



## Fireworks: Nine Profane Pieces

*Angela Carter*

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## **Fireworks: Nine Profane Pieces** Angela Carter

In this collection of nine short stories, Carter pinpoints the symbolism of city streets and weaves allegories around forests and jungles of strange and erotic landscapes of the imagination.

## **Fireworks: Nine Profane Pieces Details**

Date : Published October 5th 2006 by Virago Press Ltd (first published 1974)

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Author : Angela Carter

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## From Reader Review Fireworks: Nine Profane Pieces for online ebook

### Thomas Pluck says

no one writes like Angela Carter. Fairy tales for the modern world where we hide our fears deep.

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### Danni Jervis says

A stunning little collection of stories from Carter's time in Japan.

They will draw you in and end suddenly, leaving you with a endless sensation of wanting more. Dark, disturbing and cryptic much like Japanese folk lore you can see the influence the country has had on her writing style.

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### Andrew says

Angela Carter is bent on transmogrifying the mundane with her wet rotting prose. Her words are issued out as eloquent, elongated moans. This makes it very difficult to register her descriptions as literal images; one reads them as if they were currents of inner sensation like sickness or sexual pleasure. A pervasive theme in this collection is the double-sided elusiveness and ambiguity of mirrors. What better way to distort this typically transparent medium than to inhabit the boundary of the mirror glass itself, where your body becomes your mirror, and you know you're there being emanated but blind to everything except the feeling of your own emanation.

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### Jeanne Thornton says

This Angela Carter is the goods. The chronological organization is in many ways its best strength, since the book, by Carter's assertion, is an account of her evolution from the author of the Bristol trilogy & early works to something altogether new. So it's fitting I guess that I find a couple of the early stories--A Souvenir of Japan and The Smile of Winter--really distinctly no great shakes, and the latter kind of racially uncomfortable (the description of Japanese skin, the bikers.) But these are skins shed, and the third I assume autobio piece--Flesh and the Mirror--is astonishing, almost a hinge for the whole collection. The back half is terrific, culminating in Elegy for a Freelance, where the weirdly empty, isolated worlds of the earlier stories--the desolation of Smile of Winter, the nearly unpopulated village of The Executioner's Lovely Daughter, the pre- or postlapsarian world of Penetrating to the Heart of the Forest--suddenly transform, as if they've passed through the mirror in Reflections, into worlds suffering from the opposite problem: people crushed together, trying to find ways to exist with one another, doing terrible things to one another in order to survive. The crowded social conditions of stuff like Shadow Madness and Love return, but suddenly seem to have a new, weirdly visionary perspective, and a much deeper register of sadness and, um, "having a problem being alive"ness, to which I relate, maybe?

It's just really neat stuff and I look forward to reading the late Carter books (even, now, yeah yeah Passion of New Eve :( )

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### **Nathanial says**

Angela Carter writes ghost stories. She doesn't settle for spooks, spirits, and apparitions, though, unless you consider those terms by their etymological roots. She chooses to consider how we appear to each other; lest that seem to simple, however, she uses only the most spooky, the most spirited appearances: these ghosts consist of the illusions that her narrators invoke when encountering another character. Her tragedy is not necessarily of the bloody demise or the rotting terrain (although she does evince both, with terrifying detail and nuance): it lies more in the incapacity of one person to recognize and respond to the humanity of another.

Her narrator in the title piece evokes this most clearly. This short story sets a first-person narrator, reflecting back on a recent relationship in a distant land, and moves from intimate recounts of trysts and features into a direct, confiding address to the readers:

"I speak as if he had no secrets from me. Well, then, you must realize that I was suffering from love and I knew him as intimately as I knew my own image in a mirror. In other words, I knew him only in relation to myself. Yet, on those terms, I knew him perfectly. At times, I thought I was inventing him as I went along, however, so you will have to take my word for it that we existed. But I do not want to paint our circumstantial portraits so that we both emerge with enough well-rounded, spuriously detailed actuality that you are forced to believe in us. I do not want to practice such sleight of hand. You must be content only with glimpses of our outlines, as if you had caught sight of our reflections in the looking-glass of somebody else's house as you passed by the window."

