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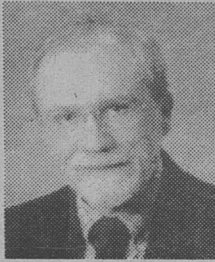
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# queer classics: djuna barnes' "nightwood"

By ERNIE MCLEOD

**D**juna Barnes (1892-1982) has been called the unknown legend of American literature. Unknown because her literary output was slim and anything but mainstream-friendly. Legend because she was a leading figure of the 1920s and 30s Parisian artistic community and because her most famous work, *Nightwood*, published in 1936, is considered a modernist classic.

*Nightwood's* status as a lesbian/feminist classic is perhaps more open to question. Dorothy Allison makes a strong case for it, however, in her excellent introduction to the 2000 Modern Library edition of the novel, which, incidentally, is especially worth seeking out to contrast her introduction with an earlier one by T.S. Eliot's,

her in its refusal to conform to or confirm political dogma. While it contains passionate, unapologetic love between women, the women – and men – it portrays are neither representative nor admirable, certainly not mouthpieces for any cause.

*Nightwood's* characters are, in fact, quite desperately miserable, though – for once! – it's impossible to claim that their queerness (or society's reaction to it) is responsible for their misery. For me, this was one of the most refreshing revelations of *Nightwood*: Barnes's bold avoidance of anything that smacks of victimhood. Sexuality is not justified or explained; it simply is. For this reason *Nightwood* seems timeless in a way that many other early explicitly queer-themed books do not.

If *Nightwood* is not a conventional novel, what is it? T.S. Eliot, in his introduction to the 1937

Eventually, Robin abandons her husband and child and meets Nora Flood, a woman with "the strangest 'salon' in America." Robin settles in with Nora for a while, torn between the need to stay and the need to escape: "Two spirits were working in her, love and anonymity. Yet they were so 'haunted' of each other that separation was impossible."

Later on, Robin becomes involved with an older, quite horrid woman named Jenny Petherbridge – described by Barnes in exquisitely vile detail – and they sail off together, leaving Nora feeling as if every hour is her last. In the midst it all, absorbing and ranting outrageously at the plights of the other characters, is the unlicensed Dr. Matthew O'Connor, a self-described "bearded lady" with a penchant for women's flannel nightgowns. A curious lot, to be sure, but – much to Barnes's credit – you never sense she's mak-

## Quotable *Nightwood*:

**"Then I kissed her, holding her hands and feet, and I said: 'Die now, so you will be quiet, so you will not be touched again by dirty hands, so you will not take my heart and your body and let them be nosed by dogs – die now, then you will be mine forever! (What right has anyone to that?)"**



while professing great admiration for the work, all but overlooks the female characters, to say nothing of the passion between them.

Superficially, it's easier to describe *Nightwood* more for what it lacks than for what it contains. Readers seeking plot, action, fully rendered settings, and realistic characters with clear motivations are guaranteed to be disappointed. Queer readers hoping for historical insights into lesbian expatriate life, or expecting an ahead-of-its-era plea for tolerance and understanding towards queer folk will also come away empty-handed.

Dorothy Allison admits that what she initially wanted from *Nightwood* was "a polemic, a manifesto, and a celebration of the lesbian in the demimonde." What she got, she explains, was closer to the experience of eagerly soaking up wine before you've learned how to appreciate it. The book "befuddled"

edition, claimed that it is "so good a novel that only sensibilities trained on poetry can wholly appreciate it." *Nightwood's* language is indeed highly metaphorical, closer to poetry than to standard prose, but – as one whose sensibility was hardly trained on poetry – I think appreciating *Nightwood* is more a matter of surrendering to the unexpected. At times, it seemed to me a series of unsolvable riddles, yet ones I – like Dorothy Allison – felt compelled to write down and savor, however uncertainly.

*Nightwood's* characters, like its language, are simultaneously vivid and opaque. There's Baron (of sorts) Felix Volkbein, a man improperly garbed for all functions in the world. He marries Robin Vote – the woman who wanders the night and has "the face of an incurable yet to be stricken with its malady" – and they have a child, Guido, who "was not like other children."

ing her characters outlandish just for the sake of it. You sense she believes in them and, more importantly, in the naked feelings hidden within and behind their alternately wise and absurd philosophical musings.

*Nightwood* is a seriously dark novel but its darkness is liberally spiked with humor, albeit humor that tends to be black and surreal and – when you're least prepared for it – raunchy. The doctor is particularly prone to shouting hilariously inappropriate non-sequiturs. For instance, when Nora is confessing her deepest sorrow at the loss of Robin, he suddenly bursts in with: "I know ... there you were sitting up high and fine, with a rose-bush up your arse." On the subject of life accomplishment, he says: "to be recognized, a gem should lie in a wide open field; but I'm all aglitter in the

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