, I'm happy to say, perhaps since nobody sent her to Sheffield High School and taught her to give herself airs. At that, I hear my grandmother speaking in my head.

But Sophie *did* trek all the way to Leeds to go to art classes. Ruskin was a strong influence in these parts. To my knowledge, Sophie never drew or painted for pleasure when she was grown-up but she taught me the rudiments of perspective, and most of the alphabet, before I was five. Her father, my great-grandfather, had he owned a pub? At this point, they vanish into mist; there is a brewery in Sheffield with their family name, but it is a common enough name in South Yorkshire. Some connection was supposed to have been the cock-fighting king of the entire country but all this is irretrievable, now. I do not even know if they had seen better days, but I doubt it.

All the same, there was a beautiful parlour-organ in Sophie's pocket-handkerchief-sized front room and a grandfather clock so old it is now in the museum in Barnsley and a glass-fronted cabinet full of ancient blue-and-white china that must have been very fine because my mother always lusted after it but never managed to get her hands on it, in the end, because Sophie outlived her, to Sophie's grief. At night, the kitchen was lit by the dim, greenish, moth-like light of gas mantles; we took candles up the steep wooden stairs to bed. There was a coal range, that Sophie blacked; no hot water; a tin bath filled with kettles in which Syd washed off his pit dirt. There were no pit-head baths at Manvers Main until 1947, when the mines were nationalised.

Smelling of sweat and the sharp, mineral odour of coal dust, the miners came off the shift blacked up as for a minstrel show, their eyeballs and teeth gleaming, in their ragged jackets, braces, overalls, and I remember gangs of them exhaustedly swaggering home, so huge, so genial and so proudly filthy they seemed almost

superhuman. I'm a sucker for the worker hero, you bet. I think most of them thought that nationalisation would mean workers' control and were justifiably pissed off when they found out it didn't, sold down the river by the Labour Party again, the old story.

Death was part of daily life, also; scarcely a family had not its fatality, its mutilated, its grey-faced old man coughing his lungs out in the chair by the range. And everybody was, of course, very poor. It wasn't until the 1960s that miners were earning anything like a reasonable living wage and by then Sophie had electricity, and a bathroom, and a gas-stove, benefits she accepted from the Coal Board without gratitude, for they were no more than her due.

Of course I romanticise it. Why the hell not. I cry with pure anger when I pass the pits beside the railway-line from Sheffield to Leeds; the workings, grand and heartless monuments to the anonymous dead.

We are not a close-knit but nevertheless an obsessive family, sustained, as must be obvious, by a subjectively rich if objectively commonplace folk-lore. And claustrophobic as a Jewish family, to which we have many similarities, even if we do not see one another often. I cannot escape them, nor do I wish to do so. They are the inhabitants of my heart, and the rhetoric and sentimentality of such a phrase is also built into me by the rich Highland sentimentality of my father's people that always made my mother embarrassed.

Since they were a matriarchal clan, my mother's side of the family bulked first and largest, if not finally most significantly.

My maternal grandmother seemed to my infant self a woman of such physical and spiritual heaviness she might have been born with a greater degree of gravity than most people. She came from a community where women rule the roost and she effortlessly imparted a sense of my sex's ascendancy in the scheme of things, every word and gesture of hers displayed a natural dominance, a native savagery, and I am very grateful for all that, now, although the core of steel was a bit inconvenient when I was looking for boyfriends in the South in the late fifties, when girls were

supposed to be as soft and as pink as a nursuree.

Gran was ninety when she died ten years ago and wandering in her mind, so she'd talk about the miners' strikes of her girlhood, how they'd march in their pit dirt and rags with banners and music, they would play harmonicas, and she leaned out of the attics of the house where she worked as a chambermaid to watch. She would have made a bloody awful chambermaid, unnaturally servile until something inside her snapped.

My maternal grandfather, who died before I was born, originally hailed from East Anglia. There was no work on the farms so he joined the army and I think his regiment must have been sent to South Yorkshire to put down the strikes. Nobody ever told me this in so many words, but I can think of no other reason why he should have arrived there in time to meet my grandmother in the late 1880s or early nineties. He met her; they were engaged; and he was sent to India.

When we were clearing out my grandmother's effects, we found a little stack of certificates for exams my grandfather had passed in the army. In Baluchistan, in the Punjab, in Simla, he had become astoundingly literate and numerate. He must also have learned to argue like hell. Furthermore, he became radicalised, unless the seeds had already been sewn in the seething radicalism of the coalfields. He wrote to my grandmother once a week for seven years. Characteristically unsentimental, she threw away their letters, with their extraordinary fund of information about an NCO coming to consciousness through the contradictions inherent in the Raj, but she kept the stamps. What stamp albums my uncles had.

Of all the dead in my family, this unknown grandfather is the one I would most like to have talked to. He had the widest experience and perhaps the greatest capacity for interpreting it. There are things about him that give me great pleasure; for example, as a hobby, later in life, he enjoyed, though only in a modest, yet a not entirely unsuccessful way, playing the Stock Exchange, as if to prove to himself the childish simplicity with which the capitalist system operated. My grandmother thwarted this flair, she never trusted banks, she kept his money in mattresses, no really, in

biscuit tins, on her person, in her big, black, leather bag.

When my mother's father came home, he married gran and joined the ILP and went to live in London, first Southwark, then Battersea, four children in a two-bedroom rabbit hutch. A yard, no garden. No bath. To the end of her life, my dotty aunt, who lived with gran, washed at the public slipper bath.

They were magnificently unbowed. There was a piano for the children, who played it; and did amateur dramatics; and went to see Shakespeare and Ibsen and Sybil Thorndyke in *Saint Joan* at the Old Vic. He was a clerk in the War Department; he used his literacy to be shot of manual labour, first rung up the ladder of social mobility, then worked in one of the first of the clerical trades unions. (Which may have been down a snake.) He got out of the slums, feet first, in his coffin; gran stuck it out until the street was demolished in 1956. Before the First World War, he chaired a meeting at which Lenin spoke. He shook Lenin by the hand and he led my eldest uncle, then a small boy, up to shake Lenin's hand, also. This uncle, however, grew up to adopt a political stance somewhat, as the Americans say, to the right of Attila the Hun.

My maternal grandfather died of cirrhosis. A life-long teetotaller, the years in India had wrecked his liver. My grandmother's house was full of relics of the Empire, an ebony elephant, spears, a carved coconut shell representing the Hindu cosmogeny, beautiful shells from tropical seas, some with pierced messages: A Present From The Andaman Islands. Also enormous quantities of souvenir china, mugs, teapots and sugar basins commemorating every coronation from that of Edward VII to that of Elizabeth II; there was even a brace of scarlet enamelled tin trays from Victoria's Diamond Jubilee. Contradictions of English socialism. And enormous quantities of books, of course, some very strange: Foxe's *Books of Martyrs*, not one but three copies; Macchiavelli; *Twenty – Thousand Leagues Under The Sea*.

Their children were indefatigable self-educators, examination passers and prize-winners; those shelves were crammed with prizes for good conduct, for aptitude, for general excellence, for overall progress, though my gran fucked it all up for my mother. An intolerably bright girl, my mother won a scholarship to a