

# Women's Prize for Fiction

2020

25

## 1996 WINNER

### A SPELL OF WINTER BY HELEN DUNMORE

#### AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Helen Dunmore was an award-winning novelist, children's author and poet. She published twelve novels including *Zennor in Darkness*, which won the McKitterick Prize; *Burning Bright*; *A Spell of Winter*, which won the inaugural Orange Prize in 1996; *Talking to the Dead*; *Your Blue-Eyed Boy*; *With Your Crooked Heart*; *The Siege*, which was shortlisted for the 2001 Whitbread Novel of the Year Award and the Orange Prize for Fiction 2002; *Mourning Ruby* and *House of Orphans*. She was posthumously awarded the Costa 2017 prize for her poetry collection *Inside the Wave*.

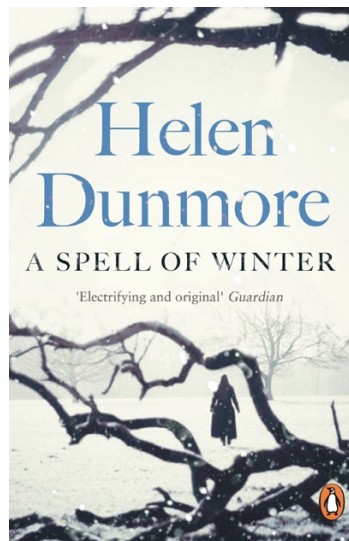
#### PLOT SUMMARY

Cathy and her brother Rob don't know why they have been abandoned by their parents. Alone in their grandfather's decaying country house, they roam the wild grounds freely with minds attuned to the rural wilderness. Lost in their own private world, they seek and find new lines to cross. But as the First World War draws closer, crimes both big and small threaten the delicate refuge they have built.

#### WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

Dunmore's novel explores ideas of 'natural' and 'unnatural' as well as ideas around femininity, wildness and heredity. Cathy and Rob are deeply connected to the land and the wild animals around them; even the house in which they live is slowly falling down and rotting, as if returning to nature bit by bit.

Cathy is physically beautiful and yet has a wildness to her (her dark hair that resists being dressed and combed) which 'makes people think of what happens in the dark', but her wildness assigns her a close relationship with nature. She is compared to Rob's girlfriend Livvy, who is as delicate and milky white as Cathy is dark and curvaceous, and as refined as Cathy is wild. Livvy, though she is beautiful and mild, is described as being made of rock underneath her artificial softness. On page 50 Cathy says that Kate has told her, "I would catch a husband better with my clothes off, the pity was that things didn't work that way,". Her raw sexual allure is also shown by Miss Gallagher's obsession with her.



There is, of course, the theme of incest in this novel, which is deemed 'unnatural' by society, although Rob and Cathy are performing the 'natural' physical act of intercourse. The first time that they have sex, they do it inside a snow house in a frozen orchard that smells of foxes and dead rabbits – committing an 'unnatural' sin in the middle of the most 'natural' environment possible. Dunmore seems to suggest almost that they are like animals in this scene (who are by nature often incestuous), though she doesn't make a judgement about whether Rob and Cathy are bad or good for having slept together. Rob and Cathy themselves both know that their relationship is frowned upon by society, but also want it to continue, like the brother and sister couple that live nearby. Dunmore manages to write tenderly and truthfully about their love through the vehicle of such an ingrained taboo.

## DISCUSSION POINTS

In the very first scene in *A Spell of Winter*, the Irish housemaid Kate describes a scene from her childhood where a dead uncle's body is brought downstairs and its arm is pulled off its body because the flesh has been allowed to rot for too long. *A Spell of Winter* contains many tropes of the gothic novel genre: a large, damaged house; family secrets; deaths; secrets; sexual obsession, ominous description (a carpet covered with roses the colour of "the blood that oozed from the butcher's parcels"; the description of Cathy's aborted foetus as swimming in a pail of blood, etc).

Discuss the ways in which *A Spell of Winter* is similar to other famous gothic novels such as *Wuthering Heights* (which contains another famous Cathy) *Northanger Abbey*, *Rebecca* and *Dracula*. What does it have in common with them, and what makes it stand apart? Consider the ways that those stories treat themes such as inheritance/family, houses, horror, suspense, secrets, madness and femininity.

## QUESTIONS

Rob and Cathy's father's dementia is called a 'moral idiocy' by the other characters in the book, and their mother's absence has been a negative influence. Their own incestuous relationship would commonly be branded immoral by the society they (and we) live in. Is there something in their essential natures or their family history that make Rob and Cathy incestuous? Is it their destiny in some way?



What is the better option for Cathy: Rob, Mr Bullivant or being independent, as she learns to be once the war starts? And what is the symbolism of Mr Bullivant's lemons? (And if you recall the strawberries in Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, how does it compare to that?)

If Rob hadn't broken his leg, would Cathy's life have been different? Or were Cathy and Rob always destined to have the relationship they did?

Is Rob leaving with Kate a betrayal or a kindness?

## NEXT STEPS

Inspired by Helen Dunmore's beautiful and original descriptive writing about nature, write a short piece about a place familiar to you – a garden, park, beach or forest – in a particular season. Winter is paramount in Dunmore's novel and

lends a definite threatening feel to the novel; how does summer, spring or autumn change the environment and the feeling of your special place? You could write about the place in question every month or at every season, building up four or more pieces of description. See if the seasons provoke different moods and try to capture that mood in your writing using sensual detail and original similes and metaphors.

For a more in-depth project, find a local stately home or house of historical significance and research it as much as you can. Then, when you feel you know a lot about it, try writing a gothic period piece set in it. You could refer to the actual families that lived there (and perhaps a real scandal) or make one up, but endeavour to use all the gothic tropes you can: foreboding feel, a mysterious house, perhaps a madwoman (or man) in the attic . . .

**“ HELEN DUNMORE WAS OUR VERY FIRST WINNER FOR A BEAUTIFUL NOVEL. IT'S ONE OF THOSE LYRICAL, HAUNTING NOVELS THAT STAY WITH YOU LONG AFTER YOU HAVE FINISHED IT ”**

KATE MOSSE,  
CHAIR OF JUDGES 1996 AND FOUNDER DIRECTOR OF WPF

## BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS

*WITH YOUR CROOKED HEART* BY HELEN DUNMORE  
*WUTHERING HEIGHTS* BY EMILY BRONTE  
*REBECCA* BY DAPHNE DU MAURIER