

## Fact and Fancy in *Oranges are not the Only Fruit* and *A History of the World in 10<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> Chapters*

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**Keywords:** Fancifulness; Truthfulness; Jeanette Winterson; Julian Barnes

**Abstract.** History, in a general sense, offers accurate and ‘true’ picture of human’s life in each period. However, are those seemingly true recordings unprejudiced and fact-based? This paper will provide an exploration of the complex relations between fact and fancy in novels by Jeanette Winterson and Julian Barnes.

### Introduction

The definition related to reality including truthfulness is changing in this postmodern era – people are experiencing the reality through what is unreal, and the pure reality becomes harder to obtain from objects to mindsets. Like Slavoj Žižek writes in his work *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (2002), we are now using virtual reality to see the reality and begin to ‘experience real reality itself as a virtual entity’. [1] Physically yes. Thanks to the surprising technology, we are left with the paradox of reality to enjoy the deep, roasted flavour coffee without caffeine or refreshing cola without sugar and the like. Mentally no? It seems that we still have the ability to distinguish reality from fantasy, but the evidence, to some extent, proves opposite. In the novel *A History of the World in 10<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> Chapters* (1990), Julian Barnes keeps a sceptical attitude towards world history. [2] He reconsidered what seems axiom in historical records and put the religious myth, history, personal transcripts together to blur the boundary between truthfulness and fancifulness. This is not the author’s individual illusion rather is the reality we are facing. Likewise, Jeanette Winterson speaks the similar view on the relation between storytelling and history mostly through depicting her own life in the novel *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (1985). [3] Through the reading of these two novels, we will explore how one’s life is entwined with the progress of history to deconstruct the truthfulness of history.

### Fictitiousness in Personal History

Winterson’s *Oranges* is a semi-autobiographical novel recreating the author’s life through the integration of the Bible and mythical stories. The protagonist Jeanette was adopted by a pious Pentecostal parent. Her adoptive mother is a binary-opposition believer and has been dreaming of training Jeanette to be missionary. Under the supervision of her mother, little Jeanette studied the Bible and conducted sermons. But Jeanette gradually found the knowledge her mother imparted was not completely true especially after knowing her adoptive identity which was totally different from what the mother told her ‘a God’s child’. This might upset her, but the devastating defeat driving her away from home could be her love for Melanie. Such a devout family upholding traditional doctrines would not accept Jeanette’s nonconformity, heresy or her homosexuality.

From the narration of Jeanette, we know the whole story of her growth, rebellion against religious, social and maternal stereotype, and the pursuit of her identity. But how much of the story is true or should we believe in? The answer is uncertain. Even the author herself knows that ‘everyone who tells a story tells it differently, just to remind us that everybody sees it differently’. (*Oranges*) Truly, people view things in different ways; and the way they choose to look at the world is influenced by personal experience, social background, religious belief and such. In the novel *Oranges*, the mother once dreamed that she would have a child from the Lord. It definitely was a dream, but she strongly believed that it would be happening and adopted Jeanette as the God’s child. In the mother’s ‘reality’, the child was given by the Lord and of course had the obligation to dedicate to God. For Jeanette, the adoptive documents are the reality – she ‘wasn’t a child of God at all’. In this sense, Jeanette and her mother are confronted with distinct realities as they see the world from different points of view. In addition, the perspective of an individual is inconsistent. Jeanette was raised in a family full of religious aura yet grew suspected her original belief. This alteration is not a sprint but in small bits. For example, in chapter Numbers, Jeanette told her mother about the absurdity of her dream like she had a pig husband, but her mother explained that Jeanette had sardines. And later, Jeanette concludes:

In the library I felt better, words you could trust and look at till you understand them, they couldn’t change half way through a sentence like people, so it was easier to spot a lie.

According to the result of research on *Oranges* TV series to test whether one will change their attitudes towards homosexuality after watching several episodes, one of the respondents indicates that she, as a Christian against homosexuality, can understand it and be ‘more open with Jess’ now. Mostly, thoughts are changeable and the change is not easy to notice. Another example follows: Elsie once said that ‘this cake doesn’t need me to eat it to make it edible’. It seems secular but philosophical. For Jeanette, ‘Once created, the creature was separate from the creator, and needed no seconding to fully exist’. At this stage, Jeanette did not react with any distinct behaviours to fight against her destiny or her mother’s expectation to be a missionary. Jeanette changed her view and fought against the ideology that stemmed

from the little self unconsciously and gradually – her mental reflection presents her hope for freedom and an independent self without any ‘seconding’ attached. Elsie did not tell Jeanette to be so, but Jeanette ‘understood’ Elsie’s sentence in her own way. There are too many unbalanced understandings in words or sentences and even people’s feelings. No single fact can explain what actually happens.