She uses that disassociated sensibility - of encountering a person, a scene, a world through reflections (off a strange surface, no less) - without naming it so directly in most of her vignettes...for they are vignettes, mostly, figured on the turns of setting and mood more than the twists of plot or character. Still, the word 'vignette' seems fabulously inadequate in her case, as it tends to minimize, disregard, or off-set - and it is here, on the edges of our vision, that her art flourishes.

Rather than returning to the blurred borders of her own awareness, as Lydia Davis does in *The End of the Story*, and structuring her progress that way, Carter conceives of the method at the start and lets us divine it throughout the rest of the book. The remaining eight pieces are variously more gruesome, fraught, and brutal than the first, which remains the most shimmeringly frangible bit of the lot, filled with gaps and ellisions, circumnavigations and lacunae that give it significance. It reads almost as if the rest of the stories suffer under the weight of over-determined meaning, that the settings and sequences of events in the rest of the book have swallowed up all the elusive incriminations of the opener (which is only fit).

{continued under the heading of "The Bloody Chamber", due to space limitations}

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## mark monday says

gorgeously written, mind-bending, appalling, cruel, ambiguous, stark, lush, radiant, sepulchral. all of my favorite things! in different combinations, of course. nine stories from one of my favorite writers; all of them interesting, many of them utterly brilliant.

authors can't help but put themselves into their writing, on one level or another. I can't help but wonder how much Carter put of herself into the three stories set in Japan - "A Souvenir of Japan" & "The Smile of Winter" & "Flesh and the Mirror". they detail the troubled romance of an older English woman and a younger Japanese man, the inevitable disintegration of that romance, and its bleak aftermath. there is a lived quality to her descriptions of a lovely small town, an anonymous big city, and a dire beach - as well as an understanding of Japanese culture and character that manages to have complete self-awareness of her status as an outsider who can never really understand: her thoughts on Japan are cuttingly critical, even-handed, and eventually self-abnegating in her realization that true understanding is beyond her. likewise there is an exceedingly personal feeling to the description of this ill-fated romance - the kind of "personal" that is so intimate it can be difficult to read. I'm not sure if all three stories are actually even detailing the same love affair, but there is a distinct (and tragic) continuity. of the three, "A Souvenir of Japan" is perhaps the most breathtaking in its transition from a description of pleasant country life to its bitter deconstruction of the all too fallible qualities of man and woman.

authors also can't help but put their obsessions onto the page; indeed it is often those obsessions that cause a writer to even write. Carter's obsessions are well-known: a fascination with gender and power, the subversion of both of those things, and the violence that can come when they engage with each other. both of those obsessions drive two of the strongest and strangest pieces: "Master" is the horrific tale of a cruel Great White Hunter and the native girl he enslaves - and who in turn becomes an even greater, crueler hunter; "The Loves of Lady Purple" details the horrific life of a fabled whore with a heart of utter darkness, and the literal puppet she has become. the push and pull when gender and power (or the lack of it) meet are also central to the collection's most confused and therefore weakest story - "Elegy for a Freelance" - which takes place in some bleak future London about to burn in riotous flames, and gives a snapshot of an absurd terrorist cell making its first group decision to take its first life - that of its own leader, a deranged and murderous idiot.

Carter is perhaps best known for bizarre, mordant, lusciously written, postmodern fantasias The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman, The Passion of New Eve, Nights at the Circus, and The Bloody Chamber (as well as Heroes and Villains, a grim post-apocalyptic anti-romance that deconstructs, wait for it, power and gender). I think *fantasia* is what she does best and it is certainly what made her one of my favorites. in addition to the previously mentioned "Lady Purple", the collection includes three more and each one provoked very strong reactions from me. I was revolted and depressed by "The Executioner's Beautiful Daughter", which despite being brilliantly written, had an analysis of certain elements of human nature that was so dark (and literally disgusting) that my mind rejected what it was reading and I had to take a long break from the book before moving on. I was wonderfully perplexed and fascinated by the hallucinatory "Reflections", which features a man being forced through a looking-glass into a sort of Reverse World by a villainous, violent young woman and her hermaphrodite guardian; it soon becomes clear that he is perfectly willing to be just as villainous and violent in his attempt to escape. I was enchanted by "Penetrating to the Heart of the Forest", a spellbinding story about an Eden in the heart of a jungle, the darkness that lies beyond a village of happy naturals, a journey into that darkness, and um twincest. because hey, why not? things like a positive depiction of two siblings making love under the Tree of Good and Evil are just par for the course to Carter.

