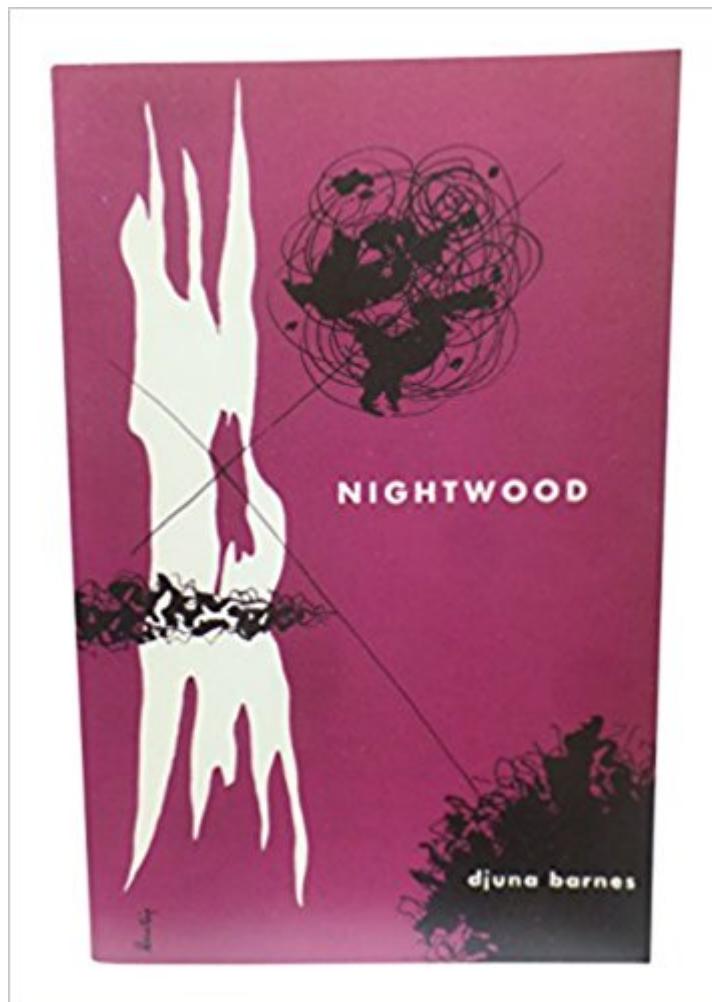


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Nightwood (New Edition)



Synopsis

The fiery and enigmatic masterpiece *Nightwood*, Djuna Barnes' strange and sinuous tour de force, "belongs to that small class of books that somehow reflect a time or an epoch" (Times Literary Supplement). That time is the period between the two World Wars, and Barnes' novel unfolds in the decadent shadows of Europe's great cities, Paris, Berlin, and Vienna—a world in which the boundaries of class, religion, and sexuality are bold but surprisingly porous. The outsized characters who inhabit this world are some of the most memorable in all of fiction—there is Guido Volkbein, the Wandering Jew and son of a self-proclaimed baron; Robin Vote, the American expatriate who marries him and then engages in a series of affairs, first with Nora Flood and then with Jenny Petherbridge, driving all of her lovers to distraction with her passion for wandering alone in the night; and there is Dr. Matthew-Mighty-Grain-of-Salt-Dante-O'Connor, a transvestite and ostensible gynecologist, whose digressive speeches brim with fury, keen insights, and surprising allusions. Barnes' depiction of these characters and their relationships (Nora says, "A man is another persona woman is yourself, caught as you turn in panic; on her mouth you kiss your own") has made the novel a landmark of feminist and lesbian literature. Most striking of all is Barnes' unparalleled stylistic innovation, which led T. S. Eliot to proclaim the book "so good a novel that only sensibilities trained on poetry can wholly appreciate it." Now with a new preface by Jeanette Winterson, *Nightwood* still crackles with the same electric charge it had on its first publication in 1936.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Nightwood is not only a classic of lesbian literature, but was also acknowledged by no less than T. S. Eliot as one of the great novels of the 20th century. Eliot admired Djuna Barnes' rich, evocative language. Lesbian readers will admire the exquisite craftsmanship and Barnes' penetrating insights into obsessive passion. Barnes told a friend that *Nightwood* was written with her own blood "while it was still running." That flowing wound was the breakup of an eight-year relationship with the lesbian love of her life. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Ã¢ "One of the great masterworks of twentieth-century fiction." - Vogue
"Djuna Barnes is a writer of wild and original gifts. . . . To her name there is always to be attached the splendor of *Nightwood*, a lasting achievement of her great gifts and eccentricities---her passionate prose and, in this case, a genuineness of human passions." - Elizabeth Hardwick
"A masterpiece of modernism." - The Washington Post Book World
"To have been madly and disastrously in love is a kind of glory that can only be made intelligible in a sublime poetry" - Dorothy Allison, author of the National Book Award-nominated novel *Bastard Out of Carolina*

