

Queering Desire: Jeanette Winterson's *Written on the Body*

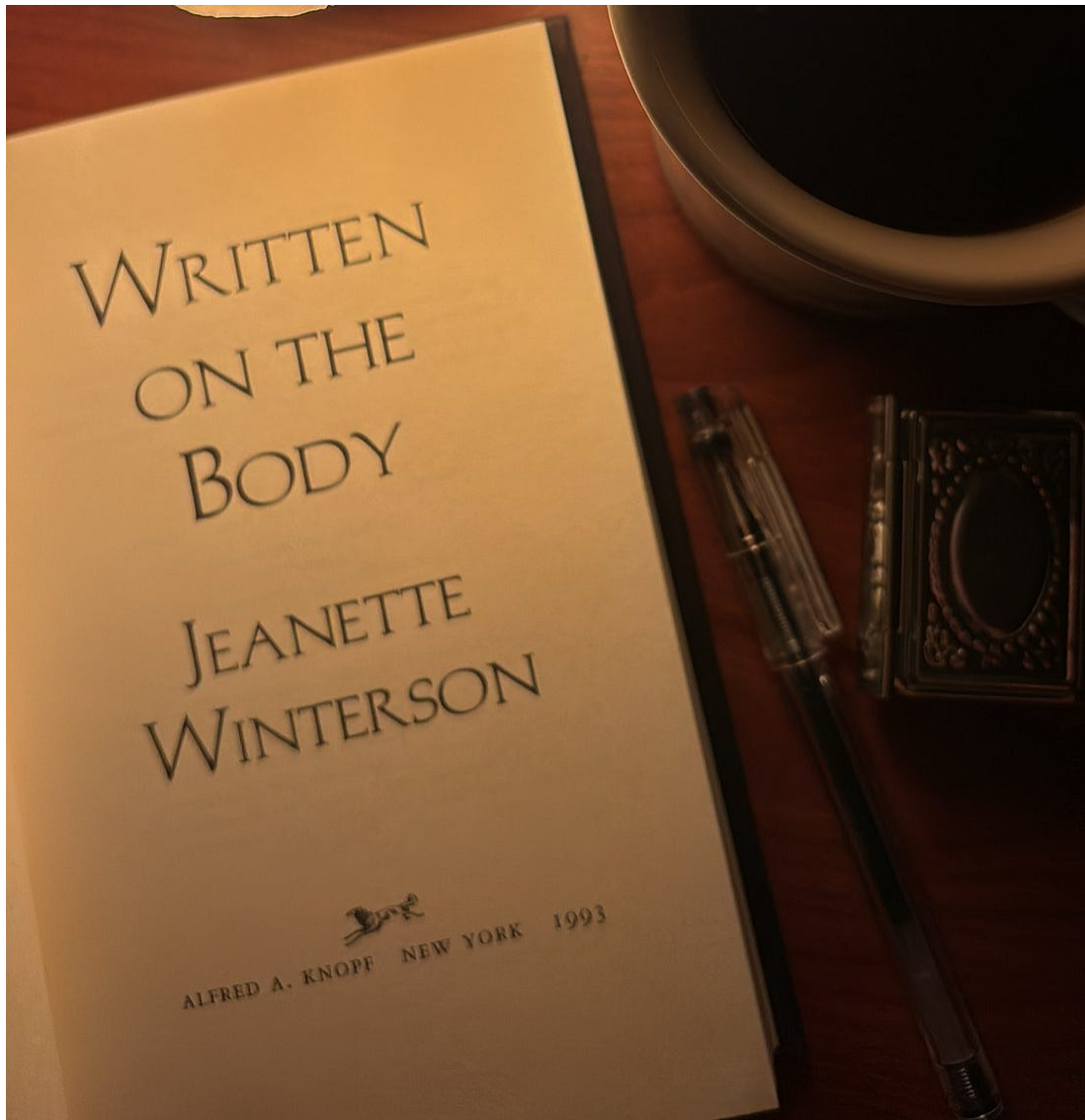


LUKE

AUG 26, 2025

Every time I start a new book I hope that the first line will tell me exactly whether it is worth my time or not. I want to be drawn in immediately, probably because of how impatient I am. Most of the time I have to force myself through twenty pages before I decide on continuing to read or not. Recently, I won't even continue past the first page if I don't like the first sentence. "Why is the measure of love loss?" is the first line of Jeanette Winterson's *Written on the Body* (Winterson 9). This was one of the first and only times a book has ever given me everything I needed to know in its first line.

