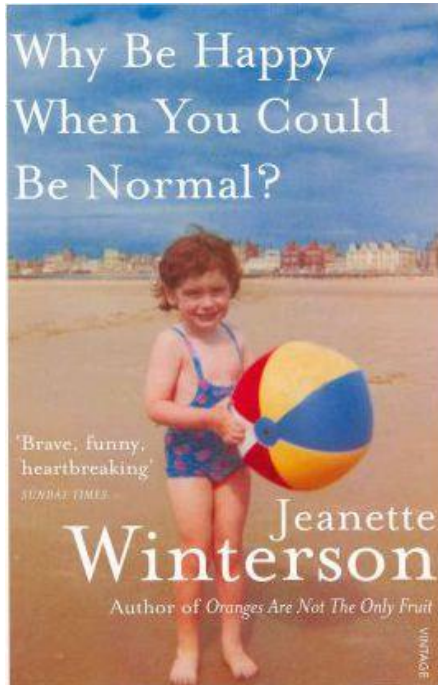


## BOOK GROUP 2 MARCH 2023

### WHY BE HAPPY WHEN YOU COULD BE NORMAL? – Jeanette Winterson



Jeanette is adopted by the Wintersons (who wanted a boy). Mrs Winterson was a religious zealot and Jeanette spends most of her free time at church or associated events. She is force-fed hymns and the Bible which has the effect of creating her early love for books and appetite for words. This proved to be her salvation. She loved school, rising above the bullying she encountered and finding a couple of like-minded friends. Her life at home was miserable with Mrs W. finding fault and often leaving her outside on the doorstep overnight in the cold and burning her secret stash of books which she has been banned from reading.

After this, Jeanette starts at “A to Z PROSE” at the library and works her way through the authors memorising the text, an amazing achievement. When she eventually discovers poetry (T. S. Eliot is one mentioned) she is delighted to find poetry is easier to remember! She is aided by the librarian and her teacher (who takes her into her home when Mrs W. chucks her out after finding her sleeping with a girlfriend). Jeanette subsequently, through sheer grit, ability, and determination, manages to get a place at Oxford where life, becoming a writer, and becoming openly gay beckoned.

After being completely involved with her childhood and eventual escape, we suddenly jump 25 years – and are thrown into the total bleakness of her life when she actually says “language left me”. She has a total nervous breakdown and tries to commit suicide. She (and the reader) are right back to the helplessness of her first abandonment as a baby. There is still no sentimentality or self-pity in her description of the time and herself which makes it even more disturbing. Strangely her recovery leads to her forming a stable relationship with someone, finding her birth mother and revealing, understanding and forgiving her adoptive family. This then turns the early “monsters” into sad damaged people themselves. She had the strength of character to pursue her dreams and believed it was her upbringing that gave her the strength. Amazingly she did not regret her biological mother’s decision to give her up for adoption.

#### Comments from the group

“She is giving us the background which developed her character, making it a sad and painful read but one that held my attention right to the end. Having lived in industrial Manchester in the late 50s it brought back many memories for me. “

“But where were the “laugh out loud funny” bits, I thought as I finished the book. So I decided to re-read the book until I found an amusing bit funny enough to laugh out loud. And to my surprise I

found it in the second paragraph of the first page where she tells us about the two pairs of false teeth!”.

“The use of black comedy emphasised the pain inflicted. In my opinion a book well worth reading”

“A very addictive quick read due to engaging prose and particularly revealing descriptions of life in Lancashire in the late 60’s. Way more austere than my experience of post war recovery in the South. I felt it was a very honest account, no self-pity but an intimate explanation of tough love, religious obsession and extreme commitment to self-discovery .The author demonstrates an extraordinary intellect and memory .”

“Her writing is beautiful, succinct but delightfully descriptive. I laughed out loud at some pieces but also had to reflect with sadness, bringing me to tears on occasions. It is also almost a book of two halves although they are obviously closely related.”

“As a story it is fascinating and disturbing. She didn’t like people. She was unhappy and depressed. I felt the whole book was her feeling sorry for herself”

“Jeanette wrote that “she was never going to be a nobody with no money and if it wasn’t the books she would have gone into property development in Manchester” This summed her own personality better than I could!”

“Did she write her book to show that it is possible, with enough determination, to transcend a deprived background, to do and become whatever you want? Is it the nature versus nurture debate? This book seems to me more of a personal indulgence, a cathartic experience to help herself go forward into her future”

“I do not know what her life is like now but I hope she is happy as well as successful.”

**Christine Wright**