I am a casual reader and certainly no expert on literature, but 'Nightwood' was recommended to me by someone who is, and I am very glad of that. So this review may seem a bit awkward, rubbing shoulders with more learned company, but perhaps there may be some worth in the perspective of someone who, in the normal course of events, would never have ventured into these waters. I will start by saying that 'Nightwood' is a work of undoubted genius. Let me also say that I started by reading the reviews here, the Introduction by T. S. Eliot and the Preface by Jeanette Winterson, and -- especially in regard to the latter two -- I rather wish I hadn't. Eliot begins (and ends) by suggesting it might be better to refuse the license offered by being given the opportunity to introduce this work and, while I understand why he went ahead and did so, personally, I wish he'd followed his first inclination. Maybe he could have said, "Just read the book. You'll understand why when you're done," but it is not my place to put words in the great man's mouth. Winterson began by saying, "Certain texts work in homeopathic dilutions; that is, nano amounts effect significant change over long periods of time. *Nightwood* is a nano-text." I think Winterson is a very good author, but aside from finding that a dubious description of homeopathic dilutions, I can't figure out what it means in regards to 'Nightwood', especially after reading it. Starting out feeling a bit lost, I wandered in the Preface a short while and gave up. The reviews were interesting and some were quite fun to read,

but I'm glad I didn't have to base my decision to buy this book on them. That is not a slam against them, for this book is many things to many people, and on reading it again (as Eliot said) I may have (probably will) new opinions. So this is a review written before the first blush has faded. Due consideration can wait for another day. 'Nightwood' has a reputation as a difficult book. I did not find it so. I fell in during the first two paragraphs and gratefully submerged myself to the end. Perhaps that is because I am shallow. But to me, the essential fact of the book is the language. The language is astounding. So much so that I will term 'Nightwood' a tale told inside-out. By that I mean, in story telling as it is most often done, there are people, places, events, thoughts and feelings, and the author chooses her or his words and style to convey these to the reader. Here we have words; brilliantly arranged and sumptuously presented, in streams and sometimes in torrents, magnificently relentless. It is the words that engender the people, places and events in 'Nightwood' because words need a referent to have resonance. Thus, the entities that populate the story are surreal, for they are born of language, not 'reality', which must obey a different canon. The doctor is an amazing creation, but you will not meet him on this plane. The description of Jenny Petherbridge is a monumental achievement, and like a monument, it's hard not to get overwhelmed by it.

Consider a few brief examples, minute beside the whole, but brilliant in their own right: 'The words that fell from her mouth seemed to have been lent to her; had she been forced to invent a vocabulary for herself, it would have been a vocabulary of two words, "ah" and "oh." "She was avid and disorderly in her heart. She defiled the very meaning of personality in her passion to be a person." And my favorite: 'Only severed could any part of her be called "right." "No being that physics admits outside the imagination of a genius could merit such a description. It has been said that 'Nightwood' is about 'meaning' (a loose term) not information, and that is true, as far as it goes, but the degree is questionable. Considering that meaning, or perhaps more concretely, the thoughts that give that 'meaning' meaning, some are not a thing of words, while in other cases, words can outrun the thoughts that inspired them. Which is the case in 'Nightwood', I have no idea. The language is so dense, so rich, so layered and knotted, it has a life of its own, independent of its creator, as if it is no longer wholly the author's work, but shaped by other forces. Trying to root 'meaning' out of it is truly difficult, perhaps impossible, if one's main concern is to ask: "What does 'Nightwood' mean"? That is not to say the book is "meaningless." Taken as data, the reflections in 'Nightwood' say some fascinating things about love, about loss, about the human condition. But so do many works. Such data are fairly commonplace (though true eloquence in expressing them is not). In this regard, 'Nightwood' is not unique. Nor are these reflections the most profound I've ever read. Perhaps (indeed, most likely), on revisiting the book I will find more meaning. But that is not

