

Studying a Post-1990 Novel

# Wise Children



**English**  
*& Media*  
**Centre**

## Acknowledgements

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Printed by RPM Repro

ISBN: 978-0-907016-99-1

Thanks to the teachers on the EMC's 'Teaching *Wise Children*' course, November 2006, and Kate Oliver for reading and commenting on the text.

Thanks also to the publishers, authors and picture libraries who have given permission to reproduce the following texts and images:

The Mary Evans Picture Library for images on pages 21-24.

Sarah Gamble, Jane Ogborn and Sarah Stokes for articles originally published in *emagazine*.

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The Wylie Agency, on behalf of Ali Smith, for 'Get Carter', originally published in *Interrupted Lives in Literature* (NPG, 2004) and 'Introduction' to *Wise Children* (Vintage Books, 2006).

Faith Evans Associates on behalf of the estate of Lorna Sage, for the interview with Angela Carter, published in *New Writing* ed. Malcolm Bradbury and Judith Cooke (Minerva, 1992).

Stills on page 37 are taken from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, d. Max Reinhardt, 1935.

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# Introduction

## An Overview of the Material

'Studying a Post-1990 Novel – *Wise Children*' has been written with the demands of both Curriculum 2000 and Curriculum 2008 in mind.

Throughout the material a wide range of approaches is used, including creative and critical writing, role-play, close analysis, charting, diagrammatic representations and so on. The pack is divided into the following main sections:

**Getting Started** introduces students to some key decisions authors make when writing a novel, focusing on the opening paragraphs from a diverse selection of prose narratives; this section also explores the concept of 'voice'.

**An Agenda** for studying any modern novel.

**Before Reading** includes activities encouraging students to speculate about story, characters and themes, and to engage from the very beginning of their study with the structure of the novel and Carter's style. The 'High and Low Culture – A Continuum Line' activity asks students to consider their own attitudes towards the status of a range of cultural texts, providing them with a personal context for analysing Carter's representation of culture in the novel.

**Reading *Wise Children*** provides activities which are designed to support students' analysis of the style and structure of the novel, as well as introduce strategies for keeping track of the story, characters, family relationships and themes. Short critical extracts are included in '*Reading Wise Children*' to open up possible readings for discussion and as a foil for students beginning to form their own views of the novel. There are opportunities for students to practise both critical and creative responses to the novel, with an emphasis in each case on exploring Carter's narrative and linguistic techniques.

**After Reading** takes key ideas and concepts raised during reading (for example, carnivalesque, structure, motifs, Carter's use of Shakespeare), exploring them in more detail, in the context of the novel as a whole. A series of active and analytical approaches to sustained critical articles supports students both in developing independent opinions and in using critical readings constructively.

**Coursework** suggestions and **Reading Trails**.

**Articles and Interview** provides five complete articles by Ali Smith, Dr Sarah Gamble and *emagazine* writers, plus an interview with Angela Carter by Lorna Sage.

**Cards** on themes, characters, relationships, places and techniques for use in a wide range of activities, including revision, coursework planning, structure diagrams.

## On the website

A pdf of the key images used on pages 13, 21-24 and 37 is available to download from the English and Media Centre's website: <http://www.englishandmedia.co.uk/wischildren.html>

## Answers

The extracts on page 7 ('Narrative Openings') and page 43 ('Narrative Endings') are taken from:

A+5: Carol Shields: *Unless*, 2002

B+9: Emily Brontë: *Wuthering Heights*, 1847

C+3: Mark Twain: *Huck Finn*, 1884

D+6: D.B.C. Pierre: *Vernon God Little*, 2003

E+1: Ali Smith: *The Accidental*, 2006

F+4: R.L. Stevenson: *Treasure Island*, 1883

G+8: H.G. Wells: *Island of Dr Moreau*, 1896

H+7: Arthur Conan Doyle: *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, 1891

I+2: Daniel Defoe: *Moll Flanders*, 1722

J+10: Hisham Matar: *In the Country of Men*, 2006

## Before Reading *Wise Children*

### Judging a Book by its Title and Cover

The novel you are going to read is called *Wise Children*.

- Write the title in the centre of a sheet of paper.
- Annotate the title with any ideas, associations, sayings and so on which it conjures up in you.
- Talk about your expectations of a novel with this title. Add anything you find particularly interesting to your annotations.

Four different covers for the novel are reproduced on page 13.

