

# Jo Walton

BY JESSICA TEISCH



“If you love books enough, books will love you back.”

—*Among Others*

**J**O WALTON is something of a literary chameleon. The award-winning, Welsh-Canadian author of more than a dozen books, she blurs genres as she hopscoches from science fiction to fantasy, historical fiction, alternate history, crime, and poetry. In her Hugo and Nebula award-winning *Among Others* (2012), set in 1970s England, a young daughter must confront her mother’s dark magic, which leaves her crippled and her twin dead; in the alternate history mystery *Farthing* (2006), England appeased Hitler, and World War II was simply “the Jewish War.” Her newest novel, *My Real Children* (reviewed on page 17), takes place in 2015, when an elderly woman recalls a life and a history—or lives and histories—that don’t quite add up.

“I think everybody sees points in their lives where, if they’d made a different choice, their life would have taken a different path,” Walton explained to *Bookmarks*. “Some people see those points with regret, and others with relief. I’ve always been fascinated by stories about people’s lives being reshaped by their decisions—as in George R. R.

Martin’s brilliant *Unsound Variation* and Ken Grimwood’s *Replay*.” Despite the fantastical nature of her stories, Walton often mythologizes her own life experiences, particularly when delving into the joys of reading, the isolation of adolescence, and the historical periods and places she and her family have experienced.

Because of their identifiable protagonists, Walton’s genre-bending novels appeal to even those readers who don’t readily embrace fantasy or science fiction. “I think the characters are the important thing,” Walton told *Bookmarks*, “and if readers can relate to the characters then they can step a little bit outside their comfort zone. My novels are all in different genres, and yes, people who like Victorian novels enjoy *Tooth and Claw* [a novel of manners featuring cannibalistic dragons], and people who like mysteries enjoy *Farthing*. With *My Real Children* I find that all kinds of people can relate to the characters and they don’t mind a bit of alternate history. I like working with fantasy and science fiction premises because they allow me to write about universal themes from a different angle. You can say interesting things about human nature when you’re showing a character developing in two different sets of circumstances.”

Born in 1964 in Aberdare, South Wales, and now a resident of Montreal, Walton embraced all things literary as a child. “I read everything that was lying around, regardless of whether it was intended for children, how old it was, what genre it was, and whether I understood it. As a writer it’s not so much that I was influenced by Tolkien or *Little Women* or Agatha Christie as that I’m never surprised to find them sitting on the same shelf. I suppose I kept some of that lack of discrimination, and so the walls between genres are lower for me than they seem to be for many people. Writing an alternate history mystery seems like a reasonable thing to me, and so does writing a sentimental Victorian novel where all the characters are dragons who eat each other.” So, we might add, does a novel set in Arthurian Britain and the Ireland of *Táin*, an old, legendary Irish tale—*The King’s Peace*, her first fantasy novel, published in 2000.

No matter the era or landscape, Walton’s world-building skills are extraordinary, built on imagination, experience, and research (she did, after all, receive her degree in Classics and Ancient History). “A lot of my research,” Walton said, “just looks like random reading which is only post-facto revealed to be research when I decide to write something. I’m interested in history, so I read a lot of history, and also a lot of older novels which are good for period feel and details. Once I’ve decided to write something I do more intensive research, but it tends to be filling things in. With *My Real Children* I needed a lot of details about when Italian railways started running again after the war and the weight of 1970s wheelchairs and details of NASA’s plans for space stations, and I could find a surprising amount of it online. For *Among Others*, of course, it was a historical period I’d lived through.”

And so, with the novels below, we enter Walton’s different lives and histories.

## SELECTED NOVELS

### Tooth and Claw (2003)

◆ WORLD FANTASY AWARD

Walton based *Tooth and Claw*, her fourth published novel, on Anthony Trollope's *Framley Parsonage* (1861). "There's a way in which the Victorians were monsters. And there's a way in which they were adorable," Walton writes on her Web site. "When modern people write about them, one or other of those things tends to get lost.

With *Tooth and Claw* I was going right down the middle of the line between those two things, between charming and gruesome." A sentimental and humorous Victorian-style novel, *Tooth and Claw* features dragon-eating dragons bound by biological determinism ("a world," Walton writes, "... if the axioms of the sentimental Victorian novel were inescapable laws of biology") rather than cultural and social mores, particularly for women.

