



Heroes and Villains

Angela Carter

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After the apocalypse the world is neatly divided.

Rational civilization rests with the Professors in their steel and concrete villages; marauding tribes of Barbarians roam the surrounding jungles; mutilated Out People inhabit the burnt scars of cities.

But Marianne, a Professor's daughter, is carried away into the jungle--a grotesque vegetable paradise--where she will become the captive bride of Jewel, the proud and beautiful Barbarian. There she will witness the savage rituals of the snake worshippers, indulge her voluptuous, virginal fantasies, taste the forbidden fruit of chaos...

Erotic, exotic, and bizarre, HEROES AND VILLAINS is a post-apocalyptic romance, a gripping adventure story, a colourful embroidery of religion and magic and, not least, a dispassionate vision of life beyond our brave nuclear world.

Heroes and Villains Details

Date : Published January 25th 1991 by Penguin Books (first published 1969)

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Author : Angela Carter

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From Reader Review Heroes and Villains for online ebook

Sean says

At the heart of this novel lies the relationship between Marianne and Jewel. Everything else is more or less window dressing*; the relationship between Jewel and Dr. Donally, while intriguing, is not satisfactorily explored. More detail on past events leading up to the current situation would also have been welcome, but alas the book is so short. It's also a little uneven at times. There were two or three times where Carter reveals fairly significant plot points in a brief sentence or two prior to expanding on them. That technique, if one can call it that, has always irked me as a reader.

*A night of fitful sleep after finishing the book has led me to conclude that this statement was a bit cavalier. Carter introduces a number of themes and/or symbols that remain largely unexplored**. One that does pervade, though, is suggested by the title, which Marianne alludes to late in the book:

When I was a little girl, we played at heroes and villains but now I don't know which is which any more, nor who is who, and what can I trust if not appearances? Because nobody can teach me which is which nor who is who because my father is dead.

All of the characters, including both Marianne and Jewel, exhibit behaviors one could consider both 'bad' and 'good', playing out the understanding that all people, no matter their status or upbringing, are fallible. Certain characters exaggerate this dichotomy more so than others. For Jewel and Marianne, it is perhaps most heightened for they are in close, intimate relationship together. As Nate suggests in his review, Carter seems to be attempting relationship analysis here. A central struggle in a relationship might be the tension born of criticizing a behavior in one's significant other while rationalizing it in one's own self. How can this not be hypocrisy? And how do we deal with it without driving a wedge between us?

**At times the novel feels like a pot of stew not left to simmer long enough, leaving chunks of uncooked potatoes and carrots floating in the broth. What about the Out People? How do they figure into this? They're discussed fairly superficially in the text but in my mind merit further consideration. Do they represent degeneration or evolution- a step backward or a step forward in humanity's attempts to navigate this post-apocalyptic world? And what of Dr. Donally? Is he good or evil? Truly diabolical or simply an outsider charlatan looking for a place to belong? Then there are the many allusions, which at times can be blunt. Jewel's scarred tattoo of Adam and Eve is one whopper of an example.

It's still a pretty good novel, but questions remain. Sometimes I consider this is a good thing when I finish a novel, but in this case I think too much remains unexplored.

Rachel says

Gods.

I can't properly review Angela Carter - her books just seem to reach into my subconscious, grasp hold of me, and refuse to let go. It's always a strange experience to read others' reviews of her work, which debate symbolism and characterization and political message. All those things are very clear to me when reading, but I feel so little need to comment on them, because the book itself feels so *true*. This is how the world is; or, more properly, this is how the world is for me. Every other sentence is a great truth that I have just been

waiting for Carter to articulate to me. Yes, it is hyper-intellectual, witty metaphor, but we live in metaphors. Our minds are paved, wallpapered, founded upon the texts we take into ourselves. Conscious heteroglossia.

Heroes and Villains has the hazy contours of a dream but, within those contours, the rich detail of memory. It takes place in a sharply divided post-apocalyptic world, but mostly within the mind of the heroine Marianne, a child of the privileged and sequestered Professor class, who runs away and joins the Barbarians. Carter does not shy away from the grittiness of her premise - more even than the vivid, matter-of-fact violence and appreciated her attention to dirt, to unpleasant smells, to the diseases that result from such conditions. The power of the choice between safety and freedom, between order and chaos is given more weight because the freedom/chaos is unromanticized (though, in other ways, it is a deeply romantic, fantastical image - gothic, in the truest sense of the word. I hope Mario Praz would approve).