do people really need trigger warnings? if you do, most definitely avoid Angela Carter: you will no doubt be triggered, again and again and again.

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### **Paul says**

A set of short stories by Angela Carter from the early 1970s; some are based on Carter's time in Japan from 1969 to 1971. She describes that time as one of change, transition and radicalisation and the stories reflect this. Carter says that the position of women in Japan and their repression drew her towards feminism. The stories cover awakening, abuse and the dynamics of relationships. One of the stories is an experiment with magic realism and there is a touch of the fairy tale about a number of them.

There is a Garden of Eden story (Penetrating to the Heart of the Forest) relating to a brother and sister brought up by their father in a village on the edge of a forest. The village culture says there is an evil tree at the centre of the unexplored forest. The children, who have always done things together, set off to explore and find it. Things begin to change and after a carnivorous plant bites the sister;

"Her words fell heavy with a strange weight, as heavy as her own gravity, as if she might have received some mysterious communication from the perfidious mouth that wounded her. At once, listening to her, Emile thought of that legendary tree; and then he realised that, for the first time in his life, that he did not understand her, for, of course, they had heard of the tree. Looking at her in a new puzzlement, he sensed the ultimate difference of a femininity he had never before known or any need or desire to acknowledge and this difference might give her the key to some order of knowledge to which he might not yet aspire, himself, for all at once she seemed far older than he. She raised her eyes and fixed on him a long, solemn regard which chained him in a conspiracy of secrecy, so that, henceforth, they would share only with one another the treacherous marvels round them."

It is of course The Fall, with a new and sacred Eve (a theme Carter will return to).

These stories aren't consistently as good as her later work, but you can sense her finding her feet. The Loves of Lady Purple is about a life size puppet, whose puppeteer creates a story for her which involves poverty, abuse and a life in a brothel as a dominatrix and then an old age of poverty. When, of course, the puppet comes to life, she does and becomes the only thing she is able to do. A fable about the narrowness of the roles women are forced into.

Reflections is also about gender roles; a gothic tale with a mirror into another (reversed) world, a hermaphrodite who knits to keep the world in place, penises as guns and guns as penises with some analysis of rape in this world and the reversed world.

Some of the stories are about cityscapes and being in an alien city, or in the underbelly of the city; usually with gender relations as part of the backdrop. The prose is lush and heavy at times and there is great intensity in the writing. This isn't Carter at her very best, but these stories are still better than most.

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### **Alexandra Daw says**

This was not really my cup of tea and thankfully was a slim volume. These short stories are the stuff of nightmares which I guess is what makes the ideas and the writing so admirable.

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## **Phil says**

I do have a massive liking for Angela Carter - to coin a sexist phrase, she's so fucking ballsy. Even when her writing lapses into its most purple and florid, it's still fascinating. This early collection of 9 short stories, originally published in 1974, is a bit of a mixed bag. At its best, it's an incredible walk on a tightrope of sexual debauchery and social extremes - at its worst it feels like an unrevised first draft written as an exercise. Be aware that this is most definitely the unfettered sexually dangerous Carter of *The Sadeian Woman* and *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*, rather than the equally interesting but more mannered and drawing room friendly *Wise Children* and *Nights at the Circus*. Carter's writing style has always been one that I need to sink into, read slowly, chew over - hers are never books to rush through, because the plots are always secondary to the luscious description and ideas.

