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Edited by Michael Marland

Excerpt

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1 The world around us

This section includes a wide-ranging collection of texts. What they have in common, however, is that they ask, or in some cases point towards, some important questions:

- What kind of world do we want to live in?
- What kind of world are we in fact creating for ourselves?
- What do we need to do in order to create the kind of world we want?

We can think about these questions in relation to ourselves as individuals, as Jeanette Winterson does in *A Roof of One's Own*. Or we can think about them in relation to ourselves as part of a wider society, as Bill McKibben does in *Worried? Us?*

The texts in this section are from a wide variety of sources and two were written over half a century ago, at a time when the Western world was a very different place from what it is today. But all in some way reflect on some of these deeper questions. Some focus on our physical environment, some on human communication and culture, and some on the interplay between the two.

Activities

- 1 Think about the world your parents lived in when they were growing up and the one you are growing up in now. What things can you do that they couldn't? Is there anything they could do that you can't? Think about:
 - knowledge
 - technology
 - freedoms and restrictions.
- 2 Collect some recent newspapers. In a small group, look through and cut out the reports and articles that are about changes – or

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2 The world around us

possible changes – to the world we live in. You might find something about, for example, a proposed new law, a new piece of technology, a plea for people to change their behaviour. Stick the articles on a large sheet of paper and add labels to show what area of life is affected by the change. You might also like to write up any questions that occur to you.

3 *There are no passengers on spaceship earth. We are all crew.*

Marshall McLuhan, philosopher (1911–1980)

What do you think McLuhan meant by this statement? What does it imply? Do you agree? Discuss your ideas as a class.

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A Roof of One's Own 3

A Roof of One's Own

by Jeanette Winterson

This intriguing essay comes from one of Britain's most respected novelists. Writing in a lyrical style, rich in imagery and with touches of humour, Jeanette Winterson draws on memories of her childhood in order to reflect on her deep connection with books and stories.

I used to live in Water Street. In a two-up, two-down, as they used to be called, to distinguish those houses from the inferior back-to-backs, which had only one room on each floor, and no yard.

Water Street was cobbled then and had been, once, the line of a watercourse that ran from the Heights down the steep hill and into the valley that became a town.

Watercourse no longer, the street was a conduit¹ for the daily life of mothers and children flowing from house to house.

In the summertime it was the custom for the doors onto the street to be left open, the entrance shielded by strips of coloured plastic threaded on a rod and hung on a pair of cup-hooks on each side of the doorpost.

These bright waterfalls signalled welcome and gossip. The form was to pause outside, and shout 'Are you in?' and the reply would come back, 'I am.'

For the children on either side of the waterfall, this was the moment of escape. We escaped into each other, into our own inventiveness. For me it became an escape into a secret of my own; a stone-age library.

One day, like the tadpoles we were, we darted away from Water Street and squirmed under the gates of the derelict, once glorious, Accrington Stanley football ground.

¹**conduit** a channel for carrying liquid

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4 The world around us

While my friends were frightening themselves in the ghostly changing rooms, I found a stockpile² of short square roofing slates. I picked up a stone and started drawing on one; cats, dogs, flowers, my mummy with and without her bosom, the usual things. Then I started writing on them; bits of hymns, poems from memory, and I realized that I could make for myself all the books I could not buy.

This is how it was done.

First of all I borrowed a book from the library. This would be examined by my mother for harmful influences and then handed back to me for one week only. Since I was not allowed to take library books out of the house, my next move was to memorize as much of the text as I could. Then as soon as somebody appeared outside the waterfall curtain, I fled the house and copied down my lines on the slates. I had no chalk so my writing had to be done with a stone.

The only way to memorize a book is to say it out loud to yourself, and I did this, gabbling away as children do, my real purpose concealed because nobody ever listens to what a child has to say . . .

‘Jeanette, come and eat this potato pie.’

‘But the hour came at last that ended Mr Earnshaw’s troubles upon earth.’

‘Do you want pickled onion with it?’

‘He died quietly in his chair, one October evening, seated by the fireside.’

‘Or you can have tomato sauce.’

‘A high wind blustered round the house and roared in the chimney; it sounded wild and stormy, yet it was not cold.’

‘It was hot when it came out of the oven.’

