

## Angela Carter's Bristol

The twenty-year anniversary of Angela Carter's death has sparked a renewed interest in her novels, short stories and essays. Widely regarded as one of the most influential writers of the late twentieth-century, Carter's audience might not immediately associate her fiction with Bristol but rather more extraordinary environments such as a dystopian America in *The Passion of New Eve* or a circus travelling to Siberia in *Nights at the Circus*. However, a handful of her lesser-known early works make such extensive use of the city that they were retrospectively dubbed 'The Bristol trilogy'. The three texts that make up the set are: *Shadow Dance* (1966), *Several Perceptions* (1968) and *Love* (1971). They not only share a background but also a concern with the sinister underside of the 'swinging 60s'.

Brought up in South London, Carter moved to Bristol with her first husband in 1962 and, having briefly worked as a journalist, was accepted by the university to read English Literature. After graduating she set out to capture what, in her words, was the city's 'atmosphere of provincial Bohemia' and explores the lives and haunts of a group she knew well: the largely middle-class beatniks, hippies and ex-students. The Bristolian mods and rockers barely rate a mention and neither do their preferred hangouts such as Mod favourite the 'Never', just off Broadmead, or the rocker's 'Starsreach Café' in Staple Hill.

Carter sketches a decaying Bristol that reflects the crumbling values of her restless and amoral characters. Although the locations she wrote about were real, to her amusement, one American reviewer suggested *Shadow Dance* was set in a 'slum' where the streets 'smell of urine, vomit and stale beer'. Whilst this is an overstatement, he was responding to the trilogy's unsentimental and unsettling depiction of a city and an era. Despite their flashes of dark humour, the novels collectively stand as a counterpoint to more celebratory tales of the subculture. In many ways they contain what you might expect from a portrait of the 'cool' youth of the period: drug taking, casual sex and a disdain for mainstream values. But instead of providing a sense of liberation for those involved, the overwhelming atmosphere is one of rootlessness and disorientation; characters strive for personal freedom but if attained they don't know what to do with it.

Each narrative revolves around an egocentric male character in his early to late twenties who is part of the beatnik / hippy scene. *Shadow Dance*, Carter's well-received debut, centres on the guilt-stricken Morris who with his friend, the sadistic Honeybuzzard, runs a junk shop. The story

tells of the aftermath Morris' botched affair with the flower-child Ghislaine and her vengeful disfigurement, and later death, at Honeybuzzard's hands. *Several Perceptions*, the most optimistic of the trilogy and winner of the Somerset Maugham prize, begins with the failed suicide of ex-student Joseph who is haunted by the war in Vietnam. It follows his gradual recovery amongst a cast of outsider figures from tramps, through ageing prostitutes to American hippies. The final book in the set, *Love*, traces a disturbing love triangle between the narcissistic Lee, his aggressive brother Buzz and the, mentally unstable, art student Annabel. Carter charts their increasingly fraught relationship which is riven with alcohol, adultery and mental breakdown.

Readers who are familiar with the history of 1960s Bristol might be surprised to discover that Carter's doesn't exploit its rebellious streak. It was an era of the public demonstration, most famously symbolised by the Bus Boycott of 1963 where successful protests led the Bristol Omnibus Company to drop its race bar. This sense of revolution does not make it into the novel as Carter's characters are either too self-absorbed or hedonistic to act idealistically for a greater good. A further omission is the massive reconstruction of the city that took place post World War 2. Bristol had been targeted during the blitz and areas such as the medieval Castle District had largely been destroyed. Carter would have seen developments such as Broadmead rising from the rubble and the centre being rebuilt or, depending on your view of the town planners, further demolished. Yet even Carter couldn't ignore the massive Mecca centre that opened its doors in 1966 and housed the Locarno Ballroom. It's here that Annabel, the disturbed protagonist of *Love*, takes a job as a hostess hoping that amongst the artificial scenery, the 'grove of palm trees' and 'luminous tropic fish, flower and fruit', she might appear normal for once.