Like all of Carter's works, it does not benefit from being summarized (the one exception is *The Passion of New Eve*, because summarizing that one to a naive audience is absolutely *hilarious*. Try it some time). It is a deeply erotic, and a deeply devastating book. Grief and mental illness run through it like a vein of sulfur. I expect that most survivors of sexual violence will find it triggering, but it also feels very much as though it was written for us survivors, whispering truths into our ears that the outside world will never understand. Inside the wild, bright colored images there is always this hard, brutal truth, like a heartbeat - *This is how it is*.

I don't know if this is just me. It very well might be.

Jonathan says

A little heavy handed at times, and showing its age a little (published in 1969), but great fun nonetheless.

Complete Review review here <http://www.complete-review.com/review...>

Leslie says

This is the story of a professor girl who chooses to exempt herself from her clan by faking her own suicide and running off with a red hot barbarian with raven plaits and a six pack. You probably won't believe me, but this hunk's name is Jewel (!?!).

It is a familiar story: headstrong girl meets headstrong boy. They come from opposite sides of the track. They butt heads until sparks fly and ignite the brittle hay that lines their foolish hearts. Then their parts are on fire! Angela Carter does her signature twisting/blurring of binaries: rapist/survivor, barbarian/professor, hero/villain, needs/desires. If you want to spice things up in your feminist book club, suggest this title. Make sure you feminist-proof your apartment. There will be infighting and things will get heinous! This book is by no means anti-feminist, it is just complicated (which is how I like it!).

A quote: "I think that in the long run, I shall be forced to trust appearances. When I was a little girl, we would play heroes and villains, but now I don't know which is which any more, nor who is who, and what can I trust if not appearances?"

This was rather slow for me at first, but it got better and better. Fans of this brand of romcom who want something lite should check out this fave of mine: *Princess Routine*.

Sara says

The Times described *Heroes and Villains* as 'an unashamed fantasist, a fabulist of daemonic energy' – and it really is. This is an incredibly loaded book, and every time I've tried to review this I've ended up word-vomiting a bad fragment of one or one hundred failed essays that could be written about it. This time will be no different (but I've hit the 'well, let's just get it done' try). I think the difficulty is down to the fact that rereading the novella I was more aware of what was trying to be achieved here, and I possibly ended up thinking TOO much about it (to the tune of 9 sides worth of unreadable notes) rather than feeling as much this time around. Regardless of all that, this is weird Angela Carter all over: worlds, characters and experiences that are rendered in narrative brutal, dreamy, a door hard to open for some of the prose written as much as it's an open field of beautiful synesthetic imagery in other places.

'Sometimes I dream I am an invention [...] On the nights I have these dreams, I have been known to wake the entire camp with my screams.'

To me *Heroes and Villains* is a loose companion piece to *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* and *The Passion of New Eve* because of the renegade Doctor Frankenstein figures in each novel who all create a kind of invention that they envisage will bring the world to rights as they see fit. Carter underpins each work with overt symbolism and ideology that is questioned by the protagonists, subtly de-clothed in narrative and also critiqued in how connotations of traditional symbols/thought beliefs are sometimes misguidedly reinforced by the Doctors in their attempts to subvert the order. In *Heroes and Villains* where there is the possibility in a post-apocalyptic world to start afresh without names, rituals or beliefs of old, it just seems impossible. The people are still so informed by signs and symbols of a destroyed civilisation to escape the 'crumbling anachronisms' which still endure (whether understood as they are by Marianne, or not in the case of some Barbarian members) and are carried on.

The world presented in this particular novella relies on dichotomies: the Professors cannot live without the Barbarians 'the other', needing these tribe to define themselves as upholders of reason and progress; an argument between Donally and Jewel regarding Marianne only serves to reinforce the matriarchal myth of Eve or her foil, the demonic Lilith. I read this great essay ('Deconstructing the Womb') which from what I remember said that Carter is wary of using myths to celebrate one's identity or an experience – she sees it as a potential trap. For example, Marianne as 'Eve at the end of the world': using matriarchal myths to elevate the status of womanhood – it doesn't subvert far more than what it serves to reinforce the view of women as vehicles for future descendants. She uses Marianne's character, a History Professor's daughter who "broke things to see what they were like inside" to expose the cracked veneer of the academic world she comes from which assesses and studies the environment around (to the point of madness), as well as mocking the sham superstitious beliefs of the Barbarian tribe when she becomes involved with them. Nevertheless there's the overwhelming sense of fatality felt by Marianne who is seen by the makeshift-shaman Donally as the tribe's 'little holy image' alongside his protégé Jewel (who is more than compelling whilst he struggles in his role as a social experiment). It's hard to tell if Marianne jokes about becoming the Tiger Lady of the tribe, because surely she would see it's kind of the same tyranny Donally imposed: the status quo will essentially remain the same, all there is changed is the face and flavour.