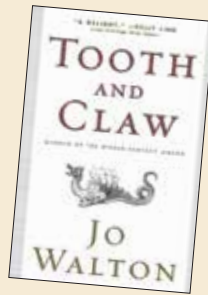
**THE STORY:** In a stratified society replete with nobility, the church, a lower servant class, politics, notions of honor, country houses, courtships, and dowries, dragons eat dragons in order to gain size, might, and power. When Bon Agornin dies in his cave, on top of gold pieces, his son Penn, a parson, instructs his siblings to consume their father's flesh. (There is, of course, a right way and a wrong way to devour the dead.) But a villainous brother-in-law's greed sets in motion a seemingly ruinous chain of events. And as Penn ruminates on his father's terrible deathbed confession, another son litigates, and three sisters take different paths: one falls in love, one joins the abolitionist movement, and one must choose between her birth family and her husband.

**"Okay, so even though we know where this is going—whether with Walton or Trollope—it makes for an entertaining read because of how well the characters are drawn, even as they represent certain clichés. ... But I don't think there's anything seriously intended here other than a good-natured romp that ultimately honors, rather than ridicules, the source of her inspiration."** DAVID SOYKA, STRANGE HORIZONS, 6/21/2004

### Farthing (2006)

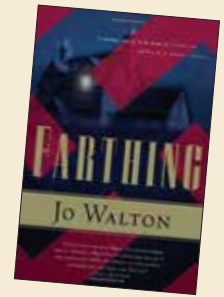
◆ NEBULA AWARD NOMINEE

*Farthing*, Walton's fifth novel and the first in the Small Change trilogy (*Farthing*, *Ha'penny*, and *Half a Crown*), is set in an alternate history in 1949, in a world where Britain made a dubious "peace with honour" with Hitler in 1941. Such "peace" curtailed civil liberties and propagated anti-Semitism and racism. Walton, brought up by grandparents who lived through World War II, wrote on her Web site, "There are ways in which the Small Change universe is more plausible—if also more horrible—than real history."



For this novel, Walton meshed the cozy mystery genre ("a country house murder of the Agatha Christie style") with alternate history and a commanding understanding of the World War II era to write about a nation's brush with fascism. (★★★★ Jan/Feb 2007)

**THE STORY:** In 1949 Britain—specifically at Farthing, an estate where the country's political movers and shakers meet—Sir James Thirkie is murdered, a yellow Star of David pinned to his chest with a dagger. Thirkie had been instrumental in brokering a deal that effectively ceded continental Europe and the USSR to Hitler nearly a decade before, as well as in ending World War II for the British and keeping the country independent of the Nazis. The story is told from the points of view of Lucy Kahn, the host's daughter and the wife of a Jewish Royal Air Force pilot, and Peter Carmichael, a Scotland Yard Inspector and closeted homosexual summoned to investigate Thirkie's death.



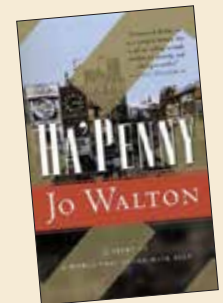
**"Jo Walton's new alternate history novel *Farthing* manages the incredible, heart-rending trick of being a quiet little story about quiet, brave people while simultaneously conjuring the kind of haunting dystopia that rips your guts out. ... *Farthing* is clearly a parable about Britain and America in the wake of the 9/11 and 7/7 attacks, when commonsense, humanism, and a commitment to liberty and justice has been easily set aside in a fury of bloodlust and a dismal, shrugging apathy."** CORY DOCTOROW, BOING BOING, 6/20/2004

### Ha'penny (2007)

◆ PROMETHEUS AWARD

The second in the Small Change series and a direct sequel to *Farthing*, this mystery and romantic thriller, a tale of domestic espionage, is set in the same world of overt racism and social conservatism as *Farthing*. As in *Farthing*, Walton alternates perspectives chapter by chapter. Dark, powerful, and beautifully written, *Ha'penny* goes one step further in showing how people willingly accommodate such political situations as fascism. "Walton is doing amazing work here," wrote science fiction writer Cory Doctorow, "writing a kind of latter-day 1984, a savage blast against the authoritarian opportunists who have cynically manipulated terrorist tragedies to suppress political speech and whip up fear to a high froth of CCTVs and identity papers" (*Boing Boing*, 9/24/2007).