- Talk about your expectations of the novel, based on the cover designs. For example, do you think it will be a comedy or tragedy? When do you think it might be set? What do you think it might be about?
- Do the covers give you any further ideas about the possible significance of the title? If so, add these to your annotated title.

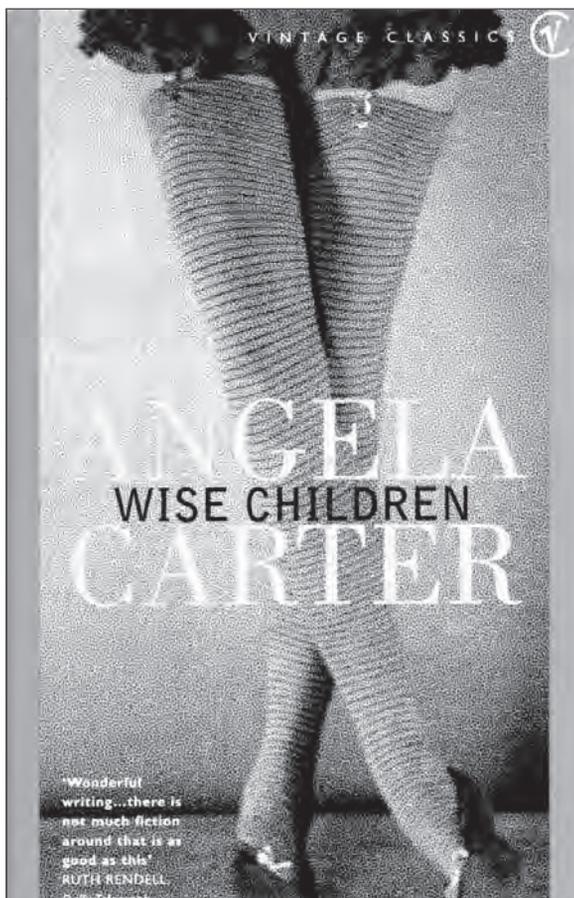
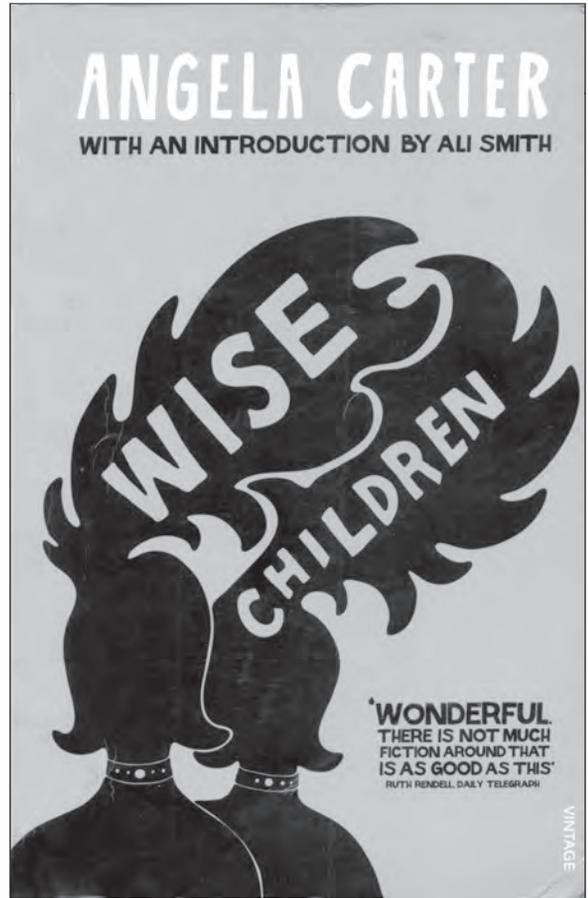
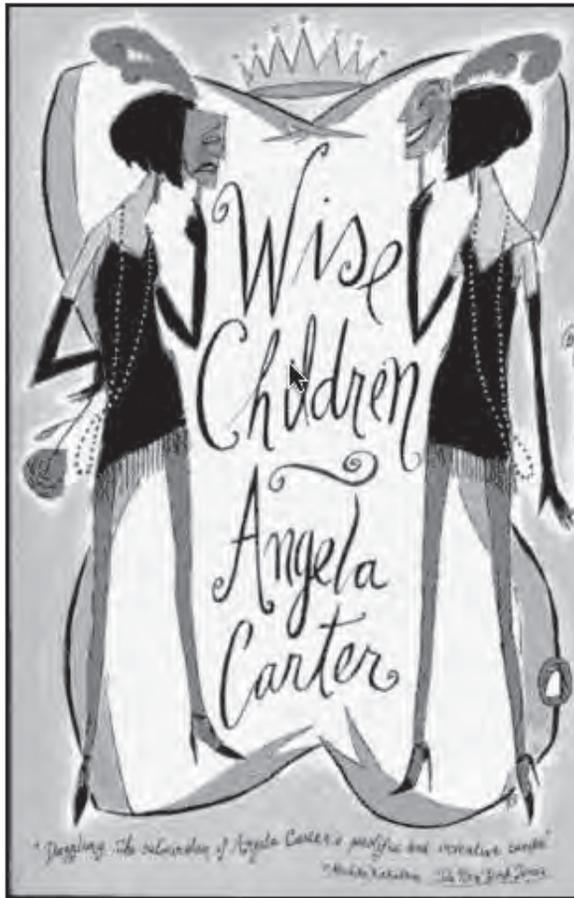
### Chapter Openings