If Marianne is made to feel like Miranda, Donally as Prospero, his son taking the surface role of Caliban (but a good fool underneath), then Jewel is a 'furious invention' indeed. Too educated for the tribe, yet educated in the wrong way to ever cross worlds like Marianne and Donally to live amongst the professors. He is the only one to survive Donally's manipulations and teachings, the previous girl and boy died in the progress of being tattooed with stripes. It is because of this that Donally sees Jewel as a son, more of a son than "the half-wit" he has biologically; Jewel is a masterpiece of an invention which he brands and continues to define,

limit (for one he refuses to teach Jewel how to read) and destroy in fear of a rebellion, and in turn, as an usurper son, Jewel tries his luck at destroying Donally too.

There's a part early on in the novella where Marianne asks Jewel if barbarians die of madness, because there is a number of cases where madness has led to suicide and homicide in the towns of the Professors. Jewel answers with a list of physical diseases that the Barbarians die of instead. In some ways that hit me most this time, because I remember in my house that my parents and those around in the neighbourhood at that time didn't recognise depression as an illness, they just saw it as a middle-class triviality – I guess they saw it as when you're busy surviving, there's no time for luxuries like living, I don't know (because there was a lot of madness there as well). Anyway, the first time you read a book you forget these little lines, but reading the ending with the above conversation in mind, it made it very poignant and depressing. Here's this boy: 'everywhere I go I'm doomed to be nothing but an exhibit' who can't really find a place in either world, so he falls back on what Donally has made of him whilst fighting Marianne in how she 'converts him' by looking at him. There is a lot more you could say regarding orientalism in terms of Barbaric tribe/Jewel, and nothing that Carter romanticises stupidly either in my opinion. Any 'exotic' description is immediately pulled down by Jewel or made so overt it becomes a parody. I'd like to see some essays written on that actually.

The ties between Donally, Jewel and Marianne become ludicrous at points: all detest the other to the point of wounding each other in some way (whether branding, rape and forced marriage, infidelity and the possible betrayal of tribe), but are magnetically attracted for one reason or a complete lack of reason. The relationships between all three is best described as such:

'They arrived at the green road and stood looking at one another, in a sudden last uncertainty as to where their true allegiances lay, for the young man and his tutor had the strange attachment of years between them, the girl and her husband the bemused attraction a sense of fatality and the girl and the magician the bond of a common language. And the girl and the young man, also each suffered from the loss of a father.'

Dialogue:

The dialogue reigns supreme here in my opinion. I showed a bit of dialogue to a friend of mine who found it incredibly unrealistic and I've read this opinion a couple of times now "Carter just can't do dialogue", but I love it. Honestly. The prose in this book is already riddled with words that all seem to be there for reason and some level of meaning, nothing is left to chance, this is only reflected in the dialogue. Some of which I get, some of which I don't, but like the sound of (because we're all prone to fancy like that). One of my favourite exchanges:

'Who do you see when you see me?' She asked him, burying her own face in his bosom.
'Do you want the truth?'
She nodded
'The firing squad.'
'That's not the whole truth. Try again.'
'Insatiability,' he said with some bitterness.
'That's oblique, but altogether too simple. Once more,' she insisted. 'One more time.'
He was silent for several minutes.
'The map of a country in which I only exist by virtue of the extravagance of my metaphors.'
'Now you're being too sophisticated. And besides, what metaphors do we have in common?'

The closest I've ever got to this in real life is "I'll decimate you" "Not before I devour you." – I think if I asked someone the same question as above and they replied back with "the firing squad" I'd be compelled to do something ridiculous like marry them – this also goes for Oscar Wilde/Sarah Bernhardt "Mind if I smoke?" "I don't care if you burn" exchange.

Bonus Material: Donally's Aphorisms

- BOREDOM IS THE HANDSOME SON OF PRIDE
- ONENESS WITH DESTINY GIVES STYLE AND DISTINCTION
- MISTRUST APPEARANCES, THEY NEVER CONCEAL ANYTHING
- MEMORY IS DEATH
- OUR NEEDS BEAR NO RELATION TO OUR DESIRES
- THE WORLD BECOMES A DREAM AND THE DREAM, A WORLD
- I THINK, THEREFORE I EXIST; BUT IF I TAKE TIME OFF FROM THINKING, WHAT THEN?

