

The Brontë Sisters

“But this I know: the writer who possesses the creative gift owns something of which he is not always master—something that at times strangely wills and works for itself. ... If the result be attractive, the World will praise you, who little deserve praise; if it be repulsive, the same World will blame you, who almost as little deserve blame.”

Charlotte Brontë, preface to Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, 1850.

BY JESSICA TEISCH

THE THREE BRONTË SISTERS—Charlotte, Emily, and Anne—are almost as famous for their short, tragic lives as for their brilliant, yet fleeting, literary output. None lived to age 40; Charlotte, the ambitious eldest, wrote four novels; Emily, considered the genius, one; and Anne, perceived as the less talented youngest sister, two. Yet, together they wrote some classics, including Charlotte's *Jane Eyre* (1847) and Emily's *Wuthering Heights* (1847). Since “authoresses” were “liable to be looked on with prejudice,” Charlotte wrote, they initially published under the pseudonyms of Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell (“Biographical Notice of Ellis and Acton Bell,” 1850). Even as “male” writers, their unconventional themes shocked their public. Who could explain *Jane Eyre's* adulterous overtones (after all, Rochester nearly committed bigamy!) and *Wuthering Heights's* intense, violent love and rather pagan sensibilities? This was a far cry from Jane Austen, who had criticized the manners of the English middle and upper classes three decades before, and contemporaries like Charles Dickens who denounced England's social ills. Rather than delving into society, the

Brontës blended Gothic romance, Elizabethan drama, and Byronic poetry to examine gender expectations and bare open the hearts, souls, and spirits of respectable men and women.

The three sisters were born in Yorkshire, in northwestern England, to Patrick Brontë, an Anglican clergyman, and Maria Branwell. In 1820, the Brontës moved to Haworth, a poverty-stricken town at the edge of the moorland. With Patrick as rector, they lived inside the parsonage. Their mother died in 1821, leaving her five daughters and one son in care of their aunt. The two eldest children, Maria and Elizabeth, attended the Cowan Bridge school. Charlotte and Emily followed them in 1824, but returned home after their two older sisters contracted tuberculosis and died. Schooled at home for the next few years, Charlotte,

Emily, Anne, and their brother, Branwell, created a rich mythology out of their lonely existence. They turned to the Bible, Homer, Virgil, Milton, Shakespeare, Scott, Byron, and supernatural stories. Inspired by a set of 12 toy wooden soldiers, they invented kingdoms and legends, recording them in minis-

WHERE TO START

For the full-blown Brontë experience, start with **WUTHERING HEIGHTS**, the most highly acclaimed Brontë novel. **JANE EYRE** is similarly a classic. **VILLETTE**, **SHIRLEY**, and **AGNES GREY** are considered somewhat lesser novels, but still classics in their own right. For poetry, try one of Emily's collections.

cule script in tiny notebooks. Emily and Anne created the Gondal sagas; Charlotte and Branwell devised the Kingdom of Angria. "We wove a web in childhood, / A web of sunny air," Charlotte wrote. These imaginary worlds dominated the sisters' lives for many years; these writings have since been collected and published.

Our perceptions of the Brontës' lives and works have shifted over the past 150 years. The sisters first hid behind their pseudonyms, only revealing their identities around 1850. After Emily and Anne's death, Charlotte glorified her sisters in order to protect them from accusations of their immodest themes. Then the biographers and critics took over. Elizabeth Gaskell's biography, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857), effectively started the Brontë cottage industry by perpetuating speculation about the sisters' isolated lives—and turning them into cultural icons. She attributed a preternatural power to the windswept moors and their influence over the Brontës' art. She also tried to dispel public perception of the sisters' "coarse" literary themes. In her hand Charlotte became a womanly, domestic saint, if marred by her rough country upbringing. And Charlotte's grief, caused by her loved ones' untimely deaths, led directly to her excess passion and fiercely independent characters.

Gaskell's biography, one of the most famous in British history, led to a century and a half of correctives as ideological trends shifted. (See *The Brontë Myth* by Lucasta Miller, ★★★★★ Jul/Aug 2004). In the twentieth century, different voices shaped our understanding of the sisters: Freudian psychologists, Bloomsbury critic Lytton Strachey, Marxists, feminists, and structuralists all had something new to say. Then, there were the films. William Wyler's 1939 version of *Wuthering Heights* portrayed Heathcliff and Catherine's cursed love as the ultimate romance. By extension, Emily became the doomed, mysterious spirit of the moors, a reputation that somehow stuck to the author. Charlotte and Emily's positions have fluctuated more wildly than Anne's has. Though her public considered her to be a more shocking novelist than either of her sisters, Anne remains the least read Brontë.