**THE STORY:** In the now fascist England, a bomb explodes in a posh London suburb at the home of respected actress Lauria Gilmore. Viola Lark (whose family is based on the Mitfords) is practicing for her role as a female Hamlet when her costar is murdered; she's soon coerced into a terrorist plot to kill Hitler and England's new dictatorial prime



minister on the opening night of the play. When Scotland Yard Inspector Peter Carmichael, exposed to his superiors as a homosexual and just off the Farthing case, starts to investigate, he finds a web of conspiracy—Jews, radical lords, Communists, IRA bombers—that threatens him personally as well as all of England.

**“Though *Ha’Penny* is primarily about British politics, a throwaway mention of Americans as ‘too frightened to elect old Joe Kennedy instead of Lindbergh with his talk of keeping down the Jews and the blacks’ echoes the theme and trajectory of Philip Roth’s *The Plot Against America* in just a single phrase.”** SARAH WEINMAN, LOS ANGELES

TIMES, 10/28/2007

## Lifelode (2009)

♦ MYTHOPOEIC AWARD

Walton describes her high-concept eighth novel as a “small-focused fantasy, that had families and women’s lives as central, in a high-magic world. It turned out to be really hard to do—who knew? *Lifelode* was definitely the most difficult book I have ever written” (Web site). Although the story moves forward and backward through time, it is organized thematically, and Walton gives the reader plenty of clues to the magical events in

this otherwise quiet domestic novel.

**THE STORY:** In a mythic, idyllic England, Applekirk’s residents lead lives according to each’s lifelode, or individual callings, in the farms and in the manor house. The novel’s central character, Taveth, keeps house at the manor according to her lifelode and sees people at all stages of their lives all at once. *Lifelode* is about family, domesticity, the complexities of adolescence, and farm life. But as Taveth’s talent suggests, the novel is simultaneously

about magic; warm, nontraditional family structures and sexual arrangements; jealous gods; and strange visitors from another time. For Applekirk’s world, positioned between the spiritual East, where time runs slower and where the gods reside, and the materialist West, where time runs faster, is anything but typical.

**“This is a huge novel on a small scale. ... The big, dramatic events are there, but they are sideways to the importance of everyday life; something amazing happens (and Walton is very good at amazing us in this novel). ... The ordinariness and quiet tolerance**

**of our mythic English village is what triumphs in the end.”** PAUL

KINCAID, STRANGE HORIZONS, 5/28/2010

## Among Others (2011)

♦ NEBULA AWARD, HUGO AWARD, BRITISH FANTASY AWARD

Walton’s most successful book, her ninth, is a love letter to science fiction, as well as a semiautobiographical novel. Like the protagonist Mori, “a science fiction reader who has fantasy problems,” Walton grew up in a Welsh industrial town, was raised by grandparents, attended a British boarding school in the late 1970s, walked with a cane, and embraced books to escape a painful adolescence. “In reality, my mother was a paranoid schizophrenic,” Walton told



science fiction writer John Scalzi. “In the book, Mori’s mother is a witch. In reality, my sister died in a car accident because a stranger was driving drunk. In the book, Mori’s twin dies helping to defeat the sisters’ evil mother and saving the world. It does something strange to rewrite things that way.” As another critic noted, *Among Others* “is also, in its unassuming way, a revolutionary novel, quietly bending the rules of science fiction and fantasy to the service of a

grimly realist world in which magic powers don’t make you a hero—they just keep you busier than the average person” (*Austin Chronicle*, 8/30/2013).

**THE STORY:** Like many children growing up in Wales in the late 1970s, Morwenna (Mori) Phelps and her twin sister, Morganna, see magic in the world around them. Unlike most parents, the girls’ mother dabbles dangerously in the spirit world, seriously injuring Mori and killing Morganna. Mori, separated by her disability, her Welsh accent, and her grief, is sent to live with a father she barely knows and his shallow half sisters. Mori attends a boarding school where she’s sorely out of place, even if she finds respite from the world in science fiction and fantasy books. When Mori’s mother realizes that her daughter has been practicing magic of her own, the woman sets in motion a confrontation to end things once and for all. (★★★★★ SELECTION May/June 2011)

**“Among Others is one of those rare tales that strike at the very heart of the healing power of literature. ... Walton’s latest novel is as riveting and as moving as her recently completed alternate World War II mystery trilogy and will be enjoyed by anyone who has ever had her or his life changed by a great book.”** MICHAEL BERRY,

SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE, 2/6/2011 ■



## BOOKMARKS SELECTION



### My Real Children

By Jo Walton



"I had the idea for *My Real Children* in a cafe in Morecambe [in Lancashire, England]," Jo Walton told *Bookmarks*. "I was talking to a friend, and she was telling me about how her husband proposed to her in 1949, and I suddenly thought how different her life would have been if she'd refused him, and how interesting it would be to write about somebody who had two lives in two diverging worlds.