Printed on page 14 are the openings to each of the five chapters in *Wise Children*.

- Read each chapter opening in turn, annotating the passage with your initial ideas about the following:
  - the narrative voice and register
  - relationship with implied listener/reader
  - the story or plot
  - the type of novel it is
  - the way it is written (style and narrative techniques such as word groups, imagery, sentence type and length, balance of description to dialogue and so on).
- Join up with two or three other students and compare your annotations of each chapter opening.

*Wise Children*, a novel of 234 pages, is divided into only five chapters.

- As a class, speculate about anything you think might be significant about Carter's division of the novel into five chapters.
- As you read each chapter, return to your annotations of the openings, and add to your response, focusing on the way in which the rest of the chapter contextualises the opening.



Q. Why is London like Budapest?

A. Because it is two cities divided by a river.

Good morning! Let me introduce myself. My name is Dora Chance. Welcome to the wrong side of the tracks.

Put it another way. If you're from the States, think of Manhattan. Then think of Brooklyn. See what I mean? Or, for a Parisian, it might be a question of *rive gauche*, *rive droite*. With London, it's the North and South divide. Me and Nora, that's my sister, we've always lived on the left-hand side, the side the tourist rarely sees, the *bastard* side of Old Father Thames.

1

One, two, three, hop! See me dance the polka. Once upon a time, there was an old woman in splitting black satin pounding away at an upright piano in a room over a haberdasher's shop in Clapham High Street and her daughter in a pink tutu and wrinkled tights slapped at your ankles with a cane if you didn't pick up your feet high enough. Once a week, every Saturday morning, Grandma Chance would wash us, brush us and do up our hair in sausage curls. We had long, brown stockings strung up to our liberty bodices by suspenders. Grandma Chance would take firm hold of one hand of each of us, then – ho! for the dancing class; off we'd trot to catch the tram.

2

We saw it again just the other week, hadn't seen it for years. Haven't been to the pictures for years, in fact, what with one thing and another, not least of which the fact the local fleapit only shows stuff in the original Serbo-Croat with sub-titles, a touch tough on yours truly's peepers. My eyes are dim, I cannot see, I have not brought my specs with me; nor do I intend to, ducky. All I have left to sustain me is my vanity. It was showing at three o'clock on a Sunday afternoon, miles away, in Notting Hill. We had to take two buses, change at the Scotch Shop.

3

Let other pens dwell on guilt and misery. A., for Austen, Jane. *Mansfield Park*. I do not wish to talk about the war. Suffice to say it was no carnival, not the hostilities. No carnival.

Yes, indeed; I have my memories, but I prefer to keep them to myself, thank you very much. Though there are some things I never can forget. The cock that used to crow, early in the morning, in Bond Street. And I saw a zebra, once, he was a galloping down Camden High Street, one night, about midnight, in the blackout – the moon was up, his stripes fluoresced, I was in some garret with a Free Norwegian. And the purple flowers that would pop up on the bomb-sites almost before the ruins stopped smoking, as if to say, life goes on, even if you don't.

4

We crossed over the river to the other side. The river lies between Brixton and glamour like a sword. I wonder why they call it Old *Father* Thames.

In Regent's Park, the bushes crouched like bears and the stands of daffs and tulips wore a pale and ghostly look as they swayed in our birthday wind, which was getting fresh, again, moist after the rain, and warmish. In the street outside the Hazard home, what a bustle! A retinue of vans, blaring lights on stands, power cables to trip you up and a muster of personnel – bald men in specs and parkas conversing in huddles, girls in jeans hither and thithering with clipboards, plus fans, the idle and the curious, rubbernecking in quantity.

