

FOREWORD BY
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'My love for Linton is like the foliage in the woods: time will change it, I'm well aware, as winter changes the trees. My love for Heathcliff resembles the eternal rocks beneath: a source of little visible delight, but necessary. Nelly, I am Heathcliff! He's always, always in my mind: not as a pleasure, any more than I am always a pleasure to myself, but as my own being.'

THERE IS A HANDFUL of books that exist beyond their time and space, beyond the circumstances of their invention: novels that are significant, novels that are beloved. Familiar friends. Their characters step off the pages of the novel and into the real world, into a public conscience to be used ever after as shorthand for a certain sort of person. Archetypes, I suppose. Stories that seem bigger than the books that contain them. *Wuthering Heights*

Foreword

is such a book. Cathy and Heathcliff are such characters.

Published in 1847, *Wuthering Heights* is a novel that changes its character and colour with every reading, yet remains uniquely and absolutely itself. It is variously a Gothic novel of obsession and revenge; a story of ghosts and bad dreams; a novel of opposites – light and shade, wild Nature versus taming civilisation, storm versus calm, violence versus tenderness, revenge versus forgiveness, the North versus the South; a novel of race and class, of the powerlessness of women’s and children’s lives; a novel about poverty, property, and wealth; a novel about how the sins of the fathers (and dead or powerless mothers) are visited on the next generation; a story of two houses – Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange – on the Yorkshire Moors; a story of the shifting of time and how the land goes about its business indifferent to human emotions; a novel of order and disorder; of violence and the consequences of violence, of hate and the consequences of hate. Most of all, of course, it is held up as the most epic of love stories. But is it? It is a novel of obsession and all-devouring emotion, certainly, and about the nature and endurance of love, but romance it is not.

The telling of the story is complicated, and, though any reader picking up this collection will know the bare bones of it, it’s worth spending a moment thinking about the architecture of the novel. *Wuthering Heights* starts at the end – in 1801 – when a southern gentleman, Lockwood, calls upon his landlord and ‘solitary neighbour’, Heathcliff. The old farmhouse, Wuthering Heights, sits isolated and exposed

Foreword

to all elements of wind and weather, in sharp contrast to the comfortable, well-appointed Thrushcross Grange where Lockwood has come to recover from an unsuccessful love affair. Confused by the household he finds at Wuthering Heights on his first visit, he is drawn back. Trapped by a snowstorm, and obliged to stay the night, he finds a sequence of names – Catherine Earnshaw, Catherine Heathcliff, Catherine Linton – scratched into the paint of the windowsill. When he falls into uneasy sleep, his dreams are haunted by the ghost of Cathy trying to get in at the window. In one of the most violent scenes in the novel, Lockwood drags her white wrist across the broken glass to force her to let him go. Heathcliff distraught and wild and desperate into the chamber.

This is the brilliant framing device that whets the reader's appetite and sets the narrative in motion.

When Lockwood returns to Thrushcross Grange the following morning, his head full of questions, he persuades the housekeeper, Ellen – Nelly – Dean, to tell him the story of Heathcliff and Catherine Earnshaw. Explain the connection between the two houses and families, going back a generation, Nelly speaks of the 'dirty, ragged, black-haired child' brought into the Earnshaw household and given the name Heathcliff; of the six-year-old Cathy and her jealous, bullying brother Hindley, of the growing affection between Cathy and Heathcliff, and of the very different household of Edgar Linton and his sister Isabella at Thrushcross Grange.

Foreword

The fragment of dialogue from Chapter IX between Cathy and Nelly Dean quoted above – and which gives our collection its title – is at the heart of the novel. For *Wuthering Heights* is not a love story as we know it – or certainly as Victorian readers might have considered it – but rather a novel about the nature of love, of what happens when love is thwarted or distorted or traduced, of what happens when like and unlike come together. Cathy is thinking aloud, imagining herself married to either Edgar or to Heathcliff, in the same way she once scratched the three different names – the versions of herself – on the painted sill of her window at Wuthering Heights. Heathcliff overhears only the first part of her statement – that it would degrade her to marry him – and storms away devastated, so does not hear the second and most fundamental part of what Cathy believes.