The best stories, for me, were "The Executioner's Beautiful Daughter", "The Loves of Lady Purple", "Penetrating to the Heart of the Forest" and "Master", whereas the least satisfactory was "Reflections" - also three of the stories are essentially at heart the same tale (A Souvenir of Japan, The Smile of Winter, and Flesh and the Mirror) about a British woman in Japan with a Japanese boyfriend, ruminating about how we don't know the true essence of people and things, nor they ours. Had these been stitched into one story, I'd have definitely given this book a 4 star review - as it is, I could only stretch to 3. However, that is in no way a reflection on the quality of the best stories in this slim book.

Another reviewer has pointed out that Carter's style in this collection owes a debt to that of Anais Nin, as a criticism, but as a massive fan of Nin (her writing and her life - which was lived almost as a work of art) this can only be a bonus. So, read and enjoy, but don't expect a comfortable time.

(#4 in my Year of Reading Women)

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## **Olivia-Savannah Roach says**

This is a short story collection recommended to me by my older sister. I decided to read it without quite knowing what I was getting into, and I quite enjoyed the short stories here. Angela Carter is an author new to me, but she certainly does know how to vividly paint pictures in the reader's mind and bring across subtle messages with her words.

All of Angela Carter's stories were so beautifully written. I can't say it any better than my sister did when she described it to me – the author uses very purple writing. Occasionally, I must admit, it made it a little difficult to understand some of the stories or what I was supposed to be thinking about when reading them. However, in some stories it perfectly worked with the voice and the message to make a mini masterpiece in itself. I don't think her writing will cater to everyone's taste, but if you generally enjoy classics then I am sure it can be something for you.

I also really liked that all of the stories were set in Tokyo. If you know me, you know I am someone who is big on culture and having stories set in different countries than the usual Britain or USA that I always seem to be reading about, makes me incredibly happy. Some of the stories were also set in alternate worlds that weren't exactly Tokyo as well. But I was happy.

Of course, with every collection, there were some stories I liked more than others. I'm going to discuss some

of my favourites here in this review.

A Souvenir of Japan: I really liked this story because of the message behind it. I found it to be about the difference between appearances vs reality, and you can think of this best when it comes to first impressions, which almost never really add up to who you really are. This message was described through a romance in the short story, and I really liked how it was done.

The Executioner's Beautiful Daughter: This one I understood to be about humanity and what that word itself entails. Right about the same time as reading this collection I was also reading *The Summer That Melted Everything* by Tiffany McDaniel, and I was so intrigued in this topic. It was interesting to see how Carter handled that.

The Lovers of Lady Purple: Now this was a story I had a mix of emotions about. It said something about language and communication, both in verbal terms and those of the body. It said something about seductiveness. It said something about your own creation occasionally growing bigger than you and how it can overwhelm you if you are not careful. The ending was twisted and I'm still not sure what to quite make of it yet. But this one definitely held my interesting.

Penetrating to the Heart of the Forest: Again, this one seemed to be dealing with humanity. How it is best when at one with nature. I also got quite a few Adam and Eve like vibes from this story, and yet it was twisted away from that too. Almost like a sinister version of a retelling.

Elegy for a Freelance: As the last of these stories this one was almost a bittersweet ending to a collection I didn't want to leave. It was also the most interesting of them all. It dealt with murder, death and idolization of someone close to you. Love can be blinding and Carter played on that common saying.

All in all, these short stories were a quick read, but left me thinking about them between reading story to story. I especially loved the meanings of the novel and Carter manages to add sinister or dark twists to almost all of them. Definitely thought provoking and worthwhile reading.

This review and others can be found on Olivia's Catastrophe: <http://oliviascatastrophe.com/2017/06...>

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### **Nate D says**

Angela Carter is great, and I think I'm getting more and more of what she's about. This is something of a transitional collection written across the late 60s and early 70s post-Magic Toyshop, half observation pieces with an appearance of autobiographical relevance to Carter's time in Japan (after using her book award money to exit an unsatisfactory marriage and move far far away), the other half reconfigured myths and legends.

