WINNER OF THE BOOKER PRIZE

GRAHAM SWIFT

WATERLAND

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Praise for *Waterland*

‘Positively Faulknerian in its concentration on murder, incest, guilt and insanity. The brooding sense of place as a shaping force in the novel’s action is as powerful as Hardy’s Wessex or Dickens’s London’
Time Out

‘*Waterland* has the air of a novel classically at ease in its chosen, and uniquely particular, field of reference . . . Swift takes on and refracts a varied tradition: the family saga, the business saga, the novel of provincial life . . . and lays an unpredictable claim on a resonant area of life which he has made unequivocally his own’
Times Literary Supplement

‘A tour de force . . . A burst of exuberant fictive energy’
Evening Standard

‘*Waterland* is a quite brilliant novel, so good that whether Graham Swift wins the Booker Prize or not is in a sense a matter of little consequence’
Daily Telegraph

‘Astonishing . . . an overwhelming success . . . the writing is fluid and earthy, eerie and realistic, complex and simple all at once’
San Francisco Chronicle

‘Mr Swift’s first novel to be published in America introduces us to an artist doing almost everything right . . . A taut, exciting tale given resonance by the author’s provocative and pungent meditations’
Wall Street Journal

‘A masterpiece . . . intellectually bold, provocative and challenging’
The Nation

‘A gothic family saga, a detective story and a philosophical meditation on the nature and uses of history . . . Rich, ingenious and inspired’
New York Times

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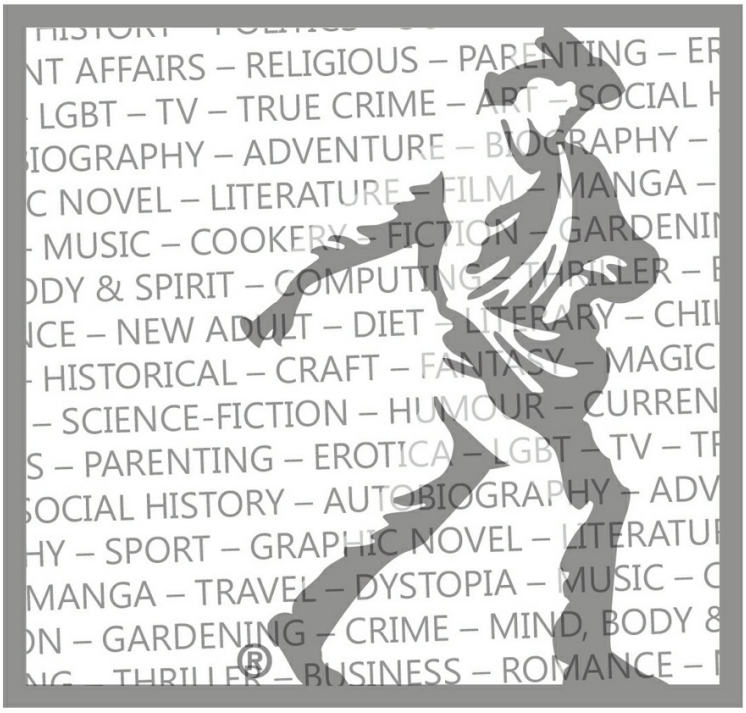

Waterland

Graham Swift

With an introduction
by the author

SCRIBNER
LONDON NEW YORK SYDNEY TORONTO NEW DELHI

For Candice

Historia, *-ae*, f. 1. inquiry, investigation, learning. 2. a) a narrative of past events, history. b) any kind of narrative: account, tale, story.

‘Ours was the marsh country . . .’

Great Expectations

Introduction by the author

It’s not just playing with words to say that *Waterland* marked a watershed in my career. It was my third novel but the first to gain a large readership and to be widely translated. Materially, it enabled me, after years of needing to do other jobs, to see if I could survive by writing alone. I’ve managed to do so ever since. It came out, in 1983, at a time when there was real excitement in the air about new fiction by new young novelists, and its publication was great fun. Eels feature prominently in the book, and the day before the launch party I bought a large smoked eel from a fishmonger’s in Soho, had it wrapped and sent to my publishers. When it was opened it apparently caused lots of screams.

In less overt ways, though not all of them marking an unprecedented crossing into new terrain, it was a watershed too. I recognised, even as I wrote it, that it was ‘bigger’, more ambitious than anything I’d previously attempted. In the more elated periods of the writing (though, as with any book, there were some bleak doldrums) I felt I could do and get away with anything. I’d dealt with multiple time levels before and with switching between different narrative threads, but never so adventurously; and while *Waterland* has its several plots and a pervasive story-telling urge, it often shifts into something not like narrative at all—the chapter ‘About the Eel’ is the example people tend to pick out. I felt confident about these seeming digressions, that they wouldn’t be digressions but vital parts of an organic, if idiosyncratic and complex, whole.

Unlike earlier, or subsequent, work, *Waterland* also has a strong element of the supernatural and the fantastical, or at least the larger than life. The remarkable effects of Ernest Atkinson’s Coronation Ale would be a case in point. Many chapters or passages invoke a fairy-tale atmosphere. I felt I could justify all this too. It was partly that I wanted to explore the workings of superstition. I may also have been under the sway of the ‘magical realism’ in vogue at the time. But there was a more basic principle that had operated quietly in my writing before and has done ever since: that one begins with the

ordinary, mundane, even disappointing world we all know and looks for the extraordinary in it. I've always worked that way round, it's a guiding instinct.

What *Waterland* peculiarly provided for me—and it really wasn't anticipated but thrown up by the novel itself—was a special, almost literal stage for the exercise of this instinct. I mean its Fenland setting, which could hardly seem more prosaic and monotonous, but out of which so much of what happens in the book arises. Once I had the Fens—though at first scarcely appreciating it—I had the perfect arena for the counterplay between mere reality, mere flat mundanity and everything in human nature (or just nature) that strives against it—whether history, superstition and human enterprise on the one hand, or elemental forces (water versus land) on the other.

I don't come from the Fens, but from south London. Ever since the book appeared I've had to surprise—sometimes, it seems, let down—people by explaining that I have no personal link with the region and that even my physical research for the novel was minimal. I still find myself disabusing readers, and one awkward but touching aspect of this is that even real Fenlanders can make the assumption that I'm a native—a fellow 'Fenny'. Of course, long before I ever thought of setting a novel there, I'd *seen* the Fens, if only from a train window, and a mere sight can leave a haunting impression, but that was really the extent of my connection. So the novel endorses another of my fiction-writer's faiths: the simple force of the imagination—of fiction itself—which can take us to both geographical and mental territory which isn't indigenously ours.

As far as I can remember, my choosing the Fens was at first arbitrary, even abstract. The novel begins with a dead body floating in a river. I found myself picturing locks, lonely lock-keepers' cottages, a generally watery, low-lying environment . . . But I think in any case that before I wrote *Waterland* I didn't consider the setting of a novel to be that important. What mattered was the human drama, and up to a point, of course, that is broadly true. So I may actively have been looking for a setting that was as unobtrusive as possible. The Fens may have seemed to me the ideal nonsetting, the ideal flat, bare platform for my human drama.

Little did I know. What quickly happened was that the apparent background became a foreground, even a kind of principal character. As my imagination travelled to the Fens, the Fens took hold of my imagination. This realization of their potential not just for physical atmosphere but for all kinds of metaphysical and metaphorical implication was one of the explosive stages