

McAvan, Emily. *Jeanette Winterson and Religion*. London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2020. Print. £75. Hardback.

As an iconic figure within the landscape of postmodern British fiction, Jeanette Winterson has drawn much critical attention over the last few decades. Unsurprisingly, gender and sexuality have provided the chief interpretative framework for many of these research contributions to date, with such explications being well-trodden ground for any Wintersonian bibliophile. Emily McAvan's *Jeanette Winterson and Religion*, however, puts forward a compelling case for the widening of this focus to include religion as "a vital force in Winterson's writing" (1). With this refreshingly novel approach to Winterson's oeuvre, McAvan opens up new intellectual space within a growing corpus of academic response that will be welcomed by emerging and established scholars alike.

In the Introduction, McAvan wastes little time before delving into the crucial critical theories that will underpin her subsequent readings of the novels. Admittedly, some of the dense theological matter could leave a less experienced reader floundering amidst a sea of unfamiliar terminology and philosophical concepts, but McAvan provides a useful exposition of Winterson's trademark experimental style and the interest this holds for post-structuralist and deconstructive theorists before then grappling skilfully with the more complex notions of post-secularism and a/theology, a form of religious reading that deconstructs the binaries between atheism and theology. Her proposition that Winterson's postmodern language employs these approaches to collapse the boundaries between religious/secular and human/divine is a convincing one, especially when combined with Winterson's treatment of the body within her creative endeavours; for McAvan, "Winterson's *écriture féminine* is a fascinating invocation of an embodied sacred" (12).

The chapters that follow guide the reader through a considerable portion of Winterson's major works, from her debut *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (1985) right through to *The Stone Gods* (2007). It is particularly pleasing to see that the oft-neglected *Boating For Beginners* (1990) and *Gut Symmetries* (1998) are given prominent positioning within McAvan's selection; *Boating For Beginners* is cited as Winterson's "most direct extended encounter with the Bible" (31), whilst *Gut Symmetries* "marks a major step in Winterson's ongoing project of creating a religiously inflected body of art" (103). McAvan rightly observes that there is a less-demonstrable interest in religion beyond *The Stone Gods* (2007) and so her study does not include Winterson's more recent outputs; the only other notable omissions are the short story collection *The World and Other Places* (1999) and the novella *Weight* (2005), but this is understandable given the focus of the book.

As McAvan remarks, it is indeed rare for a queer writer not to disregard religious culture; by placing religion at the centre of analysis, she does not shy away from the difficulties of drawing together these two disparate experiences. Within the initial chapter on *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, McAvan argues that Winterson invokes a kind of "queer sacred" (28) in creating an alliance of the sexual and the sacred that uses religious language to express sexuality. Winterson herself has professed that she views language as something holy (99), and McAvan explores this to good effect when considering the role of storytelling in novels such as *The Powerbook* and *Lighthousekeeping*; particularly nuanced is her premise of storytelling as a holy vocation (147). McAvan also identifies passion as one of the most important tropes in Winterson's writing, so her alignment of passion with religion whereby "religion is a kind of romance... just as romance is a kind of religion" (56) provides an enlightening reading of *The Passion* itself. In addition to these key thematic concerns, especially thought-provoking is McAvan's application of apophatic thought as a deconstructing presence in *Written On The Body* (77), and her exposé of religion as a "truth procedure" acting as a form of resistance in *Art & Lies* (91).

There is some slight structural inconsistency within the book in that some chapters are assigned their own conclusion, whilst others are not. Yet McAvan's text does not disappoint in the insights it offers. As well as creating a thorough and informative study of Winterson's major works, McAvan also succeeds in her overall aim – to establish that, with a reappearance of the divine in the secular cultural

space of postmodernism, Winterson creates an art of major import through a “return of the sacred in the post-secular world” (170).