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(1940–1992)

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Angela Olive Carter (1940–1992)

by Sally Soames, 1981

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Carter [*née* Stalker], Angela Olive (1940–1992), writer, was born on 7 May 1940 at 12 Hyde Gardens, Eastbourne, Sussex, the second child and only daughter of Hugh Alexander Stalker, a journalist, and (Sophia) Olive, *née* Farthing, who had been a cashier at Selfridge's store in Oxford Street. She spent much of her childhood in Yorkshire, near Rotherham, where she went to stay with her maternal grandmother to escape wartime bombing. She always remembered these years with affection. One uncle was a miner and she retained a sympathy with working people all her life. She said that,

as a child, she grew up thinking that all sheep were black, so dense was the industrial pollution. Her grandmother's house contained three copies of Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*. Its horrific accounts of martyrdoms, and the even more horrific illustrations, may have influenced her fiction, through which violence ran like a thread.

After the war Angela Stalker was educated at Balham direct-grant school in south London. She made many cinema excursions with her father, especially to the vividly decorated Granada Cinema at Tooting. The love affair with films and film-going lasted the rest of her life, and features strongly in her fiction and essays. When she left school, her father got her a job as reporter on a local paper, the *Croydon Advertiser*; but the direct reporting of events was not her forte. She met an industrial chemist, Paul Malcolm Carter (b. 1931/2), and on 10 September 1960 married him, following him to Bristol when he started teaching in a technical college there. From 1962 to 1965 she read English at Bristol University, specializing in medieval literature, because she disliked the prevailing critical fashion for 'relevance' and 'social content', as advocated by F. R. Leavis and his many acolytes. She derided this as the 'eat up your broccoli' school of fiction and plunged wholeheartedly into reading legends and romances.

Angela Carter, who began to write at university, became, thereafter, one of the most startling writers of her time. Her short stories and novels were in the line of descent from Gothic fantasy, but with the strand of sexual menace made more explicit. She wrote wide-ranging essays on both literary and social subjects, notable for their sardonic wit. She delighted in paradox: thus, she was a feminist, but she detested the puritanical aspect of such beliefs; she had a soft spot for the marquis de Sade, but she deplored the concept of woman as victim. Her best writing had many of the qualities of an unexpurgated fairy story by the Brothers Grimm. Thinking back to the libertarian 1960s, she compared that period's would-be overthrow of existing moralities to the French Revolution: 'Truly, it felt like Year One' (M. Wandor, ed., *Gender and Writing*, 1983). She admired the surrealists, and one critic called her 'the Salvador Dali of English letters' (*Daily Telegraph*, 17 Feb 1992).

Her first novel, *Shadow Dance* (sometimes reprinted as *Honeybuzzard*), was written during her second summer vacation at university and published in 1966. Two more novels followed at precocious speed: *The Magic Toyshop* (1967), one of her best and most widely read fictional works, and *Several Perceptions* (1968). With the latter she won the Somerset Maugham award, which specifies that the prize money is for foreign travel. She used it to leave her husband (they were divorced in 1972) and go to Japan; she liked to think that Maugham would have approved.

Sometimes *Shadow Dance*, *Several Perceptions*, and *Love* (1971) are referred to as the Bristol trilogy. They can all be read as grotesque fantasies, in parallel with *The Magic Toyshop*, which features a Gothic wicked uncle and a heroine under sexual and physical threat. But their settings also reflect the world in which Carter moved after she first left home, the provincial bohemia of Bristol and Bath. Here, she tried to live as much like a French left bank *habituée* as she could. She dressed in black like the singer Juliette Gréco and thought the films of Jean-Luc Godard were 'some sort of touchstone'. Her most admired film actress, however, was Louise Brooks, as much for her free-living life and her stylishness as for her films, of which Pabst's version of Frank Wedekind's expressionist drama *Lulu* is the most famous. In 1988, Carter wrote her own version for the National Theatre, which remained unperformed.

In 1967 Carter had begun to publish essays in the London-based weekly *New Society*, and for the next twenty years was one of its characteristic voices. Her time in Japan (1969–72) created a hiatus in the public appreciation that she had begun to receive for her fiction. Thereafter, for several years, many readers first encountered her through her pungent, highly original essays. (She published a first selection in book form as *Nothing Sacred* in 1982. The complete essays were published posthumously with other journalism in 1997 as *Shaking a Leg*.) One much-quoted essay, 'Lorenzo the closet-queen', attacked D. H. Lawrence's view of women. But some of her most powerful essays sprang from her experiences in Japan, including 'Once more into the mangle', a ferocious account of Japanese sado-masochistic comic books, in which she propounded a thesis she later developed at book length in *The Sadeian Woman* (1979). The women in these comics are raped, tortured, and often murdered in horrible and ingenious ways. 'But, whichever way the women go,' she wrote, 'they all go through the mangle—unless they are very wicked indeed; when they obey the Sadeian law and live happily ever after.' Carter was a child of the post-1945 welfare state, she said—'all that free milk and orange juice and cod liver oil' (S. Maitland, ed., *Very Heaven: Looking Back at the 1960s*, 1988)—and she always claimed allegiance to the protestant work ethic, but this sometimes took an eccentric form; pornography, she argued, was art with a job to do.