[first read in 2012, this review was written January 2014 & you can also find this on wordpress]

Craig says

Everything signifies something here, as evidenced by references to Levi-Strauss, tattoos of biblical proportion, charcoal slogans scrawled on walls which only one character can read and folkloric myth mixed with pagan and commercial, Western marriage ritual. Carter is playing with all of these concepts and connecting them to her usual deft explorations of gender interaction/ conflict.

Carter tropes at work: the mutual hate between men & women; raped into marriage; characters who are complacent and complicit in their own physical/ spiritual downfalls; masks/ costumes that are encoded and subsequently decoded

I was pulled in by the promise of a post-apocalyptic landscape, but as other reviewers have noted, that isn't really what you're getting here. This one is certainly slow to snag my interest. It isn't until the halfway point that the book almost picks up with a reveal connecting the characters. But that revelation does little to move things along, as very little (if anything) actually happens here. It is as if plot is crushed under the big picture concept of it all. And certainly Carter has never been slave to plot, but not even the characters are sufficiently interesting here to keep my interest.

To that, the book takes a casual tone with rape, which might be troubling to some readers. There is also a "cougar" pedophile scene and numerous scenes of violence against women.

Ryl says

This book made me so angry I went out and picked a fight with someone after reading it because I couldn't yell at the characters. I haven't had a book piss me off this much in a long, long time. I ended up dropping it down a storm drain to prevent another innocent person from reading this drek.

Let's start with the minor annoyances first. This is a post-apocalyptic novel published in the late 1960s. There are certain aspects of this genre that I was fully prepared for, one of which is the passive-voice flowery language that clouds the reality of the world the characters are living in. This book took it to extremes by

adding a layer of pseudo-intellectualism. Maybe it was real intellectualism, maybe I just don't know enough about sociology to recognize the Really Deep Insights I was supposed to be getting about decaying societies (I've heard of Levi-Strauss, a name that the characters kept throwing around, but I know nothing of his work), but all I know is that it was getting annoyingly pretentious after a while. Pretentiousness is one of the worst offenses any novel can commit in my world so this book is already starting off on a low bar.

Here's an example of the pretentious language that set me off so much:

Apart from these stray contacts, she defended herself by denying him an existence outside the dual being they made while owls pounced on velvet mice in the forest, the moon passed through its phases and the idiot boy howled disconsolately in his kennel. This third thing, this erotic beast, was eyeless, formless and equipped with one single mouth. It was amphibious and swam in black, brackish waters, subsisting only upon night and silence; she closed her eyes in case she glimpsed it by moonlight and there were no words of endearment in common, anyway, nor any reason to use them. The beast had teeth and claws. It was sometimes an instrument solely of vengefulness, though often its own impetus carried it beyond this function. When it separated out to themselves, again, they woke to the mutual distrust of the morning.

That, dear readers, is a sex scene.

I was prepared for the importance of sex to the plot after reading the back cover blurb and checking the publication date (1969). In one of Anne McCaffrey's books, (I think it was *Get Off the Unicorn*) she prefaces one of her short stories with a note that in the late 1960s you had to include a sex scene if you wanted to get published in the science fiction world. The blurb mentions Marianne's "virginal fantasies," so I knew going in that she was going to have lots of hot barbarian sex. What I did not know was that it was going to be hot barbarian rape fantasies.

Here's a good indicator of how the times, they are a-changin': when Marianne tries to escape from the barbarian camp, she is easily tracked down by Jewel. She sits in a tree while he mocks her until she gets mad enough to jump down and fight him. He pins her down, rapes her, and then tells her that now they have to get married. She's more angry than anything after this, but it's okay because deep down she really wanted him to rape her. After their marriage, she goes into a kind of fugue state where she only really comes alive at night when they're having another bout of rough sex (see the above quote). It gets so obvious that she really loves being raped that at one point, when she's arguing with Jewel, he looks at her and says "You're creaming for me now, this very minute." I, personally, found that to be unnecessarily vulgar. Marianne totally gets off on it, though. She's always telling Jewel "I hate you," but it becomes clear near the end that she really means "love" instead of "hate." Because, you know, a semi-abusive sexual relationship is just *so romantic*.