Except changeable stands and different perspectives of interpreting the happenings, people may find the source of the information that helps form their ideology is untrustworthy. On the one hand, the knowledge sometimes is unavoidably secondary. When we were little kids and could not speak, we had no choice but accepted handled information and values from our parents. Jeanette as well had to swallow all the details from her mother. It would take a long time to learn, reveal the truth and reconstruct the knowledge obtained in the childhood. Little Jeanette was closely related to and somehow an extension of her mother. Carter borrowed Jane Gallop’s ideas to demonstrate that women are prone to maintain certain relationship with her ‘original “object”’ as their ‘reflection’ being their models or archetype. Jeanette as well fails to avoid her mother’s image – pure religious dogma, the physical or psychological control. [4] Jeanette then was unaware of such obedience and subtle influence – she read what her mother chose for her, followed the doctrines her mother imparted, answered religious questions – and even highly involved in such activities. Nonetheless, Jeanette kept having questions as other girls such as why fornicating was not a quiet sin and found her way to ‘find out what I [Jeanette] wanted to know’. The most apparent untrue facts in *Oranges* are the rewriting of *Jane Eyre* and Jeanette’s adoptive identity. Jeanette’s mother made up the Jane’s marriage to convince Jeanette that people should be dedicated to God. When Jeanette found that Jane married Rochester rather than did missionary work, she knew her ideological foundation attacked. And Jeanette’s adoptive documents could be the other wrecking of her trust towards the mother and God. Jeanette used to believe in all those religious things knowing that she was a God’s child. However, Jeanette’s value collapsed the moment she found the adoptive documents, which completely denied the existence of herself not to mention her religious belief. This event shocked Jeanette and was a strong proof of unreliable source.

On the other hand, the knowledge may be first hand yet biased or one-sided. Just as discussed before, people have their own opinion or stand, and this will decide the way they look at the world. That is to say, people may acquire totally different ‘facts’ after seeing the same happening. What is more, memories can be deceptive and flexible. Cheng-Ta Yang and Yei-Yu Yeh held the scientific support to illustrate memory-change argument. They found that people have difficulties in detecting changes between two visual scenes due to blocking or retrieval failure as others said. [4] In this regard, the way to define the truth and reliability of one’s memory mostly depends on how to define real life from dissimilar viewpoints in different times. In the novel *Oranges*, Winterson employs the fairy tale or dream parts to show how Jeanette changed from a servant of God or her mother to an individual with unconscious distrust and uncertainty. At the very beginning of the novel, a fortune-teller told Jeanette that she would never marry. This message left a doubtful seed even if the thoughts of marriage had never come across Jeanette. In later part, Winterson inserted a tale saying a prince looking for a perfect woman. For quite a long time, the prince could not find a perfect woman, but when he found the one, the perfect woman told the prince that she was not perfect at all. The prince had to admit that there was no perfect woman and beheaded her. In this story, the prince could not get access to the marriage for whatever reason. Both the stories of the prince and her pig-husband dream influenced Jeanette unconsciously. Imagine, if Jeanette did not come across the fortune teller, was there any possibility that she would not dream a pig husband? Or we may ask: will dreams help building the reality and further human’s memory? Even we know the answer, we will never know whether the author made up the dream to rationalize her story including Jeanette’s homosexuality. In this sense, personal history is not reliable from its source to its receiver.

### Disloyal to ‘Grand’ History

If you think personal history is emotional, capricious and not worth believing, we will then discuss the record of events, what we usually call ‘history’. History, in some way, consists of both personal and being’ memory. Nonetheless, history, in the whole process of beings’ development, has its rationale and disciplines. But here comes the problem: if history has to be written by human beings, how can it be completely impartial without the interference of any human nature? Or how can the disciplines of history itself, the true veracity, be ensured without any form of ethical and moral issues? For this question, Patricia Hampl gave the answer ‘if we are working with consciousness itself, not with fact, we’re dealing with not what “happened” but with what “has happened”’. [5] The saying is quite cryptic. That is to say, the recorder of history has to cope with the happening itself without any feeling or perspective. Can human beings make it? Julian Barnes has his answer in *A History of the World in 10 $\frac{1}{2}$  Chapters* presenting how history is recorded and passed on through different approaches of writing history. He reveals that history is constructed, changed and interpreted by political power and testify that there is a very vague line between history and reality.

In the novel, Barnes described a scene of shipwreck to discuss whether people would keep the goodness of the inner heart in any circumstance especially in danger. People on the raft of Medusa have to reduce the number of people, in their way, casting the sick comrades who might survive in the sea, to keep those who remain alive. Everyone is confronted with a dilemma: to give up a group of people’s lives and save others or to sink together, to be the God deciding to choose who to survive or be a human leaving their lives undetermined. American ecologist Warren G Hardin ever put forward the conception of ‘lifeboat situation’ to substitute ‘Spaceship Earth’ which means a comprehensive consideration of all human beings. [6] For him, the current condition of limited community resources is

just like the lifeboats when suffering from the shipwreck. Barnes employs Medusa to symbolise the Ark, and dissects the nature of humanity and the orthodox history. This event concerns two questions: the first one, if the survivors are those who abandoned their companions' lives, will they write the impartial history saying the dirty nature of themselves? The second question, even if they did so, then how much of the story is true, will they beautify or uglify their behaviours in some way to emphasize whatever the writer wants to express? These suspicions lead to a basic question, is the history we are reading true?

