Foreword

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Why is "Reader, I married him" one of the most famous lines in literature? Why do we remember it and quote it so much? Why have twenty-one writers jumped at the opportunity to take that line and run with it, folding its powerful resonance and sheer chutzpah into their own stories? Is it because of who says it and how she says it, or who has written it, or how we read it – or all of those things?

Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, the story of a nineteenth-century orphan who becomes a governess and finds her place in the world, is most memorable for the character of Jane herself. "Poor, obscure, plain, and little", with no family and no prospects, nothing to cushion her from a life of poverty and loneliness except her wits and her self-belief, Jane is the embodiment of the underdog who ultimately triumphs. And who doesn't support the underdog? No matter what our circumstances, most of us see ourselves as underdogs; we can relate to her, and cheer her on.

Despite a childhood of physical abuse (near-starvation at her boarding school) and psychological torment (locked in the "red room" by her cruel aunt), Jane grows up with her self-esteem intact, and throughout the novel proves to be tough, resilient and morally grounded. She catches the eye of her employer, Mr Rochester, a man assumed to be way out of her league. She is as witty and as clever as he, eventually winning his love when she isn't even trying to. She stands up to him too, declaring, in probably the second most quoted line from the book: "I am no bird; and no net ensnares me; I am a free human being with an independent will." Who can resist a character like Jane Eyre?

"Reader, I married him" is Jane's defiant conclusion to her rollercoaster story. It is not, "Reader, he married me" – as you would expect in a Victorian society where women were supposed to be passive; or even, "Reader, we married." Instead Jane asserts herself; she is the driving force of her narrative, and it is she who chooses to be with Rochester. (Interestingly, Jane also inherits a fortune from an absent uncle, but no one ever remembers that detail; it is a *deus ex machina* out of her control and so it means less to us.) Her self-determination is not only very appealing; it also serves to undercut the potential over-sweetness of a classic happy ending where the heroine gets her man. The mouse roars, and we pump our fist with her.

It is also flattering – and memorable – to be addressed directly. How many novels acknowledge their readers? Jane addresses us the Reader throughout, and by doing so brings us on her side. Not only that: the line resonates because of the silent clauses that surround it. What

it really says is: "You may be surprised to learn that, Reader, I married him" or, "Reader, I married him, though perhaps I shouldn't have" or even, "Reader, I married him and then we went to bed." We readers fill in those blanks, and doing so involves us in Jane's decision as much as her speaking directly to us does. Her story becomes entwined with us, so that it feels as if we are telling it alongside Jane and her creator. No wonder we remember the line: we seem to have written it ourselves.

The woman who created that line is also a significant factor in its power. Though most readers may not know a lot about Charlotte Brontë, many will be struck by even the briefest outline of her remarkable life: remarkable not for being full of incident, but because it *wasn't*. Or it was, but it was drama played out within an intimate domestic space rather than on a wider stage. Charlotte was one of a trio of sisters who grew up in a parsonage in a remote Yorkshire village on the edge of the moors, who all published novels around the same time, with strong characters and storylines, before dying young. If you visit the atmospheric Brontë Parsonage in Haworth, where I first had the idea to create this collection of stories, you will be struck by what a strange, intense family the Brontës were: a hothouse of creativity springing from unpromising surroundings. Charlotte, Emily and Anne Brontë often sat together in the severe dining room, all writing and talking about what they wrote.

Women just didn't *do* that back in the nineteenth century. Most writers then were men; middle-class women were expected to be decorative rather than active. They were not meant to write novels about obsessive love on the moors (Emily's *Wuthering Heights*), or wives escaping their drunken, abusive husbands (Anne's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*), or a headstrong governess who declares that she will marry. That they published at all – at first under the peculiar male names Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell – is miraculous. *Jane Eyre* went on to become a publishing sensation; it was well reviewed, sold well, and Charlotte was fêted by other writers such as William Thackeray and Elizabeth Gaskell (one of the few other popular women writers at the time).

The fact that from such an unlikely background she became a famous, bestselling writer is heartening news for all would-be writers, for all women – and indeed, for all women writers. That is why I have asked women to contribute to this collection – we have even more reason to be grateful to Charlotte for her ambition and imagination, which paved the way for more women to write and be published. "Reader, I married him" reveals not just Jane Eyre's determination, but Charlotte Brontë's too, and it inspires our own.

Twenty-one writers, then, have taken up the line and written what it has urged them to write. I liken "Reader, I married him" to a stone thrown into a pond, with its resulting ripples.

Some of the writers have written close to where the stone has entered the water, taking the Jane Eyre story itself and writing it from a different angle: Helen Dunmore from Grace Poole's point of view; Salley Vickers from Mr Rochester's eyes. Audrey Niffenegger places Jane in a contemporary war-torn country in "The Orphan Exchange". Other stories are ripples a little further from the source, including elements from the novel such as the moors setting, or specific incidents, or imagery such as mirrors or animals, or even certain lines. (Look out for "small and plain", Rochester's famous description of Jane.) You do not need to know *Jane Eyre* to enjoy these stories, but if you do, those resonances will make you smile.

Other stories may move still further away from Jane, yet almost all of them address marriage (or today's equivalent of it) in some way, exploring when marriage might happen, or should happen, or shouldn't, or when it ends, or is with the wrong person, or seems to be with the right person but goes wrong. There are at least two proposals in the collection – though we will have to guess at the replies!

For some, weddings themselves provide the drama, courtesy of a painful shard of glass in Linda Grant's "The Mash-Up", or a sudden cast change in "My Mother's Wedding" by Tessa Hadley, or a secret liaison during a Zambian bonding ceremony in Namwali Serpell's "Double Men", or a muddy Gothic encounter on the moors in "To Hold" by Joanna Briscoe.

For others, a wedding is only the start of a relationship, the stories moving beyond the traditional happy ending to find out what happens within marriage. Evie Wyld explores a woman's feelings about her husband, set against an austere Canadian landscape peopled with bears, while Susan Hill dissects the fall-out from a famous Anglo-American marriage, and Francine Prose looks at what happens to Jane Eyre and Mr Rochester after they wed. In "The Self-Seeding Sycamore" Lionel Shriver reminds us of what can grow after a marriage has ended.

Always, always in these stories there is love – whether it is the first spark or the last dying embers – in its many heart-breaking, life-affirming forms.

All of these stories have their own memorable lines, their own truths, their own happy or wry or devastating endings, but each is one of the ripples that finds its centre in Jane and Charlotte's decisive clarion call: Reader, I married him.