Eventually Marianne gets pregnant and tries to cheat on Jewel by raping the thirteen-year-old "half-wit" of the tribe (I guess it's contagious). At this point I gave up on any hope of this book ever making any kind of good sense. Jewel hits Marianne a couple of times and this is portrayed as worse than any of the raping. The third time he hits her, she puts a "curse" on him and he dies in a suicide rescue mission. When she learns that Jewel is dead, Marianne declares that she will become the "Tiger Queen" and rule the tribe with an iron fist. Suuuuuuuuuure she is. The girl that everyone in the tribe hates, the girl that has people making signs to ward off the evil eye whenever they see her, the girl who can't even take care of herself in the wild, she is going to be the next leader of the tribe. She's going to be left for the mutants to eat in a week.

Ron says

The 'heroine' of this novel is more anti-hero, though not in the popular modern sense of an iconoclast determined to fight the establishment. She is deeply inured to the fascist, class-based apocalyptic society in

which her father calls outsiders the 'arbitrary children of calamity...who must take the leavings.' Feeling little attachment to her friends, she rescues one of the barbarians and allows herself to be rescued by him by taking part in a brutal scenario that is not as it seems. Enraptured by a more primitive mode of living, she nonetheless displays great arrogance, is utterly sure of herself, even as she begins to question the heroes and villains on both sides of the divide (admitting that the leisure of her professorial society is what brings madness).

The theme of fear as the ruler of our passions is explored by a disgraced professor who is now among the barbarians, even as Marianne is ruled by anger. She is aghast to be asked to be kind or told that she doesn't understand, acting cruel all along, mystified that she is understood by others while unable to understand what she sees in the eyes of her husband, Jewel. She petulantly savors the aggression she brings to antagonizing him, turning every moment into drama and conflict, dismissing his very real psychological fears with the feminine bias that violence exists only on the physical and sexual planes. When her focus becomes about the omnipresent death in that camp, she smugly asserts that she has become the focus of his moral guilt in a wrongly superior manner.

She seems to be realizing an epiphany sexually, time frozen into the senses of taste, smell, and touch, obliterating the more purely abstract intellectual senses of sight and sound, though still afraid to see herself reflected in his eyes and displaying love and tenderness. She nonetheless denies his existence outside of sex in order to defend herself, and she no longer sees all that he provides to her materially as anything other than abstraction. At this point she begins to confuse need and desire, trying always to put them in separate categories, and her boredom and exhaustion begins at last to erode her complacent sense of self.

Still, she lapses into betrayal with its immediate sorrow and regret, goes limp at the notion he might die and that he had given her an undeserved term of endearment, then aggressively pursues him sexually to make amends.

In the end, he admits to his desperation and she pushes him away, demanding again to be left alone. It is only in witnessing death that she finally concludes that her autonomy is not truth, but a passionately held conviction, and she at last sees in this final tragedy the error of her want to objectify him and keep him as a specimen.

The heroes and villains in this tale are muddled and Carter has crafted a small masterpiece.

Lotte says

Heroes and Villains is like the literary equivalent of a Hieronymus Bosch painting. Strange, oddly fascinating, unnerving and probably quite exhausting if you look at it for too long. I can't say that I *liked* it, yet at the same time I couldn't stop reading.

This is one of those books where either everything means something, or nothing means anything at all. I suspect Angela Carter was trying to achieve the former. I'm not sure she succeeded at it. She kept me wondering throughout the novel though - and maybe that's the point?

I feel like there's a lot more that I could say about it but my thoughts are pretty disjointed right now, so maybe I'll revisit it later.

Lena says

Can Angela Carter do anything wrong? No. That is my definitive answer.

I haven't read even half of what she has published but the very idea of Carter's death preventing her from writing anything new makes me profoundly sad. I wish I could make literally everyone read something of hers.

Seonaidh Ceannéidigh says

At times great, at times muddled, Carter's post-apocalyptic fairytale [that is, minus any fairies] manages to both dazzle and sometimes bore, if only because its initially-strong-heroine [Marianne] becomes strangely passive-aggressive as the novel and the adversity wears on. The climax is replaced by a wind-down, the best part of which is a nightly stroll by a seaside resort, unfortunately capped with the disappointing off-page exit of its lead male character; a young man named Jewel who is strangely ennui-ridden and verges on being a villain himself [he kills the brother of the lead character and later rapes her]. The characters have a habit of waxing on, addressing and attacking one another in elaborate ways, and it is in dialogue that Carter stumbles. This world of Professors and Barbarians and Out-People is a mixed bag of interesting concepts, brilliant poetic writing, and oft-muddled metaphors and descriptions that tend to go astray.

EDIT: May, 2013.

