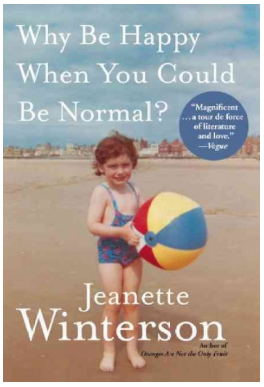
Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?



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If you think for a moment that you had a hard childhood, read this memoir. Mrs. Winterson, as Jeanette calls her adopted mother throughout this account, was incredibly tough, and often cruel. Routinely, she locked her young child out all night, so that Jeanette sat frozen huddled on the front stoop until her dad came home from his overnight shift. Other punishments included being locked in the coal bin and forbidden food. Repeatedly, Mrs. W. told Jeanette that the devil sent her to the wrong crib when she chose Jeanette for adoption. Even food was a scarce commodity in the Winterson home. When Jeannette attended the grammar school for older kids, her mother never applied for the lunch program even though they were poor and ran out of food and gas (to cook it) each Thursday before payday.

Books were not allowed, and when Jeanette became a teenager and found a job, Heaven was a bookshop filled with thousands of books. She brought a few home every week and hid them in the only place her mother would not check--under the mattress. Alas, one night a copy of D.H. Lawrence's *Women in Love* slipped over the edge and her mother discovered Jeanette's whole stash. The next day, Mrs. W. started a massive bonfire. From this event, Jeanette learned that she had to keep anything she valued inside herself.

The Winterson family members were strict evangelicals--no drinking, smoking, dancing, and movies. Church events occurred every night and all day Sunday. In the summer as a teen, Jeanette would cycle twenty miles to attend revivals. These were at least fun for her. She loved the big tents, the free food, and liked discovering new towns and meeting new people.

Also, as a teen, Jeanette discovered that she was gay, anathema to her mother and her church. After she spent time alone with another girl and was found out, Jeanette refused to repent. Her mother then demanded that an exorcism be done because surely an evil demon must have taken over Jeanette for her to act this way. For three days, Jeanette was denied food, beaten, and forced to accept the sexual advances of a church official. In the end, Jeanette's homosexuality drove her from the church.

And books saved her. At sixteen, Mrs. W. kicked her out of their home and Jeanette--ever resourceful-- moved into a friend's car. She worked, attended school, and visited the library often where she was systematically reading literature from A-Z. One day a teacher asked her about her reading and was amazed at the extent of Jeanette's self-education. Immediately, the teacher offered her a room in her own house for the duration of her schooling.

Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal is about growing up poor in a working class part of England, but more importantly, it is about an artist saving herself through the power of books.

Another interesting mother and daughter biography is Linda Sexton's account of growing up with the famous poet. It's called *Searching for Mercy Street: My Journey Back to My Mother, Anne Sexton* [4].

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Posted by Dory L. on Sep 19, 2012

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