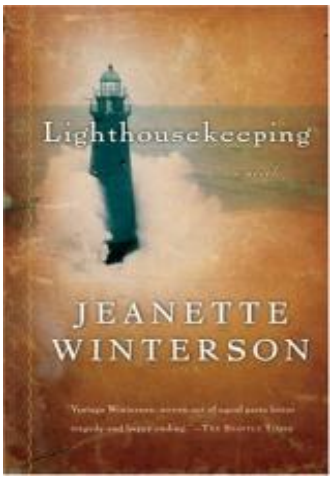
ReadingGroupGuides
The online community for reading groups

Lighthousekeeping

by Jeanette Winterson



About the Book

My mother called me Silver. I was born part precious metal, part pirate.

Orphaned and anchorless, Silver is taken in by blind Mr. Pew, the mysterious and miraculously old keeper of the Cape Wrath lighthouse. Pew tells Silver ancient tales of longing and rootlessness, of journeys that move through place and time, of passion and betrayal. His stories center on Babel Dark, a local nineteenth-century clergyman who lived two lives: a public one mired in darkness and a private one bathed in a beacon of light. Pew's stories are, for Silver, a map through her own particular darkness, into her own story and, finally, into love. With **Lighthousekeeping**, Winterson begins a new cycle and a return to the lyrical intimacy of her earliest work. One of the most original and extraordinary writers of her generation, Winterson has created a modern fable about the transformative power of storytelling.

Discussion Guide

1. Discuss the novel's opposing epigraphs. In what way do both quotations speak to Silver's mandates? What understanding of life's instabilities does Silver express in the opening paragraphs of **Lighthousekeeping**?

2. Who are Silver's beacons? In Silver's mind, does her mother light any paths for her, or does she extinguish them? Is Miss Pinch a purveyor of only dark episodes?

3. What ironies do the characters' names possess, from Babel to Pew? Does the town (called Salts) yield only bitterness?

4. Jeanette Winterson has been widely praised for innovative approaches to voice, time, and point of view when creating a storyline. What is the effect of the enfolded stories in **Lighthousekeeping**? How does Pew's storytelling tone compare to Silver's?

5. Babel Dark wouldn't marry Molly because he didn't trust her. Does his religious hypocrisy empower him or undermine him? What does his treatment of his wife reveal about the nature of abuse?

6. What parallels exist between Silver and Molly's daughter, Susan?

7. What makes Silver so captivated by the Dark legends? How do these legends compare to the other narratives she relishes, such as Death in Venice, the account of Captain Scott's final mission, or Wagner's Tristan and Isolde?

8. When Silver asks Pew to tell her a story that begins again, he says this is the story of life. At what points does her life story begin again? To what extent do all life stories begin again?

9. Why can't Silver's Psychiatrist for Young Offenders discern the logic in her thinking? Do you perceive Silver as a rational person on the lam from an irrational world, or is her story surrealistic? Is imagination inimical to rational thought?

10. Miss Pinch said Pew was an orphan from Glasgow; what is your understanding of his identity? What do you think of his conversations with Babel Dark about the liaisons with Molly in the lighthouse?

11. What enables Silver to be loved at last? What enables her to trust her lover and create beauty with her, while Dark's experiences with Molly were equal doses of anguish and beauty? What is the effect of Silver telling her love story in second person?

12. Already drowned, Dark releases the seahorse and sets out to be reunited with Molly. How do you interpret his final scene?

13. Discuss Silver's homecoming to the lighthouse and her reunion with Pew and DogJim. How does her understanding of life at that point compare to when Pew first took her in?

14. What literary techniques does Winterson use to blend historic narratives with Silver's contemporary one? What balance does she strike between humor-especially in word plays-and pathos?

15. The love stories portrayed in Winterson's previous novels have spanned cybersex and the French Revolution. Read as a continuum, what truths and possibilities about love does her fiction resolve?

16. In terms of ancestry, fantasy, or your favorite literature, which narratives have most shaped your identity? What story have you told throughout your life?

Author Bio

Jeanette Winterson was born in Manchester. She is a beloved cultural icon and queer trailblazer who published her first novel, ORANGES ARE NOT THE ONLY FRUIT, at 25. Over two decades later, she revisited that material in her internationally bestselling memoir, WHY BE HAPPY WHEN YOU COULD BE NORMAL?

Winterson has written 13 novels for adults and three collections of short stories, as well as children?s books, nonfiction

and screenplays. Her novel, WRITTEN ON THE BODY, was named one of the 25 Most Influential Works of Postwar Queer Literature by the *New York Times*.

Since her innovative and forward-thinking writing about AI in her essay collection 12 BYTES, she speaks at tech conferences around the world. She is professor of New Writing at the University of Manchester and writes a popular Substack, Mind Over Matter. She lives in the Cotswolds in a wood and in Spitalfields, London.

Critical Praise

"Winterson writes about love the way van Gogh painted sunflowers: lovingly, obsessively, always seeking a fresh way to present the subject."

Lighthousekeeping

by Jeanette Winterson

Publication Date: April 3, 2006
Genres: Fiction
Paperback: 232 pages
Publisher: Harvest Books
ISBN-10: 0156032899
ISBN-13: 9780156032896