Re-reading does a lot to help the novel. My initial disappointment with, say, the ending, may have been tempered by contemporary post-apocalyptic fiction, which tends to require that the hero cast out the villain in a climatic duel. Going back to it, the ending seems quite sobering, realistic (concerning the wordless and off-page exit of Jewel) and the 'meandering' of the prose simply vanishes when you know in advance that this isn't a story that is heading towards one central conflict, but is rather a meditation on civilisation vs. barbarism. Jewel's ennui still grates somewhat, but his role as a living social experiment is better defined. His role as a 'grey' character is more appreciated. Marianne's dialogue still seems strangely formal, but makes sense in the light of her education and upbringing; same with Jewel.

I've either grown more patient since 2011, or have become a more rounded reader. Hopefully both.

Jamie says

I'd say 3.5 on this one, but would willingly bump my rating up to 4 for Angela Carter--who, even when not in tip-top shape, is simply incomparable in so many ways.

The long and short of it: Heroes & Villains is basically a novel of ideas, as is frequently the case with Carter. Here, as in something like 'The Infernal Desire Machines of Dr. Hoffman,' the ideas are more at the forefront than, say, character development or flowery prose. It's ostensibly a post-apocalyptic novel, though not in the Orwellian or even Atwoodian sense; there's no explanation, there's no flashing back to the past, there's honestly very little nostalgia for what preceded this particular incarnation of the world. It's more of an evolutionary approach to the dystopia, as if, naturally, we could regress at any time & perhaps (as seems to

be the case with the Barbarians) begin again. The battle is between the Barbarians and the Professors, and neither primitivism nor intellectualism are let off the hook in Carter's biting critique (well, in fact, I suppose the primitivism at hand is more or less a construct of the intellectuals, and *that* othering process is being critiqued).

Marianne is our heroine, but almost all of the characters feel a bit like conduits (not unusual for a Carter novel), so if you're particularly attached to realistic characterization, you may want to stray from this novel. Basically, Marianne begins the novel as a typical fairytale orphan; despises the tedium of 'city' life; decides to return to the natural world; becomes entrenched in a Barbarian tribe. Adventures ensue. Violence, sexual assault, mythic structure, provocative ambiguities--all the qualities that make Carter so distinctive are at hand, but when I closed the final page, I almost felt as if it was like a super long short story rather than a novel. Not my favorite work by her, but it was a fun ride.

Zee says

I am now pretty certain that no one ever really gets used to Angela Carter's brand of vitriolic love or her genre-defying characters. I mean, when I try to figure out 'Heroes and Villains', I really struggle to put a label on what I have just read. Instead I come up with crazy statements like: it's a futuristic fairytale with elements of creation mythology that registers roughly on the ultraviolet section of the story-telling rainbow. Yeah. It's like THAT.

The main ingredients of a typical Carter novel are a fistful of folktale blueprints, which are then stripped from all the pretty 'Perrault' restraints and marched at gunpoint into the roiling, ascerbic crucible of the author's mind. And from this magician's melting pot which consists of a curious alchemy of brains, barbarism and wily femininity come out twisted versions of the tales themselves; genetically spliced monsters that would and could turn upon themselves at the slightest provocation. Actually, imagine the cannibalistic fairies that feature in 'Pan's Labyrinth' and you're more than halfway there to figuring out just how brutal Carter can be in her own re-telling of events.

Take our main character for example, one bony slip of a girl called Marianne, who quite literally grows up in an ivory tower surrounded by luxuries. The tower and her social status as a professor's daughter places her as the 'princess' of the story. A quick glance outside those castle walls and we instantly see how privileged she really is; as only two other caste systems remain in this bleak post-apocalyptic world. The dreaded barbarians are the 'noble savages' made up of wandering gypsies, thieves and vagabonds. Then there are the Out-People; a genetically corrupt version of humanity that have devolved into monsters. From these Carter makes up the misunderstood 'other' who are not as intellectually inferior as they seem and the half-man, half-monster types that would rank among the minotaurs and Centaurs of ancient mythology. The sad irony of this is that even though the latter group emulate the glory of demi-gods, the reality is quite the opposite as Carter marks their existence as unnatural and the undoing of man.

Marianne therefore surprises us when she tires from her closeted upbringing and decides to defect into the wilderness with a dangerous barbarian who is held captive in the fortress. Even worse is the fact that she runs away with the very boy who murdered her own brother. So begins a very strange tale of love (if love it can be called) between a savage and a professor's daughter as they form an odd alliance that can only be described as a type of Stockholm Syndrome.

