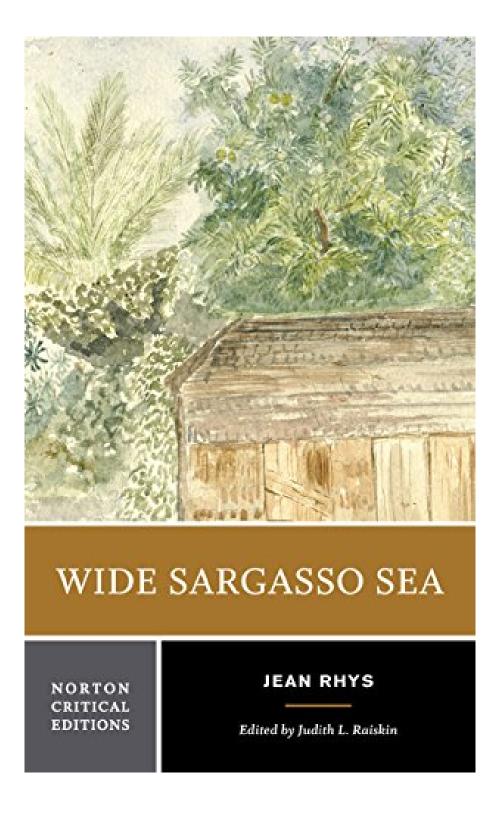


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About the Author

Jean Rhys (1890–1979) is the author of Good Morning, Midnight; Voyage in the Dark; After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie; Quartet; and The Collected Short Stories.

Judith L. Raiskin is Associate Professor and Director of Women's Studies at the University of Oregon. She is the author of Snow on the Cane Fields: Women's Writing and Creole Subjectivity.

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Written over the course of twenty-one years and published in 1966, Wide Sargasso Sea, based on Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre, takes place in Jamaica and Dominica in 1839–45.

Textual notes illuminate the novel's historical background, regional references, and the non-translated Creole and French phrases necessary to fully understand this powerful story. Backgrounds includes a wealth of material on the novel's long evolution, it connections to Jane Eyre, and Rhys's biographical impressions of growing up in Dominica. Criticism introduces readers to the critical debates inspired by the novel with a Derek Walcott poem and eleven essays.

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Most helpful customer reviews

86 of 90 people found the following review helpful. Gulfs of many kinds By Diane Schirf Wide Sargasso Sea by Jean Rhys. Highly recommended.

Jean Rhys, troubled by the one-dimensional Bertha Mason in Brontë's classic Jane Eyre, or perhaps seeing an opportunity to take the depiction of Creoles out of the hands of English writers, decided to "write her a life." The result is Wide Sargasso Sea, in which the Bertha Mason of Jane Eyre (Antoinette Cosway in Wide Sargasso Sea) finally steps out of the realm of caricature and becomes both human being and symbol. In the Norton Critical Edition edited by Judith L. Raiskin, several commentators expound on their views of what that symbolism means from a Caribbean, British, and feminist perspective.

First, I have noticed that several reviewers mistakenly assume Antoinette is of mixed race (the modern

assumption about what Creole means). In the context of the time, however, Creole meant a person of English or European descent living in the Caribbean. Rhys makes this even clearer with terms such as "white Creole" and "white cockroach." This is an important distinction because it, combined with her French ancestry and poverty, sets Antoinette apart from the wealthy English and from the former slaves on the islands who are of African descent. That theme of having no home, no society, nowhere to go, and, essentially, being nonexistent, is integral to the storyline-and fits in perfectly with Bertha's role in Jane Eyre.

Another important point is that Antoinette's mother (as well as her nurse) is from Martinique, a French island at a time when the French and the British were in bitter conflict. This makes Antoinette even more alienated from the societies in which she dwells but of which she is not a part. It's interesting to note that some of the academic commentators mistakenly attribute her mother's birthplace and the origins of the nurse Christophine (one calls her a Haitian, no doubt because of that island's strong associations with obeah) and even get Christophine's name wrong.

Although there are parallels between Antoinette and Jane, between Antoinette and the Black child Tia, and even between Antoinette and her carefully unnamed husband (Rochester), this is a brilliant novel that does not depend on the reader's knowledge of Jane Eyre; like Antoinette herself, it stands alone. There are also many cycles throughout the book, including Antoinette's repeated dream. Antoinette's lack of identity is reinforced by Rochester's invocation of a principle of obeah; he calls her Bertha, a name that is not hers (this also emphasizes the predominance of an English identity over that evoked by the French name Antoinette). There are the clear dichotomies between Rochester and his England, where he is a disenfranchised second son, and Antoinette and her Caribbean, where she belongs neither to the wealthy whites or the freed slaves.

Wide Sargasso Sea invokes the Bible several times. Rochester's father and older brother betray him to Antoinette's stepfather Mason for 30,000 pounds, alluding to the 30 pieces of silver that Judas Iscariot takes from the Romans for betraying Christ. There are numerous references to a rooster or cock crowing at key moments, as the cock did after Peter had denied Christ three times. The Christian allusions are intermixed with the presence of obeah throughout-just as the Christian faith and obeah beliefs from Africa became intermingled in the Caribbean.

