

Reading the Brontës

by DM Denton, author of

[*Without the Veil Between, Anne Brontë: A Fine and Subtle Spirit*](#)

Merry Christmas from Aunt Renee, 1943. When my mother was fourteen she received a book that fed her appetite for novels and offered an escape from her own complicated narrative. Published by Random House, New York, it was wider and “taller” than it was thick, bound in dark blue-green with a slightly gullied joint and gold lettering on a strong spine, front and back boards illustrated by the work of Fritz Eichenberg, more of his moodily magnificent wood engravings within. Monotype Bodoni with long descenders and double-columns presented its text, chapters running on without pause, like the brave and breathless mind and spirit that filled it with one of the most mercilessly compelling, passionate, earthy unearthly stories ever told.

Over twenty years later this classic hardcover edition of *Wuthering Heights* was re-gifted to me and my reading the Brontës began with Emily. She immediately and irrevocably enticed me out of 1960s suburban America, away from fenced-in yards, narrow sidewalks, and managed nature, into the wilderness of her West Yorkshire world, inexhaustible imagination and uncompromising soul. I had never before read a novel as descriptive and dramatic, bold and mesmerizing, as validating of my own mystic inclinations. Of course, I hadn't. I was only twelve.

I believe I can credit reading Emily with the early maturing of my literary preferences. Her poetry soon followed and I felt even more akin to her: introverted but intense, a homebody with wanderlust, quiet with much “to say”, my fantasies my salvation.

Wuthering Heights led to *Jane Eyre*, also at my adolescent fingertips. My mother owned the matching 1943 edition originally boxed as a set with *Wuthering Heights*. Lent to a reckless relative, it came to me a little battered and begged to be handled devotedly. Soon I was occupied by the reticence, resilience, and quiet and artistic sensibility of Jane, and entertained by the romance, mystery and maneuverings of her journey. If in my younger days I didn't feel the empathy with Charlotte I did with Emily, later, much later I found myself identifying with Charlotte's struggles and strength, even her stubbornness, certainly her conflicted ambition. Earlier and later I couldn't help appreciate and aspire to Charlotte's mastery at storytelling.

Unfortunately, neither of Anne's novels were included in the Eichenberg illustrated collection. Still, a treasured copy of *Agnes Grey* also found its way to me through my mother: a 3 ¼ by 5 ¼ hardcover edition she had purchased from a second-hand book store in Oxford on a visit while I was living in England. It was part of the Oxford University World Classics range,

first published in 1907 and reprinted numerous times up until the 1970s, which included all four of Charlotte's novels, *Wuthering Heights*, and, also, Anne's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. Despite the diminutive dimensions of this edition of *Agnes Grey*, the front of its burnt-sienna dust jacket had space for a Leonard Rosoman black and white illustration of governess Agnes. Its text was tiny, reminiscent of the Brontë juvenilia, requiring youthful eyes or a magnifying glass.

From the multitude of documentaries about the Brontës, and movies, even pop music, inspired by Charlotte's and Emily's books, it was all too easy to neglect Anne's presence and influence in her family and literature. As an English major in college, those "in charge" of my education barely mentioned her if at all. They might have been directing my edification as they thought necessary, but not my curiosity more piqued by the neglected than celebrated.

In the mid-1990s while organizing book shelves I happened upon my miniature *Agnes Grey*. Flipping through it I stopped at Chapter XXIV, *The Sands*. I was reminded of my first and only visit to Scarborough, North Yorkshire in March 1974 when sightseeing took me up to the medieval Fortress on the town's northern headland. Back down Castle Road I detoured into the yard of the little church—St. Mary's—where, a month or so earlier, when at last I made it to Haworth, I had learned Anne was buried. If walking through the cold, rolling fog behind the Brontë Parsonage unable to resist calling out "Heathcliff" was surreal, standing at the small wind-and-salt weathered monument to Anne's courageous self-determination opened a new chapter in my Brontë reading. Finding her interred apart from her family, away from the place name and environment that, for me as for so many others, she and her siblings were inevitably associated with, my first thoughts on "why?" were intuitive rather than informed.

I could understand Anne wanting to be near Scarborough's curve of headlands, beaches, and watery outlook to "somewhere foreign and, therefore, appealing". I found myself in her reasons to value those rare moments in sight and sound and smell of the sea. I identified with her relief and exhilaration when she was out-of-sight of all whose assumptions had for too long defined and restricted her.

Even when all I had to go on was a hunch, I suspected Anne Brontë was something of a rebel, not in defiance but for discovery.

Scarborough had lured Anne to move from mortality to eternity because she couldn't ignore her need for a way all her own. The only thing in error regarding her burial away from Haworth was the inscription on the stone noting her age when she died. Symbolically that chiseled "typo" took away the year of Anne's greatest accomplishment, forewarning Charlotte literally doing so when she refused a posthumous reprinting of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*.

I'll admit I didn't read Anne's second novel until I decided to write one about her and wondered—and soon recognized—why it had taken me over half a century to do both.

Sometimes the closest thing to ourselves takes a long time to reach. My mother made it to Haworth in 1975. For reasons that seemed important at the time and now I can only regret, I wasn't with her as she walked up the hill, heard her steps on the cobblestones and voices of the dead, inhaled the mist, saw the parsonage and windswept trees and moors, and, perhaps, if silently, did a little Heathcliff calling of her own to turn the pages back. I didn't see if her eyes sparkled, but like to think they did.