Within the span of the story, Marianne shows her true colours, as her life with the savage tribe exposes her to vulgarity and sexual assault. Male/ female relationships are brought down to their bare primal essentials and we realise how Marianne is made of much, much sterner stuff. As the story progresses we see how Marianne

by instinct has finally found the place where she is most happy; beside the beautiful but violent raven-haired Jewel.

As a reader I enjoyed the progression of their relationship, this unlikely romance that would go sour in some places and then pick up again when you least expected it. There story is underpinned by the Adam and Eve mythos, and this also handsomely features in the form of a grotesque tattoo on Jewels torso of the scene where Eve offers Adam the forbidden fruit. In fact, Jewel is somewhat of a synthetic messiah; a puppet controlled by the ominous 'Doctor'; a madman who is trying to fabricate his own religion using members of the savage tribe. Jewel with his imposing physique and handsome looks doubles as Adam, Jesus and other religious characters.

So, dystopian fiction or post-apocalyptic nightmare; barbaric romance or feminist literature, you read and decide.

Megan says

Read for a uni subject on Gothic Fiction.

Ian "Marvin" Graye says

A Truly Gothic Novel Full of Dread and Glamour and Passion

Angela Carter enjoyed a major period of imaginative stimulation and production immediately before and then when she resided in Japan for several years at the cusp of the sixties/seventies.

According to the British Library, this was the first of two novels she wrote in Japan (the other being *"The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman"*, still my favourite of her novels) in addition to her first collection of short stories, *"Fireworks"*. However, it appears that she actually wrote this novel before her trip, while still living in Bristol.

Published in 1969, *"Heroes and Villains"* is a Gothic domestic drama set in a post-apocalyptic world where much of civilisation has been wiped out by some type of *"blast"* in a war. We don't learn what happened exactly. It might have been a nuclear bomb. All we learn is that the people who live in the world described in the novel have been splintered into several groups - the Soldiers (the remnants of the army), the Workers, the Professors, the Barbarians, and the outcast mutant Out People (she describes one as a *"not-man"*, *"what seemed to her a cruel parody of life"*).

The Surviving White Tower

The protagonist Marianne is the daughter of a Professor of History, who lives in a white (metaphorically ivory?) tower made of steel and concrete (*"it stood among some other steel and concrete blocks"* that survived the blast):

"Marianne had sharp, cold eyes and she was spiteful but her father loved her."

Father and daughter live in an academic community that is much like a rural village near where there are

farms of corn, and apple orchards, beyond which there was nothing but marshlands and the *"tumbled stone"* of ruined buildings. *"Here even the briars refused to grow and pools of water from the encroaching swampland contained nothing but viscid darkness."*

Henri Rousseau - *"The Sleeping Gypsy"*

The Barbarians

Marianne was not allowed to go outside the outer wire fence surrounding the community. It was out there that the Barbarians lived:

"If you're not a good little girl, the Barbarians will eat you."

The son of the Professor of Mathematics tells her, *"The Soldiers are heroes but the Barbarians are villains."*

Marianne is not averted by this old wives' tale. Rather, she is allured by the Barbarians. She doesn't play by the rules. *"She was a skinny and angular child."* (Like Angular Carter herself perhaps?) *"She was very wiry and agile."*

The Arbitrary Children of Calamity

Marianne's father explains to her:

"Before the war, there were places called Universities where men did nothing but read books and conduct experiments. These men had certain privileges...some Professors were allowed in the deep shelters with their families, during the war, and they proved to be the only ones left who could resurrect the gone world in a gentler shape, and try to keep destruction outside, this time."

Her father, being a Professor of History, *"reconstructed the past; that was his profession."* The survivors were *"the arbitrary children of calamity...If the Barbarians inherit the earth, they will finally destroy it, they won't know what to do with it."*

Francisco Goya - *"The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters"*

All Was Chaos

Marianne first witnessed an attack on the Professorial community by the Barbarians, when she was six years old. Many Soldiers died, and then *"all was chaos...The rabble came to ravage, steal, despoil, rape and, if necessary, to kill."* A Barbarian boy stabs her brother and then holds him with *"a strange, terrible tenderness until he was still and dead."* The Barbarian then looks up to Marianne's tower and realises she has been watching him. The two obsess about each other for much of the rest of their lives, until they meet each other when Marianne absconds from the village after the brutal axe murder of her father. The Barbarian's name is Jewel: *"Perhaps he was called Jewel because he was so beautiful, though also very strange."*

The Barbarians are described in much the same way as Gypsies (*"Gypsy is a corruption of the word, 'Egyptian'").* Marianne says:

"The Professors think you have reverted to beasthood. You are a perfect illustration of the breakdown of

social interaction and the death of social systems."