One reason for Carter's over-riding disinterest in contemporary sites is that, despite its realism, the trilogy contains a highly Gothic streak; it is preoccupied with excess, taboo and the darker aspects of human nature. Like many of her predecessors she is drawn to the past and, whilst the books contain no castles or dank dungeons, she manages to turn Bristol into a haunted Gothic set in which the protagonists play out their dramas. She exploits the genre's method of connecting space and character and uses the places through which they pass or are trapped to reflect their state of mind. This dynamic is illustrated perfectly in a scene from *Shadow Dance* where an anxious Morris wanders the city at night. He finds himself in an unearthly Bristol described as possessing a 'deep blue, secret and mysterious sky with a low, white satin moon applied on its bosom' where the 'voluptuous shadows of the city trees moved with black shadows'. The deserted streets reflect his desire to be alone to the point that he thinks happily 'there was nobody alive but himself'.

Carter exploits the uncanniness of those unexpected moments of quiet in normally bustling urban spaces and collapses the boundary between the interior (psychological) and the exterior (physical).

Although occasionally the landscape is represented as possessing this type of otherworldly beauty it is largely portrayed as neglected and derelict. Characters ponder their lives in tired cafes that are trying to rebrand themselves as 'coffee bars', dingy pubs, failing corner shops and the labour exchange. Morris' business is described as 'in the slums' and although its exact location isn't clear it is most likely in Clifton, the trilogy's most prominent location. Bristolians today might only vaguely recognise Carter's descriptions of a rundown area where 'many of the shops were boarded up, to let, or sold secondhand clothes, or had become betting shops' and where 'tufts of weeds and grass sprouted from every cranny'. *Several Perceptions'* narrator reminds readers of its former glory pointing out it was 'once handsome' and had 'been a shopping promenade of a famous spa and still swooped in a sinuous neo-classic arc from the Down'. The spa in question flourished during the 18th century at Hotwells and drew such luminaries as Jonathan Swift and Daniel Defoe. In contrast, the 1960s inhabitants are those marginalised by society, the old, students and the hippies who make their homes in streets that have seen better days under the radar of the mainstream.

Carter writes about other famous Bristol areas and landmarks. For example, Morris takes refuge in the Bristol Museum and Art Gallery 'with its echoing coolness' and 'reassembled skeleton of an Irish Elk on the landing'. He escapes into the past to avoid facing his disappointing present where he is both a failed artist and husband. *Several Perceptions* opens on the Bristol Downs and offers a detailed description of the protagonist's route home past a café and the obelisk, dedicated to William Pitt, which Carter drily describes as a 'modest size as obelisks go'. *Love* too begins, and ends, in one of Bristol's oldest public spaces, Brandon Hill Park which 'randomly dishevelled by time, spread its green tangles across the shoulder of the hill'. Annabel tellingly avoids the ground's ordered gardens preferring the 'Gothic north, where an ivy covered tower with leaded windows skulked among the trees', a reference to Cabot's Tower, built in 1898 by Bristolian architect William Venn Gough to commemorate John Cabot's voyage to America. Once again, Carter transforms a prosaic environment into something Gothic and eerie, reflecting the character's tenuous grip on the everyday.

The ease with which Carter portrays an inherent strangeness in the cityscape could be a result of the fact that hers is an outsider's view of Bristol. As in much English literature, London functions as the norm in the trilogy with the central characters coming from the capital. Bristol acts as provincial cousin with its natives playing bit-parts. The notable exception is Viv in *Several Perceptions* who is described as speaking in 'the drawling accent of the city' and using 'all the local

endearments, my queen, my lover and my star.' Singer in a rock and roll band, he is on the periphery of the bohemian set and with his pragmatic cheerfulness he prospers in a way that they don't, maybe a suggestion by Carter that there are other, less destructive, ways of being young and hip.

A new generation of readers are discovering the trilogy and Bristolians, native or adopted, will find an extra frisson in reading about the places you know and perhaps, if around in the 1960s, recognising a street or pub that has since disappeared. But be warned, these are dark novels that tell the often-nightmarish tales of hippy idealism turned bad against a backdrop of a dilapidated and uncanny Bristol.