

∞ READING ROUND ∞

The Classic Book I (Wouldn't) Like To Rewrite and Why

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I DON'T HOLD WITH the idea of rewriting books, since they're a product of their period and tell us about how people – both authors and their characters – were shaped by the cultural and social conventions of their time and place. Later generations often think that they can judge earlier ones because we who come later must be morally superior, having greater awareness and more enlightened attitudes. Of course, that's a delusion, as I know, because, at seventy, I'm embarrassed to look back at some of my own attitudes when young, and feel ashamed about the racist and misogynistic behaviours that I failed to challenge because they seemed normal at the time. It's often something a younger person says now that opens my eyes to how brainwashed I was.

If I had to choose a book not to rewrite, I would choose *Jane Eyre*, which I loved as a child, and which I still love, just as it is. But in the 1990s, when I was teaching creative writing at Sussex University, I put it on my reading list and was astonished when several young women told me they'd been unable to finish it because they found Jane so unsympathetic. 'Why was she so passive, such a victim?' they asked.

Where does one begin to explain the limited options that single women had then, the legal, religious and social barriers they faced, their conditioning to be obedient, dutiful, and self-sacrificing? How married women couldn't work or vote and didn't even own the property they'd brought into their marriage, so if they left their husbands, even for the most justifiable reasons, they could lose their children and end up destitute. In many parts

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of the world that still hasn't changed. Even here, in the West, some of these attitudes to women, while remaining unexpressed, break out from time to time when women seem to be becoming too autonomous. The neglect of women's particular needs in everything from medical training to safety equipment to police procedures, and the statistics for femicide, speak for themselves. So *Jane Eyre* still seems to me to be relevant today.

There are some other issues with the book though — Jane's acceptance of Rochester's domineering behaviour, and the depiction of his mad Creole first wife. But as Pat Barker and Madeline Miller have shown with their retellings of the Greek heroic tales, it's entirely possible to create an original work that throws new light on outdated attitudes by retelling the same story from the perspective of the victims of those attitudes. This is what Jean Rhys does in *Wide Sargasso Sea* through the perspective of Rochester's first wife. In it, she addresses issues of racism, misogyny and colonialism, issues that she was passionate about. And, in doing so, she not only forever changed the way we read *Jane Eyre*, she also created a brand-new masterpiece.