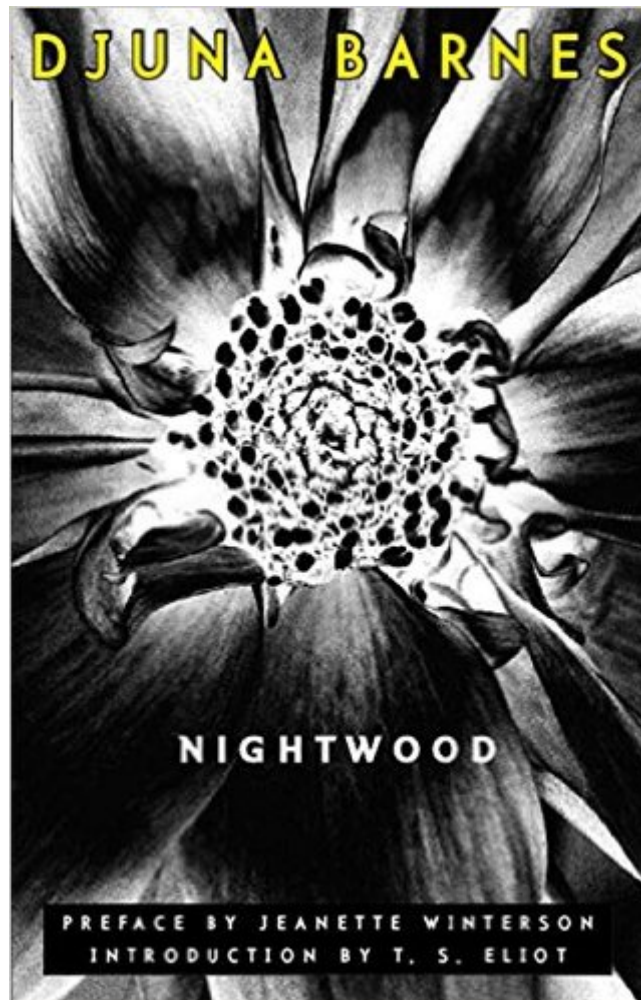


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Nightwood (New Edition)



Synopsis

The fiery and enigmatic masterpieceâ•one of the greatest novels of the Modernist era. Nightwood, Djuna Barnes' strange and sinuous tour de force, "belongs to that small class of books that somehow reflect a time or an epoch" (Times Literary Supplement). That time is the period between the two World Wars, and Barnes' novel unfolds in the decadent shadows of Europe's great cities, Paris, Berlin, and Viennaâ•a world in which the boundaries of class, religion, and sexuality are bold but surprisingly porous. The outsized characters who inhabit this world are some of the most memorable in all of fictionâ•there is Guido Volkbein, the Wandering Jew and son of a self-proclaimed baron; Robin Vote, the American expatriate who marries him and then engages in a series of affairs, first with Nora Flood and then with Jenny Petherbridge, driving all of her lovers to distraction with her passion for wandering alone in the night; and there is Dr. Matthew-Mighty-Grain-of-Salt-Dante-O'Connor, a transvestite and ostensible gynecologist, whose digressive speeches brim with fury, keen insights, and surprising allusions. Barnes' depiction of these characters and their relationships (Nora says, "A man is another persona woman is yourself, caught as you turn in panic; on her mouth you kiss your own") has made the novel a landmark of feminist and lesbian literature. Most striking of all is Barnes' unparalleled stylistic innovation, which led T. S. Eliot to proclaim the book "so good a novel that only sensibilities trained on poetry can wholly appreciate it." Now with a new preface by Jeanette Winterson, Nightwood still crackles with the same electric charge it had on its first publication in 1936.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

First, I should tell you what *Nightwood* isn't. It's not a celebration of love between women, or of the glamour of Paris, or of modernism's traditionally spare aesthetic. It is, however, a wonderful book, which will probably try your patience but will repay your efforts with the pleasure of reading some of the most wonderful writing to have been produced this century. Djuna Barnes, born in the US, spent some twenty years in Europe, during which she wrote innovative journalism, a novel (*Ryder*), short stories, poetry and plays, and, slowly, the autobiographical fictional narrative that was finally published as *Nightwood* in 1936. The novel was hard to place, and finally published by no less of a modernist luminary than T.S. Eliot, then working at Faber and Faber. Barnes' novel chronicles a love affair between two women: Nora Flood, the sometime "puritan," and Robin Vote, a cipher-like "somnambule" -- sleepwalker -- who roams the streets of Paris looking for -- well, it's not quite clear, but it's a fruitless quest she's on. Nora finds herself roaming the streets too, looking for Robin, but, like most of the characters of the novel, she bumps up against Dr Matthew O'Connor instead. O'Connor, an unlicensed doctor from the Barbary Coast, dominates much of the novel with his astounding barrage of anecdote, offering a stream of stories that all point, ultimately, to the sublime misery of romantic obsession. The love story (if it can even be called that) is framed by the history of Felix Volkbein, a self-styled Baron who marries Robin early on, and whose family tree provides the structure on which the rest of this dawdling narrative hangs.

Nightwood is a novel composed in poetic prose, as T.S. Eliot asserts in his preface, the kind of writing that "demands something of the reader that the ordinary novel-reader is not prepared to give." Most novels are not composed at such white-hot intensity, at a level of personal emergency such as Djuna Barnes has conveyed in *Nightwood*. This is a book that doesn't let you rest for a moment, the rare sort of novel that is all conflict and climax. It's a work that you don't doubt was torn living from the author's very being, less a "novel" per se, than an organic and all-but-impossible to dissect whole that loses more the more you attempt to analyze it. What Barnes records in *Nightwood* is the experiential agony, as opposed to merely the "story," of a love-lost. Robin Vote is a Sapphic femme fatal, an androgynous, alcoholic, nymphomaniac enigma who is beloved, successively, by three different characters, who she subsequently leaves an emotional wreck. Nora Flood, who stands in for the author, is the narrative center of *Nightwood* and the woman around whom the others orbit, with Robin, like a doomsday asteroid, orbiting them all. It is Nora who struggles and suffers and indeed understands Robin better than anyone, even if that only means understanding better the tragedy inherent in knowing her at all. Her utter despair at losing Robin is stunningly captured by Barnes who, it is said, based *Nightwood* closely on a real-life love

catastrophe from which she never recovered. One can believe it reading *Nightwood.* A good deal of the novel's intensity comes from its unquestionable authenticity. In Robin Vote, Barnes has created the personification of the unsolvable mystery of every beloved who, as if by destiny, eludes, indeed must elude, our grasp.

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