why I will revisit it. To me, 'Nightwood' is first and foremost a sensual experience. I would not ask a sunrise what it means. A sunrise would never answer. I take 'Nightwood' in the same spirit.

A love triangle is common in film and literature, but the Djuna Barnes version is by far more complex and interesting due to the incredible richness of her language and literary style. After reading (one should say 'studying' due to the concentration needed for its understanding) *Nightwood* the memory of each character will have a long decay time, and this will happen regardless of the gender or sexual preferences of those who decide to devote their time to it. It is one of the few novels of the twentieth century that was daring in its subject matter but still interesting and provocative without being excessively polemical. There is a lot in this story that one can form an intellectual intersection with, and just as much that is novel and will at first appear distant and hard to focus on, like a light source that has been blurred by a dirty lens. Readers may have to remove their prejudicial and conceptual bifocals in order to see just what the author has broadcast. This is the best feature of the story, namely that it requires a fair amount of cognitive perspiration for its appreciation. It cannot be understood with a mere surface reading, and is definitely not for the light-hearted or those who want rapid scene changes and simplistic dialog. The characters are not mere slogans, but ones who display traits that one can find comradeship with, and themes that also have moral force, with this force being directed on purpose, with high-powered literary artillery. One will encounter for example in (Baron) Felix Volkbein the uncritical adulation of authority, with this an expression of his adaptation as a Jew living in a foreign land, with foreign meaning both in tradition as well as in its prejudices. And Felix's affection for Robin Vote is expected and natural. Robin is the delicate and vulnerable character in the novel, the one who journeys the most and is followed the most as the novel unfolds. Robin is to be contrasted with Nora Flood, the character who is by far the most different from men, a 'deviation' that men may aspire to but is always out of reach. The romance between Robin and Nora is atypical and deep, but at the same time refreshing without being frivolous. And then there is Jenny Petherbridge, the character that is certain to demand attention and perhaps disgust from the reader. Jenny may be subjected to condemnation by many readers, but she adds weight to the third vertex of the triangle, and in a way that makes it non-isomorphic to other triangles that readers might discover in novels of this genre. By far the most interesting of the characters is Dr. Matthew O'Connor. Unlicensed to practice medicine but definitely deserving accolades for his ability to subject the reader to strong perturbations of verbal patterns, O'Connor nails *Nightwood* on a wooden plank as

one of the best stories of the twentieth century. Whether it was the intent of the author or not, O'Connor is the central figure, most definitely so, and this is true despite his frequent cynicism and sometimes macabre attitude about love and life. Readers may find themselves in a kind of Hegelian opposition to him, an antithesis perhaps of all they stand for, but it is easy to delight in his frankness, and in the ease in which he can create strings of words that form patterns not matched before in literature.

I really enjoyed the first few chapters of this book. It was weird and quite entertaining to me at first, plus, the author is a great writer and has a unique style. In general though, the subject matter isn't especially appealing to me. It would really interest people who are bi-sexual, gay, or transgender though because the majority of the characters are struggling with these issues and trying to come to terms with how to be themselves in a world that finds it difficult to except them. It gives an interesting perspective, and is quite well written, but it's just not my cup of tea as far as the topics covered. Not a bad book though if you are interested in gay literature; in fact, this might be the best book out there which is written from that perspective. I read it for a college class.

This is just a very odd book and though I really wanted to like it - because I like experimental writing - I couldn't. In the end, I didn't like the characters and I didn't care very much what happened to them. Perhaps I read it too late in life, but it felt too melodramatic and overwhelmed without enlightenment. It could have just been 'off' but I could not get into this book.

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