5

## ‘Dramatis Personae’

‘Dramatis Personae’ is a term most often used in drama texts. It is the list of characters in the play and usually appears before the beginning of Act 1. Angela Carter includes such a list at the end of *Wise Children*.

- In pairs, discuss anything that strikes you about, or any questions provoked by Carter’s inclusion of this list at the end of the novel. For example, how might Carter’s listing of the ‘Dramatis Personae’ link to her organisation of the story into five chapters?

Included here is the ‘Dramatis Personae’ with the names of the characters removed.

- Read the list and, in pairs, talk about anything you notice, for example the type of characters, the way they are described, patterns, repetitions, absences and so on.
- On the basis of the ‘Dramatis Personae’, what type of novel do you expect *Wise Children* to be?

identical twins, illegitimate daughters of..., officially known as daughters as...	their goddaughter	fraternal twins, sons of the marriage of...
first wife of..., mother of...	second wife of..., mother of...	identical twins, legal daughters of..., biologically daughters of...
fraternal twins, sons of...’s third marriage	third wife of... mother of...	guardian of...
mother of...	a photographer of children	husband of...
boyfriend of...	a foundling, mother of...	a foundling, mother of..., grandmother of..., great-grandmother of...
a dance teacher	her mother, an accompanist	comedian and patriot
...’s first boyfriend	musician, composer, boyfriend of...	a film producer
a jealous woman	an Italian American, fiancé of...	American writer, boyfriend of...
boyfriend of...	male soprano, third husband of...	granddaughter of...
her husband	In no particular order of appearance: rough children, cats, chorus girls, chorus boys, nudes, spear-carriers, comics, fans, Free French, Free Poles, Free Norwegians, soldiers, sailors, airmen of all nations, media personalities, television crews, market traders, pupils of the Italia Conte School, Amazonian tribesmen, photographers, film buffs, the public, extras	

## Reading Wise Children – Before Reading

Included below are the names of the characters (the 'Dramatis Personae') in *Wise Children*.

- Read through the list of characters and share your first responses to the names, focusing on their possible associations or significance.
- In pairs, experiment with different ways of grouping the characters, then compare your decisions with those of other pairs in your class.
- Look at the names in relation to the description of the 'Dramatis Personae' on page 15. Try pairing up the characters and the descriptions in different ways, then look at the 'Dramatis Personae' as it is published in the novel.

Dora Chance

Nora Chance

Tiffany

(Sir) Melchior Hazard

Peregrine Hazard

Lady Atalanta Hazard, née Lynde

Delia Delaney, née Daisy Duck

Saskia Hazard

Imogen Hazard

Tristram Hazard

Gareth Hazard

'My Lady Margarine'

'Grandma' Chance

Estella 'A Star Danced' Hazard

'Lewis Carroll'

Ranulph Hazard

Cassius Booth

'Pretty Kitty'

'Our Cyn'

Miss Worthington

Mrs Worthington

Gorgeous George

'Pantomime Goose'

Principal boy

Blond tenor with unmemorable name

'Mr Piano Man'

'Genghis Khan'

His first wife

Tony

Ross 'Irish' O'Flaherty

Unnamed radical German exile in Hollywood

'Puck'

Brenda

Leroy

## High and Low Culture – A Continuum Line

*Wise Children* is a novel filled with references to, and quotations from, a diverse range of entertainments and cultural texts, including songs, films, plays, shows and television programmes. Some of these are listed below.

Shakespeare	Nursery rhymes	Touring revues
TV game shows	Music hall	Popular song
Stately homes	Adverts	Hollywood
TV children's programmes	String quartets	Black and white films
Fairytales	Magic shows	Poetry
TV cookery programmes	End of pier shows	Westminster Abbey
St Paul's Cathedral	Novels	Black tie parties

- On a large sheet of paper, draw a continuum line with 'High Culture' at one end and 'Low Culture' at the other. Place the different 'texts' wherever you think they fall on the continuum line from high to low culture. Don't spend long thinking about this – just go with your immediate, instinctive thought.
- Briefly share your decisions in class discussion.
- As you read *Wise Children*, think about the place each 'text' occupies in the novel and mark this on your continuum line in a different coloured pen. Annotate your continuum line with your developing thoughts about the way Angela Carter confirms or challenges conventional views of high and low culture.