The Prince of Darkness

Nevertheless, Jewel is *"one of its aristocrats"*, *"the ragged king of nowhere"*, *"the Messiah of the Yahoos"* and *"the prince of darkness"*, is interested in books, and has a tutor, Doctor Donally, who is *"a bit mad...The Doctor is a practical man and believes religion is a social necessity."* (He seems to be a precursor of Doctor Hoffman.) Donally proclaims:

"It seemed to me that the collapse of civilisation in the form that intellectuals such as ourselves understood it might be as good a time as any for crafting a new religion."

He then quotes Hobbes:

"The passion to be reckoned upon is fear; whereof there be two very general objects: one, the power of spirits invisible, the other, the power of those men they shall therein offend."

The Sophisticated Groom

Jewel and Donally live in a large Gothic house, *"a gigantic memory of rotten stone, a compilation of innumerable forgotten styles now given some green unity by the devouring web of creeper, fur of moss and fungoid growth of rot."*

Donally's room is an old chapel, *"everywhere a litter of books, bottles, vessels, strangely shaped utensils and bundles of dried plants."*

Marianne escapes back to the wood, where Jewel finds her, rapes her and brings her back with him. It had been his plan to marry her the following day. Marriage proves little better, it being a succession of rapes: *"Marianne must reconcile herself to everything from rape to mortality."*

Donally inks an absurdist sign that says, *"MISTRUST APPEARANCES, THEY NEVER CONCEAL ANYTHING."*

Marianne subsequently concludes:

"I think that in the long run, I shall be forced to trust appearances. When I was a little girl, we would play heroes and villains, but now I don't know which is which any more, nor who is who, and what can I trust if not appearances?"

Donally advises her, *"Gather yourself together, young lady. Marry the Prince of Darkness. You'll find him very sophisticated."*

Sophistication, in this world, is supposed to be enough to warrant a relationship, or even a marriage.

The Savage Husband

Marianne acknowledges, *"Our Jewel is more savage than he is barbarous."* Like the Parisians of old, she worshipped the goddess Reason. Her white tower kept *"unreason at bay outside, beyond the barbed wire"*. Though on her wedding day, she realised *"her ruling passion was always anger rather than fear and she turned into a mute, furious doll which allowed itself to be totally engulfed."*

She describes their relationship as a composite of signs:

"He had become the sign of an idea of a hero; and she herself had been forced to impersonate the sign of a memory of a bride."

She thinks of him as *"an icon of otherness...The Barbarians are Yahoos but the Professors are Laputans."*

The Infernal Pit of Their Embraces

There is no rational reason that explains their relationship and *"the infernal pit of their embraces"*:

"You are the most remarkable thing I ever saw in all my life...You're nothing but the furious invention of my virgin nights..."

"They lay upon the narrow mattress and, involuntarily, by a compulsion that had nothing to do with reason, will or conscious desire, she found she moved closer and closer to him."

"She defended herself by denying him an existence outside the dual being they made while owls pounced on velvet mice in the forest, the moon passed through its phases and the idiot boy howled disconsolately in his kennel."

Another Metaphysical Proposition

By the end of the novel, she concludes, *"You're not a human being at all, you're a metaphysical proposition."*

And then, having negated each other, they *"relapsed into silence"*.

An Astonishing Juicy, Overblown, Exploding Gothic Lollipop

The execution of this novel is astonishing. It consists of just seven chapters that total 164 pages in length. The plot is minimal, but efficient. The chapters flow together like a stream of romantic consciousnesses. A world is built beautifully and imaginatively, in the manner of a Gothic surrealism. The characters are drawn sympathetically, even when they are villains, not heroes. The heroes are real, complex people, not just angelic personae or delicate caricatures.

Robert Coover contributes (dials in?) a perfunctory three page introduction that does little more than quote Angela Carter's essay *"Notes on the Gothic Mode"*. This novel exceeds in brilliance those maximalist tomes of Coover's fellow American post-modernists Alexander Theroux (*"Darconville's Cat"*), Joseph McElroy (*"Women and Men"*) and William T. Vollmann (*"The Royal Family"*).

Carter herself described it as *"a juicy, overblown, exploding Gothic lollipop"*.

Suck it and see!

SOUNDTRACK:

(view spoiler)