The observation pieces are often great -- evocative, moody images of life in land not really her own that remind me of those of Anais Nin's stories that seem wholly concerned with providing a complete description of some person or place. These culminate in the theoretical density of *Flesh and the Mirror*, which despite its confessional tone has the crisp conceptual delineation of a fairy tale. And around that, the actual fairy tales, which begin as almost just sketches of stories in the earlier entries, before becoming fully-formed and often fantastic. Carter offers some insight into what exactly these "sub-literary" forms mean to her in the afterword, but it's clear just from reading them: these simple short forms allow a clarity of discussion far

more piercing than can be reached in the ambiguities of reality. Not that these are unambiguous, as Carter fluidly manipulates her alternate worlds, still-falling edens, and revolutionary fugues with a refreshing blend of passion and amorality. I'll have to get around to *The Bloody Chamber* soon for her full development of this narrative tangent.

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### **Katie says**

*Fireworks* is a very apt name for this collection of stories: like fireworks, they are short, sharp bursts of concentrated but brief beauty, all with an underlying element of danger. However, while Angela Carter always writes excellently and has an amazing way with words, this was definitely not my favourite of her short story collections. Although her prose is rich and full it sometimes feels a little stifling in this book and I often caught myself committing the sacrilege of wishing for fewer words and more plot.

In the story 'A Souvenir of Japan' Angela Carter's fictional self says: "But I do not want to paint our circumstantial portraits so that we emerge with enough well-rounded, spuriously detailed actuality that you are forced to believe in us. I do not want to practise such sleight of hand. You must be content only with glimpses of our outlines, as if you had caught sight of our reflections in the looking-glass of somebody else's house as you passed by the window." (p. 10) This is a fair illustration of how these stories work: they don't provide full narratives with fleshed out characters, but give tantalising glimpses into worlds where you can never be quite certain of anything. There is a dream-like quality to the stories which makes them feel uncanny and remote and just a little bit too odd for me, I think. Carter's epilogue explains exactly what she was doing in this collection and I found that very helpful, illuminating some of the more bizarre elements of these madcap stories (particularly the incest; I swear incest has been a theme in almost everything I've read by Carter now). I always enjoy it when an author decides to let their readers in on their thought processes, particularly when they are as patently oddball as Carter's, so this provided a welcome opportunity to help untangle some of my thoughts on the book.

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### **Patrik Sampler says**

These are indeed profane pieces, courageously surreal and pointed. They are also frequently depressive, or "fuscus" -- a word that appears in them more than once. The vocabulary is ornate but never ostentatious, and creates the strange feeling of coming across an animal declared extinct merely years ago. (See: *baiji*.) I thought to include a quotation from the book, but I'd have to "excerpt" most of it. Almost the entire thing rings clearly. My only complaint is the hackneyed trajectory of "Penetrating to the Heart of the Forest". Otherwise, *Fireworks* is a surprise.

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### **Nick says**

I can't admit that I read every word in this collection. I mostly skimmed it for the sections that were set in Tokyo, and I did find the two stories *A Souvenir of Japan* and *Flesh and the Mirror* very good. Her descriptions of a Japanese summer festival were brilliant, and the idea of Tokyo as a mirror in *Flesh and the Mirror* was excellent.

The other stories in between these two didn't really do much for me, and I still think I like Angela Carter the

most when she's not showing off. *Nights at the Circus* still remains my favourite thing I've read by her to date, mostly because she adheres to plot and character instead of just writing earth-shatteringly good sentences, which is what I see from her short fiction in general.

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### **Amalia Gavea says**

The stories in this collection aren't simply Gothic. They are full of darkness without any source of light. Full of dark, ominous sexuality and murderous impulses. The set is primarily a tapestry of Japanese lore and urban wanderings, vindictive geishas lurking in the lantern-lit backstreets of Tokyo. Tribal, animalistic, shamanic rituals from the heart of Africa, androgynous enchantresses hidden in moonlit caves, women seeking their lovers of the past in the East, tales of incest upon the villages of the German mountains, dark actions and betrayals within a terrorist group in the heart of London in the 70s.

If you choose to read "Fireworks", do it with a clear and open mind. Don't focus on the sexual premise of the stories, look beyond it, within the darkness of the human soul and let the beauty of Carter's language carry you away. Not for the faint of heart...

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