Today, the Brontës are an industry unto themselves. After Shakespeare's Stratford-upon-Avon, Haworth is the most visited literary shrine in the world; the Brontës' works have been translated into 30 languages. But no matter who the Brontës *really* were, they are now solidly embedded in the literary canon, revealing the triumph of imagination over emotional poverty and hardship.

CHARLOTTE (1816-1855)

Charlotte ("Currer Bell"), best known for *Jane Eyre*, was the eldest of the three sisters, often seen as the center of the trio for her willful personality, more prolific output, and longer life. Biographer Gaskell, who befriended the small, frail woman around 1850, depicted her as a "motherly friend and guardian" to Emily and Anne. Yet, faced with the death of her mother and siblings, Charlotte lived a life of mourning, reworking her sorrow into imaginative, supernatural fiction.

Charlotte taught at the Roe Head school between 1835 and 1838 and subsequently found work as a governess, the

only respectable vocation for an unmarried woman at the time. Wishing to open a school of her own, she and Emily traveled to Brussels in 1842 to study languages and school management. There she fell in love with her married instructor, Constantin Héger, who would serve as a model for *Jane Eyre's* Mr. Rochester and other characters. Their aunt's death brought them home, but Charlotte returned to Brussels in 1843 to teach for a year. In 1846, the Brontës published their first work, a joint collection of poetry—*Poems by Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell*. Publishers initially rejected Charlotte's first novel, *The Professor*. But in 1847, "Currer Bell" published *Jane Eyre* to critical and commercial success. After her siblings' deaths, she published two more novels, *Shirley* (1849) and *Villette* (1853). Charlotte married her father's curate, Arthur Bell Nicholls, in 1854, and died in pregnancy in March 1855.

Poems by Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell (1846)

In late 1845, Charlotte discovered Emily's poems and convinced her sisters to collaborate on a collection of poetry. Published at the Brontës' own expense, this collection (which sold only two copies the first year) left critics perplexed about the identity of its authors. Although a financial disaster, the volume encouraged the sisters to write. By the end of 1847, each had published her first novel.

THE POEMS: This collection of poems includes "Pilate's Wife's Dream" (Currer), "Memory" (Acton), and "To Imagination" (Ellis), and dozens more. Critics generally agreed that Emily's poems showed the most promise, though each poet bared her heart through her words. Charlotte, for example, referred to her Brussels experience: "Oh! Love was all a thin illusion; / Joy, but the desert's flying stream."

"Who are Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell, we are nowhere informed. ... [I see] the presence of more genius than it was supposed this utilitarian age had devoted to the loftier exercises of the intellect." THE CRITIC, 7/4/1846

"... all the Bells selected incidents and persons of a singular character; produced by circumstances of a rare kind, or arising from isolated modes of life. ... If, as seems not unlikely, they are infected with a rage for literary experiment and an itch of writing, they will by no means fulfill the expectation which some have formed of them, or even hold their ground; especially as their experience or their taste seems limited to one kind of life, and that both peculiar and extreme." SPECTATOR,

11/11/1846

THE BOTTOM LINE: A vital sampling of the Brontës' poetry.

Jane Eyre (1847)



Jane Eyre, written by Currer Bell, was an immediate if controversial success. Written in the first person, the novel reflected aspects of Charlotte's own life: the plight of a "poor and plain" girl at school, the life as a governess and need for love, the limited options for poor but educated women, and the questioning of Victorian gender

roles. Charlotte dedicated the novel to William Makepeace Thackeray, who called it “the masterwork of a great genius.” Other critics found the novel coarse.

THE STORY: Jane Eyre, a penniless orphan, struggles through her aunt’s oppressive household and the charity school of Lowood. After many sorrows, including the death of Helen Burns, she becomes the governess at Thornfield Hall. Finally content in her position, she falls in love with the handsome and brooding Mr. Rochester. Yet strange sounds penetrate the manor, and Jane must confront Mr. Rochester’s awful secret.