She had gone to Japan to join a lover; he told her he would never forget her, which she noted 'is not the kind of thing one says to a person with whom one proposes to spend the rest of one's life' (A. Carter, *The Quilt-Maker, Burning your Boats*, 1995). After a short-lived job with the NHK Broadcasting Company in Tokyo, she lived penuriously. She worked for a time as a bar hostess in the Ginza entertainment district, where, she said, 'I could hardly call my breasts my own' (*Independent on Sunday*). She wrote about the experience not only in a collection of semi-autobiographical short stories, *Fireworks* (1974), but also in a gleefully ironic essay, 'Poor butterfly', in which she noted the attraction of western hostesses for Japanese businessmen and described her role and that of her colleagues as 'a masturbatory device for gentlemen'.

Carter found in Japan an exoticism and an obsession with violence and style which continued to mark her own writing. She wrote often, and brilliantly, about the importance of apparently trivial details of fashion, frequently emphasizing its fetishistic aspects. Style, she thought, had 'heartless innocence'. Dandies are usually thought of as male, but Carter wrote with a dandy's wild grace. Among the authors she admired was the aesthete Ronald Firbank, about whom she wrote a radio play, *A Self-Made Man* (1984).

Her novels moved, for a period, into a macabre version of science fiction, starting with *Heroes and Villains* (1969) and followed by *The Infernal Desire Machines of Dr Hoffman* (1972) and *The Passion of New Eve* (1977). These began to seem strained, with their obsessive breaking of taboos. Harking back to her studies of medieval literature, they were also allegories, a form of writing later authors have found it hard to tackle successfully. These novels were often seized on by academic analysts of her work, because they lent themselves to thematic dissection.

One of Carter's most successful books came next, a retelling of traditional fairy stories, whose overall title *The Bloody Chamber* (1979) evoked the legend of Bluebeard's castle; she later wove some of these violent and erotic tales into the script of an intellectual horror film, *The Company of Wolves* (1984), directed by her fellow novelist and short-story writer Neil Jordan. One of Carter's most provocative books, *The Sadeian Woman*, also

appeared in 1979. This was the first non-fiction title commissioned by the feminist publishing house Virago, with which she had been closely associated from its launch in 1972. With its defence of de Sade, and its teasing interpretation of his most notorious works as psychological insights into the freedom that non-procreative sex could bring for women, it created an outcry among feminists. She suggested to Virago that it should be followed by a republication of de Sade's novel *Juliette*, a tale of wickedness rewarded, but Virago declined.

After her return from Japan Carter lived in Bath again, but then settled in south London with Mark William Pearce, a potter. From the late 1970s she increasingly depended on university teaching for a regular income, holding temporary posts at, for example, the universities of Sheffield and East Anglia in England, Brown in the United States, and Adelaide in Australia. Her teaching helped to strengthen her following among students, but her campus life meant that some of the direct observation of a wider world that gave such force to her essays and fiction began to fade. Her novel *Nights at the Circus* (1984) marked a change of approach. Her previous novels and short stories had been bejewelled miniatures (one East European translator of her densely written, sparkling prose described it as 'embroidery'); but this was much longer than any previous book. The story of Fevvers, a Cockney trapeze artist who grows wings, it was laden with symbolism, and it took her into the mainstream of the 'magic realism' school of writing, whose founding father is usually said to be the South American novelist Gabriel Garcia Marquez and whose best-known practitioner in Britain at the time was Carter's friend Salman Rushdie.

Unfortunately, *Nights at the Circus* had a mixed reception, and Carter wrote only one more novel: *Wise Children* (1991). This too was more diffuse than her earlier work, but it had an attractively light touch. Set in south London, the fantastical life story of Dora and Nora Hazard evokes music-hall and cinema history, with strong undertones of the transformations and sexual confusions of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *As You Like It*.

There had been a crammed toy-box in the Carter–Pearce household long before there was a child. In 1983 Carter had a late and much loved son, Alexander, with Mark Pearce, whom she married on 2 May 1991. She told one fellow writer, 'Sometimes, when I read my back pages, I'm quite appalled at the violence of my imagination. Before I had a family and so on' (*Vogue*, August 1985). She was a good judge of her own writing; probably her best work was done before she was forty. At that age, also, she suddenly changed her appearance, from her previous sprite-like look to that of a wise witch from a fairy tale. She stopped hennaing her hair and pursuing fashion. She was much older than Pearce, and the change emphasized this. The two of them went around London by narrow boat, exploring the hidden backwaters of canals. They sometimes wore identical greatcoats.

Carter spoke with a slight stutter, and her conversation was ribald, allusive, and often caustic; none of this helped to make her a well-known public figure. She depended on readers falling in love with her baroque prose, aflame with artifice; and for many of those initial readers she was an almost private passion. Early in spring 1991 she was diagnosed with lung cancer. She died in London on 16 February 1992 and was cremated at Putney Vale crematorium. The obituaries were longer and more generous than most of the reviews she received in her lifetime. In the days after her death there was a sudden upsurge in sales of her books, and many sold out: 'There is a popular necrophilia,' said one friend, the cultural historian Marina Warner. Carter became one of the most widely taught novelists in British universities. Soon three posthumous collections were published:

Burning your Boats (1995), containing all her short stories; *The Curious Room* (1996), containing her forays into drama, most notably her radio plays; and *Shaking a Leg*. Her memorial celebration was held at the Ritzy Cinema in Brixton, south London, her beloved Granada, Tooting, having been converted into a bingo hall.

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