What I did in the book was to take Patricia and establish her really solidly as a character, and then split her life and all of history. I then wove together the two different stories of the paths her life could have taken as they diverged. It's a close up story of her life, in two different versions of the second half of the 20th century."

**THE STORY:** In 2015, the elderly Patricia Cowan, beset by dementia, can't remember the year. However, she recalls far too much about her life, or lives, in England: two parallel existences, diverging at the moment she agreed to marry or not marry Mark, a pushy young philosopher at Oxford, during World War II. In one life, "Tricia" becomes an obedient housewife trapped in a loveless marriage, has children, and embraces local politics. In this world, JFK was never shot and a long peace prevails. In her other life, "Pat" rejects Mark, travels to Italy, falls in love with a woman, builds an alternative family, and becomes a celebrated travel writer. In this world, JFK is dead and nuclear disarmament is a pipe dream. Rather than a dichotomy between lives either well or poorly lived, both contain deep happiness and sorrow and an inspiring engagement with the world. But do Patricia's confused recollections reflect just her own befuddlement—or a split within the history and destiny of humanity?

Tor. 320 pages. \$25.99. ISBN: 9780765332653

Boing Boing



**"My Real Children is a story of pure love without an ounce of sentimentality, infinitely wise about the human condition, parenting, and family. It changed the way I think about the very meaning of life."** CORY DOCTOROW

io9.com



**"Would you rather have a slightly sad life in a happy world, or a happy life in a world on the brink of disaster? Perhaps the most challenging part of *My Real Children* is trying to figure out of these two possibilities are equivalent—or if one is the better place, where you'd want your real children to live."** ANNALEE NEWITZ

Quill and Quire



**"It's an impressive feat, and a deceptive one. ... It is unclear whether Walton has wrapped a literary novel around SF tropes, or crafted a subtle genre novel featuring achingly beautiful prose and carefully crafted characters."**

Romantic Times



**"It would be hard enough just to write the story of the scope of a person's life as movingly and vividly as Walton does here ... so when she does so twice over, while subtly building two alternate histories of the world since the 1950s, it's shockingly impressive. ... Set in perfect counterpoint to each other, the effect of the twinned stories—and the book as a whole—is stunning."** IAN MATHERS

Locus



**"Walton's undeniable skills in both character development and social extrapolation result in a novel which at its best is an epic of regret and redemption, and a wise meditation on what our lives mean, and what they might have meant."** GARY K. WOLFE

NPR



**"I keep wanting to say this is an elegant book, but that's not enough to convey my meaning: that there isn't a word wasted, that there is a deliberateness in its every moment and movement, no matter how small. ... I loved, deeply, that this was a book half about women growing old together, half about a woman growing old mostly alone, and wholly about the responsibilities shared between parents, children, and the communities they shape together."** AMAL EL-MOHTAR

Toronto Star



**"The 20th century also takes radically different directions from this moment on (punctuated by a series of nuclear exchanges), but Walton's emphasis remains on the domestic front and the obscure, indirect way the personal and the political interact. The multiverse and the butterfly effect have become familiar pop-culture tropes, but Walton is such a genial storyteller, and Patricia so decent (indeed, almost to a fault), that she charms us all the way down the road not taken—as well as the road that was."** ALEX GOOD

### CRITICAL SUMMARY

*My Real Children* reads like a work of magical realism and nominal work of science fiction—but the character studies, the finely observed relationships, and the characters' relationships to the political world building are all too real. In exploring how one woman confronts the world as an unhappy wife in a hopeful world or as a happy woman in a world destined for destruction, Walton convincingly intertwines the personal and political and demonstrates how one's choices in such matters lead to vastly different outcomes. Despite these large themes, *My Real Children* is a quiet novel. Walton is far too clever and understated to built two obvious alternate histories; by juxtaposing the ups-and-downs of Tricia and Pat's lives, she delves into the subtle vagaries of families, histories, and politics. Simply, *My Real Children* "is the rarest sort of novel," critics agree, "one that transcends genre. It is a book that, one surmises, will be eagerly reread as the years pass" (*Quill and Quire*).