“[Most] would at least like to be the sort of woman or sort of girl who is indispensable and vitally essential to strength, as Jane Eyre is in her relation to Rochester. The pity is that they should not see that Jane is really strong, and Rochester is really weak; but Jane does not see this herself, and it is doubtful whether her author saw it.” WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS, HEROINES OF FICTION, VOL. 1, 1901

OF FICTION, VOL. 1, 1901

“[Jane’s voice] is, in its directness, its ruefulness and scarcely concealed rage, startlingly contemporary; and confirms the critical insight that all works of genius are contemporaneous both with their own times and with ours. ... [Jane Eyre] is nonetheless a work of stubbornly idiosyncratic intelligence; its strength lies as much in passages of introspective analysis as in conventionally dramatized scenes.” JOYCE CAROL OATES, PREFACE, JANE EYRE, 1988

JANE EYRE, 1988

THE BOTTOM LINE: A classic novel in the Gothic tradition, and an unusual love story: with Rochester, Jane becomes “bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh.”

Shirley (1849)

In the wake of *Jane Eyre*’s success, Charlotte wished to write a social and class-conflict novel that tackled “something real and romantic as Monday morning.” Here, she reworks her father’s recollections of the Luddite riots earlier in the century, possibly fashioning Shirley after Emily and Caroline after herself.

THE STORY: Amid the Napoleonic Wars and the Luddite revolts of 1811-1812 in northern England, a mill owner attempts to court Shirley Keeldar, the vivacious, rebellious heiress to the local estate. By contrast, the mill owner’s cousin, Caroline Helstone, a curate’s daughter, has only the limited opportunities available to single women at the time. Together, these characters create a story of friendship, romance, and class conflict.

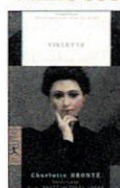
“Shirley is a revolutionary novel. ... Charlotte Brontë imagined a new form of power, equal to that of men, in a confident young woman [whose] extraordinary freedom has accustomed her to think for herself. ... Shirley [is] Brontë’s most feminist novel.” LYNDALL GORDON, AUTHOR OF CHARLOTTE BRONTË: A PASSIONATE LIFE, 1995

THE BOTTOM LINE: A social history and romance deserving of wider readership.



An engraving of Charlotte Brontë from an edition of *Jane Eyre*.

Villette (1853)



Charlotte based *Villette* both on her memories of Brussels in the early 1840s and on the sorrow following the death of her siblings a few years later, though she also added supernatural elements. Critics generally considered *Villette* to be Charlotte’s most accomplished and emotionally wrought work; Virginia Woolf even called it her “finest novel.”

THE STORY: When Lucy Snowe flees from her unhappiness and leaves England for a teaching position in Villette, France, she meets an English doctor and an autocratic schoolmaster. She must then choose between true independence and freedom—or love and its constraints.

“Villette! Villette! Have you read it? It is a still more wonderful book than Jane Eyre. There is something almost preternatural in its power.” GEORGE ELIOT, 1853

“Today [Villette] is read and discussed more intensely than Charlotte Brontë’s other novels, and many critics now believe it to be a true masterpiece, a work of genius that more than fulfilled the promise of Jane Eyre.” SUSAN FROMBERG SCHAEFFER, INTRODUCTION TO VILLETTE, 1986

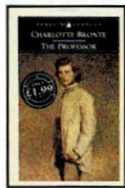
INTRODUCTION TO VILLETTE, 1986

“... Villette is a great novel of affective estrangement, a profound artistic investigation of the unconscious conditions,

habits, logic, and tendencies of a radical and intolerable predicament of lovelessness." JOHN HUGHES, "THE AFFECTIVE WORLD OF CHARLOTTE BRONTË'S VILLETTE," STUDIES IN ENGLISH LITERATURE, 1500-1900, VOL. 40, 2000

THE BOTTOM LINE: Less dramatic and more despairing, perhaps, than *Jane Eyre*, but nonetheless a masterpiece about gender roles and identity.

The Professor (1857)



Charlotte completed this first novel in 1846, but failed to find a publisher even after *Jane Eyre* made her famous. Her widowed husband published it two years after her death. According to Charlotte, the novel "contains more pith, more substance, more reality, in my judgment, than much of *Jane Eyre*." She based the story on her year of teaching in Brussels and her love for her married schoolmaster. Not surprisingly, critics found the themes crude yet dull.

THE STORY: William Crimsworth (Charlotte's only male narrator) escapes from a Yorkshire mill to teach in an all-girls school in Belgium. As a young teacher, he falls in love with a penniless student teacher. But his involvement with a self-interested and manipulative woman complicates this love.