Throughout her career as a writer Jeanette Winterson has found a unique way to position herself and her semi-autobiographical characters on an intriguing exploration of human desire, specifically queer desire. In *Written on the Body*, the narrator, who is without gender, sexuality, or name, has an all-consuming love affair with a married woman, Louise. Winterson explores not only queer desire but also her own "demons of ambiguity" that can be found throughout her other early novels.



In her debut novel *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, the character Jeanette hallucinates an orange-colored demon while she is locked in her room for 36 hours without food or light by her church congregation. This demon represents both her struggle with her sexuality and her gender identity, "When Jeanette attempts to pin down its proper sex, it cheekily replies, 'Doesn't matter does it? After all, that's your problem' (109). Neither male nor female, the demon is that ambiguous part of herself which defies categorization, but which is nonetheless fundamental to her sense of coherence," (French 234). Winterson utilizes fantasy to, a French states, "work chipping away at the binaries that undergird the

patriarchal regulation of sexual desire,” (French 233). The ambiguity and lesbian desire of her debut novel are both seen heavily throughout *Written on the Body*, despite the narrator's lack of specified gender or sexuality, similar to the demon she writes of in *Oranges are Not the Only Fruit*.

The lover of the narrator, Louise, is the focus of *Written on the Body* along with the concept of love in its visceral entirety. As Winterson herself stated in discussion of the novel, “...for me a love story is a love story. I don’t care what the genders are if it’s powerful enough. And I don’t think that love should be a gender-bound operation...” (Botescu-Sireteanu 68). Winterson shows her dedication to ambiguity and queerness through her genderless narrator, and through her story of queer love as being something visible, “written on the body”. She does this successfully by emphasizing that, “It’s the clichés that cause the trouble,” and in the case of her fiction, heterosexual desire is one of these clichés (Winterson 10). The fact that Louise is married to a man is essential to displaying the “patriarchal regulation of sexual desire,” that Winterson is actively trying to dismantle (French 233).

To Jeanette Winterson, desire and love are plain to see, and this is a struggle for her protagonists who, “...initially inhabit a fearful, disembodied self-enclosure, depicted as patriarchal in their unwillingness to share embodied vulnerability,” (Bradway 187). As the narrator states, “Written on the body is a secret code only visible in certain lights...I like to keep my body rolled up away from prying eyes...I didn’t know that Louise would have reading hands. She has translated me into her own book,” (Winterson 89). While this focuses on the love and connection the narrator and Louise have, it also reiterates Winterson’s idea that queer desire is visible. Despite this deep love, *Written on the Body* takes a turn when Louise is diagnosed with terminal cancer. This diagnosis is a “dying fall” for the narrator, and Winterson who, “by sacrificing her characters to...the “dying fall,” a masochistic imposition of death and stigmatization on protagonists in early

twentieth-century lesbian fiction,” highlights her own, “fear of social damnation,” (French 233). Winterson loves her ambiguity, but there is a reason that her *demon* was the ambiguous one in her debut novel.

It is clear that Winterson struggles with her own sexuality and gender throughout her works, but I do not see this as some sort of masochistic self-hatred as some do. There can still be love found in the pain of her narrator. Winterson queers the desire in her stories and ensures that ambiguity permeates the novel through not a “sappy” queer love story with a happy ending, but by instead a queer love story free of clichés, a love story that destroys patriarchal/heterosexual expectations *and* itself. Winterson allows for queerness itself to defy categorization, and she ensures that her novel *Written on the Body* defies categorization as well, with its final sentence reading, “I don’t know if this is a happy ending but here we are let loose in open fields,” (Winterson 190).

Botescu-Sireteanu, Ileana. “QUEER IDENTITIES: JEANETTE WINTERSON’S NARRATIVE OF THE FEMALE BODY.” *University of Bucharest Review: A Journal of Literary and Cultural Studies*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2007, pp. 66-71. *ResearchGate*, https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Eliana-Ionoaia/publication/344453943_Identity_and_Alterity_Geographies_of_the_Mind/links/5f775188a6fdcc00865253cf/Identity-and-Alterity-Geographies-of-the-Mind.pdf#page=66.

Bradway, Tyler. “Queer Exuberance: The Politics of Affect in Jeanette Winterson’s Visceral Fiction.” *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal*, vol. 48, no. 1, 2015, pp. 183–200. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44030742>.

French, Jana L. “‘I’m Telling You Stories.... Trust Me’: Gender, Desire, and Identity in Jeanette Winterson’s Historical Fantasies.” *Journal of the*

Fantastic in the Arts, vol. 10, no. 3 (39), 1999, pp. 231–52. *JSTOR*,
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/43308390>.

Winterson, Jeanette. *Written on the Body*. Random House US, 2013.