He does not hear her say: ‘Whatever our souls are made of, his and mine are the same.’ He does not hear her say that she loves him.

Heathcliff is gone for years, and, when he returns a wealthy man, is governed by revenge rather than love. He has killed the best part of himself, the part of himself that is Cathy. Tenderness is gone, leaving only cold self-interest. He finds Cathy married to Edgar Linton, and, in spite, marries Isabella. The first part of *Wuthering Heights* ends with the death of Cathy, having given birth to a daughter, and Heathcliff’s grief at losing her for ever.

The story of the second generation – the children of

Foreword

Heathcliff and Cathy – is less well known (and, in adaptations, often ignored altogether), but it is what gives the novel its unity, its balance. Heathcliff mourns Cathy, yet plots against her daughter. It is not until he abandons hate and only love remains, that they can be reconciled. Finally, the line between the living and the dead is blurred, and all that remains is peace. It is left to Nelly Dean, when Lockwood returns to Yorkshire in 1802, to recount the story of Heathcliff's recent death, and bring the novel to a close. The final words are given – as are the first – to the outsider narrator, Lockwood, as he looks down upon the three headstones on the 'slope next the Moor': Cathy's is 'grey, and half buried in heath'; Edgar Linton's is 'only harmonised by the turf and moss creeping up its foot'; Heathcliff's is 'still bare'.

So, what makes *Wuthering Heights* – published the year before Emily Brontë's own death – the powerful, enduring, exceptional novel it is? Is it a matter of character and sense of place? Depth of emotion or the beauty of her language? Epic and Gothic? Yes, but also because it is ambitious and uncompromising. Like many others, I have gone back to it in each decade of my life and found it subtly different each time. In my teens, I was swept away by the promise of a love story, though the anger and the violence and the pain were troubling to me. In my twenties, it was the history and the snapshot of social expectations that interested me. In my thirties, when I was starting to write fiction myself, I was gripped by the architecture of the novel – two narra-

Foreword

tors, two distinct periods of history and storytelling, the complicated switching of voice. In my forties, it was the colour and the texture, the Gothic spirit of place, the characterisation of Nature itself as sentient, violent, to be feared. Now, in my fifties, as well as all this, it is also the understanding of how utterly EB changed the rules of what was acceptable for a woman to write, and how we are all in her debt. This is monumental work, not domestic. This is about the nature of life, love, and the universe, not the details of how women and men live their lives. And *Wuthering Heights* is exceptional amongst the novels of the period for the absence of any explicit condemnation of Heathcliff's conduct, or any suggestion that evil might bring its own punishment.

What of today? Will a new generation of teenagers, of readers, be introduced to Cathy and Heathcliff by teachers at school, or librarians, or be inspired to seek the novel out by collections like this? I think so. I think their reactions will be much as my own more than forty years ago, for, despite changes in our lives and expectations – the frantic pace of life, the banishment of boredom, and the lack of solitude – the confusion of first loves and deciding which of our selves we might be (as Cathy does when trying to decide between Heathcliff and Edgar Linton), these emotions are as commonplace now as then. Even if the language and style of the novel might seem to belong to another era, the conflict and story do not.



Foreword

The history behind the novel and its author is also well known, and has grown a little shabby with retelling. For the most part, over-attention on the biography of a writer is a way of diminishing the power or the uniqueness of her or his imagination. But, in the case of EB (and indeed Charlotte and Anne), there is some justification. Her sense of indifferent or careless Nature comes in part, surely, from the terrible losses they suffered: the early death of their mother and their two older sisters – Maria and Elizabeth – dying as a consequence of neglect and ill treatment at their school. The remaining four children, three girls and a boy, were then tutored at home and, taking refuge in writing and their imaginations, created a secret language and magical universes filled with stars and fantasy. Penning stories and poems on tiny fragments of paper. The freedom and claustrophobia of walking around and around the dining-room table in Haworth at night when the household had gone to bed, the sisters reading passages aloud to one another. The relentless ticking of the clock, the creaking of the wooden floorboards, the wind wuthering in the trees in the graveyard in front of the parsonage. The death of their aunt, and the increasingly dissolute behaviour of their brother Branwell, disappointed and drowning in drink and opiates, and debts. And then, in 1847, three novels published under the pen names of Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell. Astonishing novels that spoke of the iniquities of the world, of the position of women without income, of violence and passion and of landscape.