Eighteenth and nineteenth century classics are long. My slates were short. I could not copy word for word and more and more I sought to transpose what seemed to me essential and to

²**stockpile** large supply, for use in time of shortage or emergency

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add the connectives myself in a short-hand devised for the purpose.

Pirate I was, sailing on the forward momentum of someone else's prose and then tacking on a spit's³ length of my own.

I know this is an author's nightmare, and that my stone-age library breached⁴ every nicety of copyright and scholarship. At least I was not boiling down Reader's Digest-style⁵ abridgments.⁶ It was not the story I wanted. I wanted those moments of intensity that change a narrative into a poem. I wanted to feel its heartbeat against my own.

My heart beating faster. What worlds could I not inhabit if those worlds existed in books?

I never thought of myself as a poor child from Lancashire, I thought of myself as Aladdin, Hotspur, Lancelot, Heathcliff. Not gender, not time, not circumstance seemed any barrier to me. The book was a door. Open it. Pass freely.

Barriers there were; largely my mother, who always placed her ample frame in the way of my small doorways.

A pamphleteer by temperament, she knew that sedition⁷ and controversy are fired by printed matter. She knew the power of books and so she avoided them, countering their influence with exhortations of her own, single-sheets pasted about the house. It was quite normal for me to find a little sermon in my packed lunch, or a few Bible verses, with commentary, stuffed into my hockey boots. Fed words and shod with them, words became clues, I hunted them down, knowing they would lead me to something valuable, something beyond myself, and whether that something was inside or outside, in action or imagination, hardly mattered.

³**spit** a thin rod or stick

⁴**breached** failed to obey

⁵**Reader's Digest** a publisher known for its shortened versions of novels

⁶**abridgment** a shortened version of a book, play or other work

⁷**sedition** something that encourages rebellion against a government

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My mother suspected me of harbouring print. She searched thoroughly but found nothing. Library books that were vetted and returned never worried her, it was close association that she feared – that a book might fall into my hands and remain there.

It never occurred to her that I fell into books. That I put myself for safe keeping inside them. When I copied them out later, it was myself I was freeing.

Freedom. Not escapism. Time with a book is not time away from the real world. A book is its own world, unique, entire. A place we choose to visit, and although we cannot stay there, something of the book stays with us, perhaps vividly, perhaps out of conscious memory altogether, until years later, we find it again, forgotten in a pocket, like a shell from a beach.

Freedom. The chance to enlarge mind and spirit beyond the confines of the everyday. The everyday will crush us if it can.

Art acts as a canopy against the downward pressure of mass. Like titanium, it is strong, light and resistant to corrosion.

Many a time I have taken shelter under a book. I do not think of art as consolation, rather I imagine it as a roof over my head. There is good reason for this when your books are made of slates, but there are other reasons too . . .

Since I left home as a teenager I have had nineteen different homes. A considerable number, I think, for someone who is thirty-eight and not a Foreign Correspondent. I like where I live whenever I live in it, but I never expect to be able to stay. For the first ten years or so it was love and money; either I couldn't afford to stay or I romantically evicted myself. More lately I am in pursuit of something even more elusive than the perfect red-head, but the outcome is the same. I don't stay anywhere for long.

Always leaving, what can I take with me?

Books. Books written and not. Other people's and my own. Books are home. They don't make a home, they are one.

If my mother had had her way, I would have lived out my life in her own grey tower planted round with thorns. My

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mother was an unhappy woman, difficult and intense. I was a happy child, also difficult and intense. The battle between us, really that of happiness and unhappiness, was somehow bound up in the battle of the books.

Her charge against reading 'You never know what's in a book until it's too late,' taught me how powerful books are. When you side with a book, its strength becomes your strength. My mother did not want me to become strong on books. She knew she would lose me if I did. I wanted books because I did not want to be her Rapunzel. There was no prince to rescue me (I had guessed early on that I would be doing most of the prince-work myself) but I was determined to be carried away by a story.

What do stories tell us? That this life is a journey through a dark wood. That the soul is always in peril. That those who love should never count the cost. That duty and passion tear the heart in half. That beauty is as good a reason as any. That understanding is rare. That miracles happen. That there are heroes. That even a hero like Siegfried,⁸ who can row against the current of the Rhine, is destroyed by his own vanity and forgetfulness. That wisdom is pain but pain is not wisdom. That the buried treasure is really there. That few things are worth the burden of possession. That no one can steal what no one can possess. That there is always a second chance. That there is love.