After surmising another possibility of the story of Medusa, Barnes continues that Theodore Gericault acquires a lot from this event, who transferred mischance to artistic work. Barnes points out that 'Catastrophe has become art; but this is no reducing process. It is freeing, enlarging, explaining.' Barnes uses notes to depict more details that lack from what Delacroix hopes yet not to paint, and he imagines and analyses Delacroix's psychological activities during his drawing. For Barnes, rewriting history is to explore the concealed or what has not been recorded. For the painting of Gericault, it cannot or does not present all the details, thus Barnes adds some items to complete the event, which renders a new historical text. Barnes juxtaposes the description of historical events and artistic skills together with his interrogation on the truthfulness and reliability of the painting and other texts.

But we also need to justify it [the Medusa event] and forgive it, this catastrophe, however minimally. Why did it happen, this mad act of Nature, this crazed human moment? Well, at least it produced art. Perhaps, in the end, that's what catastrophe is for.

Barnes concludes that the change of artistic works is due to the need of secular politics and religious pressure; in this sense, these different kinds of records are changed because of certain outer powers as the way of understanding in personal history. History, in this sense, is not accurate or absolutely unbiased.

Then, Barnes deconstructs people's mental Ark 'love' by designing a parenthesis, the half chapter in the novel. Barnes discusses the essence of love through the description of different kinds of love poems and classical literature. He believes that people say the sentence 'I love you' too easily even without any thought, which leads to the more obvious solitariness of human. That is, language itself is an approach to construct or change one's thinking mode, and further unconsciously make the story different. At the end of the chapter, Barnes concludes that love is unreal and conflicted with historical progress. Barnes puts emphasis on fragment narrative from the self-narration of abonium, the terrorist-victors' hijack, nonsense of the religious war to the survivors in nuclear war, including trying to make a possible interpretation of traditional significant events, supplying relevant triviality or another facet to the happening. He questions the conventional recording of history and provides the alternatives of history with his diverse writings. Just as Rushdie points out that the contribution Barnes makes is to use fiction to interpret history and subverts the tradition that renders the novel as a critical tool. [7] Barnes holds that 'History is that certainty produced at the point where the imperfections of memory meet the inadequacies of documentation.' [8]

## Conclusions

It is certain that the relation between history (truth) and fiction (fancy) is not a binary opposition rather is connected and interweaved in certain ways as the essay discusses above. History is inevitably consisted of different points of view, uncertain information, or biased data. Nonetheless, all the history or stories in any event, fantasy or fact, narrative or imagination, up to a point, aim to provide their experience or to record their thoughts or to criticise for contemporary society and current life. That Jeanette Winterson integrates the Bible, Jane Eyre and fairy tales into her own experience is mostly a method to fight against her childhood memory about her mother's and religious control. The way she writes her personal history is exactly a path Winterson chooses to voice for herself on her unequal treatment in terms of lesbian and non-religious issues. For Julian Barnes, the way he rewrites specific world history with fantasy is to voice for contemporary community in terms of the uncertain and philosophical issues.

History not only is historians' occupation but also concerns with everyone's attitude towards the past, present and future. It is defined that history is what happened in the past, however, no one exactly knows what really happened because the history we know is others' narration that the authority, historian, recorder can give their own interpretation of historical truth.

In this sense, how people view the fictitiousness and subjectivity of history and how they view the truthfulness and whether historical fact can be absolutely reliable or not, to some extent, seems less important concerning to its function in enlightening contemporary era. After all, people have already known the fictitiousness and tendency towards certain groups of truth, and they still need to believe in history because they will be critical upon what is recorded properly. Just like what Barnes indicated his suspicion about love in 'Parenthesis', 'it's [love is] our only hope even if it fails us, although it fails us, because it fails us.' Likewise, it is distinct that people should keep hope towards history and understand its subjectivity. Lingering between fantasy and reality probably is the best choice to enjoy oneself.

Some might argue that private history is just a personal experience which cannot be seen as a proper example to demonstrate its uncertainty. In terms of the false 'witness' of a period of personal history, it is easily to find the confusion between what one considered in his or her mind and what really happened because memory can be deceptive. Winter also implies in *Oranges* that history itself, in this case, personal history, is not totally true, and the only element to define the truthfulness of history is whether to believe it. – (fantasy and fictitiousness) However, once this 'personal experience' can be read, or in certain ways, has its audience, it begins to have the heuristic function to others. Just as Stephen Spenser points out, 'it [autobiography] is no longer the writer's own experience: it becomes everyone's; he is

no longer writing about himself, he is writing about life'. It means a personal occurrence can apply to most people's ordinary life as long as it is presented in the form of words or even sounds because the development of a person is mostly the rationale of private history. Both individual and collective history have their functions when it comes to providing certain record or enlightenment to the offspring. Jeanette Winterson ever pointed out in an interview on the 25th anniversary of *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* by Vintage Classics that '[writing] is about creativity and connection', and authors 'are passing something on, one to another'. [9] In this sense, literature or literary creation, like history, has the responsibilities to pass some experience or epoch record on.

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