Foreword

Reactions to *Wuthering Heights* at the time were mixed. Dante Gabriel Rossetti described it as a ‘fiend of a book – an incredible monster’; *Atlas* as a ‘strange, inartistic story’; and *Grantham’s Lady Magazine* as ‘a compound of vulgar depravity and unnatural horrors.’ *Douglas Jerrold’s Weekly Newspaper* said: ‘*Wuthering Heights* is a strange sort of book – baffling all regular criticism; yet, it is impossible to begin and not finish it; and quite as impossible to lay it aside afterwards and say nothing about it.’ However in the years after Emily Brontë’s death, the novel’s reputation took root: Lord David Cecil considered it the greatest of all Victorian novels, and Matthew Arnold said: ‘For passion, vehemence, and grief she has had no equal since Byron.’

In modern times, critics – such as the great Elaine Showalter, Sandra Gilbert, and Susan Gubar – as well as novelists and poets, from Daphne du Maurier, Helen Oyeyemi, and Margaret Drabble to Sylvia Plath have all admired, considered, been inspired by Brontë’s ‘fiend of a book’. Playwrights and choreographers, artists and composers too, in print, in opera, and song, in ballet, and plays, on screens large and small.

Here, just a few examples: Genesis’s 1976 album *Wind and Wuthering* and Kate Bush’s chart-topping ‘Wuthering Heights’ released two years later, both of which use direct quotations from the novel itself; the all-female Japanese opera company Takarazuka Revue, and the Northern Ballet Company; Hotbuckle Productions Theatre Company, and The John Godber Company, in a version adapted and

Foreword

directed by Jane Thornton; the leading Asian touring company, Tamasha, with a piece set in the deserts of Rajasthan.

And, of course, film. The earliest known screen adaptation was filmed in England in 1920, though the most famous is the 1939 black-and-white starring Laurence Olivier and Merle Oberon (and David Niven as Edgar). It omitted the second generation's story, but was firmly situated on the Yorkshire Moors, as was Andrea Arnold's 2011 adaptation. Luis Buñuel's 1954 Spanish-language adaptation, *Abismos de Pasión*, was set in Catholic Mexico, and Yoshishige Yoshida's 1988 version was set in medieval Japan.

The sheer ingenuity and range of work inspired by *Wuthering Heights* is testament to the power of the ideas within the novel, the depth of characterisation, and the emotional intention of the story. As technologies change what can be achieved on screen and stage, there will be ever-new interpretations of the text, shaped and refashioned, keeping the passion for the story alive in new generations of audiences all over the world.

Now, here is this collection, published to celebrate the bicentenary of Emily Brontë's birth in 1818. I won't spoil the surprise of the stories that follow by summarising the work of the wonderful writers who have contributed, except to say that the pieces are wide-ranging and clever, moving and thought-provoking. Interestingly, a majority are set in modern times, rather than in the period of the novel or indeed EB's own time. Some are about what we would

Foreword

call – in modern terms – violent and toxic relationships; others about the collision of grief and identity; some are visceral and savage, and others infused with the emotion and beauty of *Wuthering Heights*. There is even the promise of a school musical! What the stories have in common is that, despite their shared moment of inspiration, they are themselves, and their quality stands testament both to our contemporary writers' skills, and the timelessness of *Wuthering Heights*. For, though mores and expectations and opportunities alter, wherever we live and whoever we are, the human heart does not change very much. We understand love and hate, jealousy and peace, grief and injustice, because we experience these things too – as writers, as readers, as our individual selves.

I'll end where we began, with Emily Brontë's words – and what is surely one of the most beautiful closing paragraphs in all of literature – as Lockwood looks down on the graves of Heathcliff, Linton, and Cathy. It's a magnificent full-stop of a sentence.

'I lingered round them, under the benign sky; watched the moths fluttering among the heath and the harebells, listened to the soft wind breathing through the grass, and wondered how any one could ever imagine unquiet slumbers for the sleepers in that quiet earth.'