And these things need to be said in every different way for every different generation, again and again. Underneath time is perpetuity.⁹ The connectedness of history and DNA. What we make and what we are, splinted together and anatomied for us in art.

The clean slate that is the child is also the coded carrier of the universe. We are what is written and what is read.

We are the living book.

⁸**Siegfried** the hero in the story in Wagner's opera *Götterdämmerung*

⁹**perpetuity** eternity

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8 The world around us

Further reading

A collection of other essays by Jeanette Winterson is published in *Art Objects* (Vintage, 1996). If you would like to read some of her fiction, you could try her collection of short stories *The World and Other Places* (Chatto and Windus, 1999). On Jeanette Winterson's own website (www.jeanettewinterson.com) you can find more information about the author and her writing and read some of her newspaper columns.

My Bubble, My Rules

by Lynne Truss

Do manners matter? Is our society in the UK becoming less polite and considerate? Lynne Truss, the author of the following extract, thinks they do and it is. She sets out her observations in *Talk to the Hand*, a humorous book described unashamedly in the introduction as ‘a systematic moan about modern life’. The title alludes to a phrase heard on *The Jerry Springer Show*: ‘Talk to the hand, coz the face ain’t listening’ – an extreme example of the kind of thing that gives her concern.

I have a rather heretical¹ view when it comes to mobile phones, so I’d better confess to it at once. I don’t mind people saying, ‘I’m on the train.’ It truly doesn’t annoy me. Here are the things that drive me nuts when I’m out. I can’t stand people talking in the cinema. I can’t stand other people’s cigarette smoke, especially outdoors. I am scared and angry when I hear the approach of young men drunkenly shouting. I can’t stand children skateboarding on pavements, or cyclists jumping lights and performing speed slaloms² between pedestrians, and I am offended by T-shirts with ugly Eff-Off messages on them. It was, however, the rather mild ‘Bored of the Beckhams’ that was my least favourite T-shirt slogan of recent years, for the usual shameful pedantic reasons. ‘Bored *with* the Beckhams!’ I would inwardly moan, reaching for the smelling salts in my lavender portmanteau.³ ‘Or even bored *by* the Beckhams, if you must! But bored *of* the Beckhams? Never, my dear, *never!*’

What else? Well, I am incensed by graffiti, and would like to see offenders sprayed all over with car-paint and then strung up for public humiliation. (As you can tell, I’ve given

¹**heretical** going against generally accepted ideas

²**slalom** a race in which people zig-zag around obstacles

³**portmanteau** a suitcase

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a lot of thought to that one.) I also can't abide to see people drop litter; it truly shocks me. People of all ages evidently think nothing of reaching into a bag, discovering something surplus to requirements, holding it out at arm's length and then insouciantly⁴ *letting go*. Walking along the Brighton seafront one balmy evening, I saw a woman perform a nappy-change on a public bench and then just leave the old nappy and the paper towels behind, when there was a litterbin about fifteen feet away. Occasionally I will confront a litter-bug, running after them and saying, 'Excuse me, I think you dropped this.' But, well, I say 'occasionally'; I've done it twice. Sensibly I weigh the odds. If the person is bigger than me, or is (very important consideration, this) *accompanied by* anyone bigger than me, I walk away. As a litterbug vigilante,⁵ I know my limits. If they are over five foot two, or older than four, I let it go.

But as I say, the thing that doesn't drive me nuts is other people's mobile phones – mainly, I suspect, because I have one myself, but also because hearing a stranger on the phone humanises them in (to me) a generally welcome way, whereas watching them blow smoke in the air or drop soiled tissue or deface a building does quite the opposite. It seems to me obvious that 'I'm on the train' is the main thing you will hear other people say, because – being reasonable about it – the train is the main place you are likely to hear people talking on mobile phones. If they said instead, 'I'm in the bath' you'd think, hang on, no you're not, you're on the train. Actually, the only depressing aspect of this is how boringly honest people are. They seem to have no imagination at all. When they say, 'Just pulling into Haywards Heath, dear,' I look up optimistically every time, but dammit, we always are just pulling into Haywards Heath. I yearn to hear someone say, 'Yes, dear; next

⁴**insouciantly** without concern

⁵**vigilante** someone who goes out to catch and punish lawbreakers but who has no legal authority to do so