Reality and dream are equally inseparable. "Is England like a dream? . . . She said this place London is like a cold dark dream sometimes. I want to wake up." The unnamed husband (Rochester) retorts, "Well, that is precisely how your beautiful island seems to me, quite unreal and like a dream." Their erotic life is no less a dream. "I watched her die many times . . . Only the sun was there to keep us company. We shut him out. . . . It was at night that I felt danger and would try to forget it and push it away."

Rhys, saddled with the pre-determined ending of Jane Eyre, manipulates its foreshadowing and symbolism brilliantly. Rochester says, "I would give my eyes never to have seen this abominable place." Obeah woman Christophine responds, "You choose what you give, eh?" In a return to the beginning, Antoinette, determined mad by an equally mad Rochester, burns down Thornfield Hall, just as her own childhood home was burnt by the freed slaves who held her and her mother in such contempt ("white cockroach").

There are seemingly endless layers of meaning within the slight 112 pages of Wide Sargasso Sea, about ethnic and national identities, about imperialistic and patriarchical repression, about madness, and about the relative relationship between reality and dream. Ultimately, Antoinette reclaims her identity and reality through a dream-and with her death. The more times you read this rich novel about a poor woman, the more you will discover.

Diane L. Schirf, 8 December 2002.

20 of 22 people found the following review helpful.

Unusual Insights on Racial Politics

By Alfredo Torres

What I found most memorable in this book are the connections it makes between the personal and public, the objective and subjective, and the natural and supernatural realms. It can be read as an extremely important analysis of racial politics, and the politics of disenfranchisement. I read it as an ingenious account of how a person becomes a ghost, impressive because the story presents a profound and serious examination of the process of how this happens.

My grandmother used to say that, "There is no black magic. There is jealosy." Wide Sargasso Sea reminded me of my grandmother's saying because it also exposes the "witchcraft", the black magic people practice every day without knowing it, through petty emotions that give rise to bad intentions and manifest in evil acts. Wide Sargasso Sea is a story of how jealosy, hate, and pride can kill people, and still do. It is also the story of the spiritual effects of such "witchery."

Wide Sargasso Sea is also a story of love, rather than a "love story." In our society, we like to think it's love when an affair works out and ends up in marriage and children. When it doesn't work out, we like to say that it is not love, and we call it co-dependency, obsession, and a host of other terms from psychology. I believe that Wide Sargasso Sea poses the controversial argument that when love goes bad, it's still love--that love can be a hideously negative thing. Poor Antoinette, the heroine, binds herself to a man whom she knows hates her--categorically--because she is a creole--and being unable to break off from him she damns herself and ends up becoming a ghost in her husband's cold English house. At least, that is my reading of the finale.

I was also impressed by the face-off between two of the central characters--Christophine, an Obeahwoman (witch) and the Rochester character who is not so named in the book. When they face each other about Antoinette and Christophine tries to get him to leave her and part of the fortune--in his mind he comes up with hateful and racist arguments and perspectives on Christophine. In the end, Christophine, for all her Obeah powers, cannot defeat the racist hatred of Rochester. And his intention all along was to take Antoinette to England and lock her up in his attic--a prisoner and a dirty secret he would never show to anyone. Yet another instance in the story showcasing the witchery, the black magic, of our petty human emotions.

31 of 35 people found the following review helpful.

The Making of a Madwoman

By JessH

I have read several books over the past year that were inspired by or offered different viewpoints on other books and stories. These included "The Red Tent", "Wicked", "The Hours", and most recently "Wide Sargasso Sea." I have enjoyed reading all of them and love seeing new perspectives on classic tales. "Wide Sargasso Sea" is Jean Rhys' take on Bronte's "Jane Eyre". However, instead of focusing on Jane Eyre, Ryhs instead turns the lens onto the life of Bertha, the mad woman who is locked in the attic of Mr. Rochester's house. The story takes place in Jamaica and Dominica in the mid-1800's. It is a time of unrest between the English colonizers, the recently freed slaves, and the Creoles. Antoinette Cosway (Bertha) is the Creole daughter of former slave owners and an heiress. Rhys relays Antoinette's lonely childhood and her misfortunes with friendship and love. Antoinette's family arranges a marriage for her with a young English gentleman, Mr. Rochester. The book sheds a new, completely different light on the character of Mr. Rochester than what we saw in "Jane Eyre".

"Wide Sargasso Sea" is narrated in several different voices including Antoinette and Mr. Rochester. These voices switch throughout the novel with little warning. Some may find this hard to follow. The novel also creates a great sense of place. Rhys does an excellent job of evoking the hot, humid atmosphere of the

Caribbean.

"Wide Sargasso Sea" was a recent selection in my book group. We enjoyed discussing it while dining on Caribbean fare. The discussion focused on topics such as colonialism, rich vs. poor, slavery, love, and of course madness. This was a good book for a discussion group since there were many themes to cover and also since it was inspired by "Jane Eyre", the group could also compare both books. I read the Norton Critical Edition of "Wide Sargasso Sea" which contained footnotes and an Appendix of essays and articles written about the book. The footnotes helped to deepen my understanding of the book since there were many references (literary and otherwise) that I may've missed.

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