"As Victorian novels go, *The Professor* is surprising. It is short, no main character dies, its hero is a bespectacled schoolteacher with tufts of dun hair, and its heroine ... insists on continuing to teach after her marriage." THE PROFESSOR, INTRODUCTION BY MARGARET SMITH, 1998

THE BOTTOM LINE: Charlotte's first novel, lacking some of her later passion but a fine book that, like her other work, questions Victorian mores.

EMILY JANE (1818-1848)

THE UNDISPUTED GENIUS of the Brontë sisters, Emily ("Ellis Bell") now ranks among the giants of English literature for her poetry and only novel, *Wuthering Heights* (1847). Unlike Charlotte, she had few friends, enjoyed housekeeping, and embraced mysticism, which translated into her fantastic, almost visionary writing. "If I could I would always work in silence and obscurity, and let my efforts be known by their results," she wrote.

The fifth of the six Brontë children, Emily attended school for a few years at Cowan Bridge and Roe Head. Homesick, she returned home, where she created the world of Gondal with Anne. Her first and only job involved working as a governess near Halifax. Its grueling nature and her declining health sent her home after about six months. She accompanied Charlotte to Brussels in 1842, returning to Haworth to care for her father after her aunt's death. In 1847 she published *Wuthering Heights*. Either out of jealousy or the desire to protect her sister's reputation, Charlotte may have destroyed a second novel that Emily started. A prolific, brilliant poet, Emily wrote most of her surviving poems between 1838 and 1842. Like her sisters, she died young, catching cold at Branwell's funeral in September

VISITING BRONTË COUNTRY...



Haworth parsonage.

The Brontës wrote their novels while living in the parsonage in Haworth, a small town in West Yorkshire, England—now a thriving tourist destination. Charlotte's biographer, Elizabeth Gaskell, described

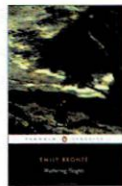
their home as "situated on the side of a pretty steep hill, with a background of dun and purple moors, rising and sweeping away yet higher than the church, which is built at the very summit of the long narrow street." Today, you can retrace the Brontës' steps by following the steep, cobbled road running through the village center (now part of an industrial township). Haworth Parsonage now contains a museum owned by the Brontë Society. Other points of interest include the Haworth Church, the Black Bull Pub (where Branwell's opium and alcohol addiction reputedly started), the Brontë Stone Chair (where the sisters supposedly wrote), and Ponden Hall, featured in *Wuthering Heights*. It's Brontë country, to be sure, but not exclusively. If you don't get trapped in one of the many teashops or souvenir stores, you can visit the old Keighley and Worth Valley Railway, the backdrop for period films including *The Railway Children*, *Yanks*, and *The Wall*.



The dining room where the sisters did most of their writing.

1848, refusing treatment, and dying that December. In her biographical note to the 1850 edition of *Wuthering Heights*, Charlotte attributed to Emily "a secret power and fire that might have informed the brain and kindled the veins of a hero."

Wuthering Heights (1847)



Emily's only novel, published by "Ellis Bell" a year before her death at the age of 30, did not attain the immediate acclaim of Charlotte's *Jane Eyre*. Set in the bleak Yorkshire Moors, the novel imagines a world all its own. Its unusual narration—in contrast to Charlotte and Anne's more autobiographical and authoritative voices—introduces the unreliable Lockwood. Some critics saw the themes as morose, immoral, and improbable; others attributed authorship to Branwell for its shocking passions.

THE STORY: Lockwood, who seeks shelter one night at *Wuthering Heights*, tells this tempestuous story of passion and thwarted love between the willful Catherine Earnshaw, daughter of the house, and the handsome anti-hero, Heath-

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cliff. "I am Heathcliff!" says Catherine. "He's always, always in my mind; not as a pleasure, any more than I am always a pleasure to myself, but as my own being." But their love is not meant to be—at least not until the cycles of love, hate, and revenge are complete.

"When Emily Brontë began to write *Wuthering Heights* she did not leave the world of the Gondal poems. ... *Wuthering Heights* is a difficult and elusive work, a work with which no reader has felt altogether at ease." J. HILLIS MILLER, "EMILY BRONTË" IN THE DISAPPEARANCE OF GOD, 1963

"Long misread as a poetic and metaphysical work given a sort of sickly, fevered radiance by way of the 'narrowness' of Emily Brontë's imagination, *Wuthering Heights* can be more accurately be seen as a work of mature and astonishing magnitude." JOYCE CAROL OATES, "THE MAGNANIMITY OF WUTHERING HEIGHTS," CRITICAL INQUIRY, WINTER 1983

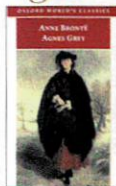
THE BOTTOM LINE: A true classic, considered by some to be one of the best novels in the English language.

ANNE (1820-1849)

ANNE ("ACTON BELL"), THE YOUNGEST of the Brontë children, is generally judged to be a less talented writer than her two older sisters. Still, critics praised her two novels *Agnes Grey* (1847) and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848) for their realism and irony, and the modern themes resound today.

A baby when her mother died, Anne was educated at Haworth parsonage. There, she and Emily, to whom she was closest, invented their Gondal saga. She was deeply religious and struggled with religious conscience her entire life. Like her sisters, she worked as a governess, first for the Inghams at Blake Hall, and then, between 1840 and 1845, for the Robinsons at Thorpe Green Hall near York. To her chagrin, she was asked to leave the latter due to an indiscretion on Branwell's part. ("Sick of mankind and their disgusting ways," she wrote on the back of her prayer book when she found out about Branwell's affair with her employer's wife.) Faced with an uncertain future and craving independence, she returned home. A year later she published *Agnes Grey* to some acclaim. *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, which followed, sold well. Soon after, Anne contracted tuberculosis. She died in May 1849 at Scarborough, the only one of her family not buried at Haworth. Upon her death, Charlotte, the sole surviving sister, wrote: "There's little joy in life for me, / And little terror in the grave; / I've lived the parting hour to see / Of one I would have died to save."

Agnes Grey (1847)



Anne ("Acton Bell") based her first semi-autobiographical novel on memories of her days as a governess. Through her heroine, she explores bourgeoisie snobbery, moral responsibility, and the loneliness of governess life. Critics heralded the novel as mature and insightful, but it did

not achieve the same success as *Jane Eyre* or *Wuthering Heights*.

THE STORY: Agnes Grey, a poor but charitable rector's daughter, becomes a governess first to the wild Bloomfield children and then to the heartless Murrays. She finds solace in nature and falls in love with the respectable local curate, Edward Weston, whom the self-indulgent Rosalie Murray tries to lure away.

"Though overshadowed by her sisters' much more dramatic novels—and completely ignored by Charlotte who did not consider it worthy of comment in either her biographical or editorial prefaces to the 1850 reissue of *Wuthering Heights*/ *Agnes Grey*—Anne's first novel had many strengths of its own. Enlivened by a quiet humour, it is a far deadlier exposé of the trials of being a governess than her sister's more famous *Jane Eyre*." JULIET BARKER, THE BRONTËS, 1995

"I had never read Anne's *Agnes Grey* before, and it seems to me to be amazingly modern. Virtually nothing happens.... *Agnes Grey* is a little masterpiece." DAILY TELEGRAPH, 10/18/97

THE BOTTOM LINE: Called a "governess novel," a mature, ironic, and greatly overlooked look at women's work.

The Tenant of Wildfell Hall (1848)



Published in three volumes, Anne's second novel sold better than *Agnes Grey*. It challenged Victorian social mores in its depiction of alcoholism, feminist themes, and the criticism of sexual double standards. Despite good reviews, critics considered the material inappropriate for a female writer—and her female audience. Even Charlotte, in her preface to the 1850 edition of *Agnes Grey* and *Wuthering Heights*, agreed that, "the choice of subject was an entire mistake."

THE STORY: Helen Huntingdon and her son escape to her brother's Wildfell Hall after leaving her morally corrupt husband Arthur (based, perhaps, on Anne's brother Branwell). A local farmer, Gilbert Markham, pursues her, only to be rejected. Helen then offers him her journals, where he reads of her disintegrated marriage and ignites a new romance.

"A.B.'s *Tenant of Wildfell Hall* puts most of our contemporary female novel-writers to shame, but it has still not received its deserved acclaim as a novel that, in construction, style, and clarity of theme, compares with the greatest that Emily and Charlotte wrote. Apart from this, it is as fearless and affirmative in its assumption and declaration of the independence of women as any of Charlotte's and is more clear-headed, shrewd, and unsentimental about womankind than today's noisy proselytizers." BARBARA AND GARETH LLOYD EVANS, EVERYMAN'S COMPANION TO THE BRONTËS, 1982

THE BOTTOM LINE: A fearless, feminist, and, once again, overlooked novel. ■