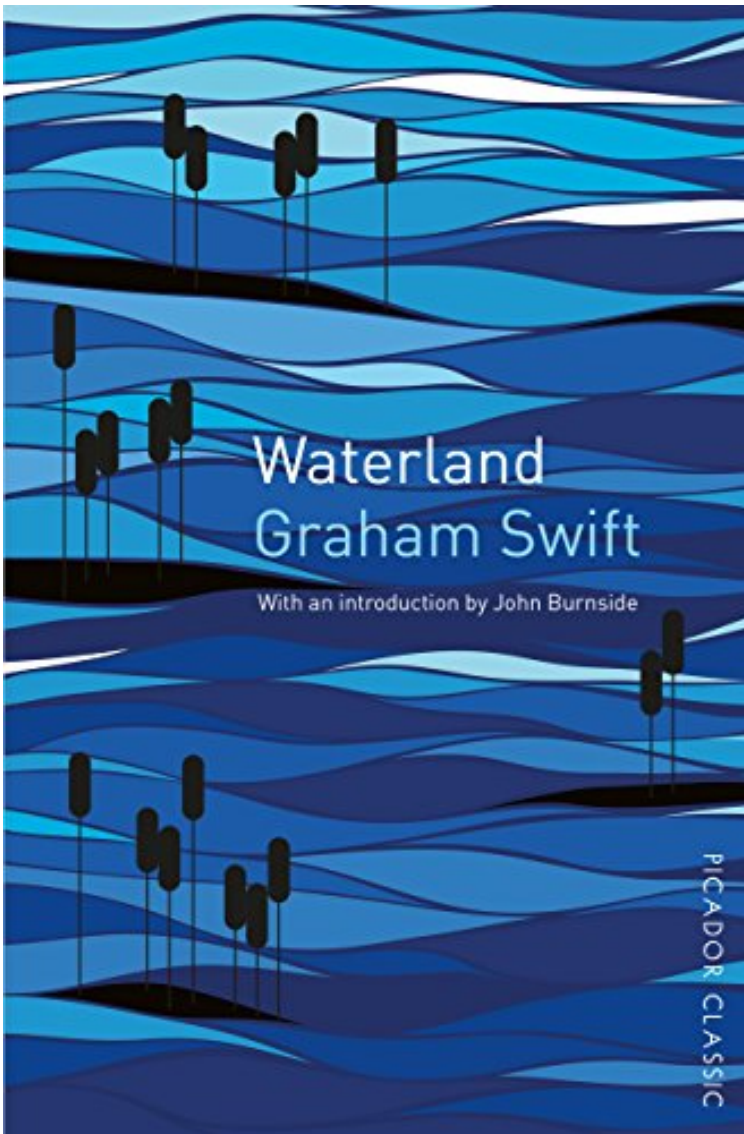


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# Waterland: Picador Classic (English Edition)



*Par Graham Swift*

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**Description :** Description du produitShortlisted for the Booker, winner of the Guardian Fiction Prize

Prsentation de l'diteurWith an introduction by John BurnsideShortlisted for the 1983 Booker prize, winner of the Guardian Fiction Prize.Children, only animals live entirely in the Here and Now. Only nature knows neither memory nor history. But man - let me offer you a definition - is the story-telling animal.Tom Crick is a passionate teacher, but before he is forced into retirement by scandal, he has one last history lesson to deliver: his own. Spanning more than 200 years in the lives of its haunted narrator and his ancestors, Waterland is a visionary tale of England's mysterious Fen country. Taking in eels and incest, ale-making and madness, the discovery of a body and a tragic family romance, this is an extraordinary novel about the heartless sweep of history and man's changing place within it.In the years since its first publication in 1983, Graham Swift's Waterland has established itself as a much-loved classic of twentieth-century British

literature. It was shortlisted for the Booker prize, won the Guardian Fiction Prize and has been adapted into a film starring Jeremy Irons and Ethan Hawke. Excerpted from the Introduction

I was sitting on the steps of a caravan. It was winter and the sun was out. The house we had bought was still a wreck. I was a junior editor at Penguin and Graham had given me the first sixty or so pages of his new novel. I had worked on Grahams second novel *Shuttlecock* and we had become friends. This was his third novel. It was to be called *Waterland*. Almost at once, from the very opening, from those first few promises of stories and ancestry and mothers milk, I knew instinctively that I was in the presence of something extraordinary, something which, when opened fully, was going to envelop me like a glorious burst of light, changing me and the world I lived in forever. Reading a great book is a discovery of its own. The reader feels an almost limitless thrill, like an archaeologist must when stumbling upon a fabled burial site or the lost skull of civilization. It is as if you have discovered this treasure by yourself, and it is yours and yours alone. You take possession of it, guard it jealously. Sure, that moment will pass. Later you will offer up its secrets to others, allow them to talk of it, handle it with (as far as you are concerned) disturbing familiarity, but for those precious hours and days it belongs to no one else, and you hug it closely, protecting every page. That was how I felt, reading those sixty pages. That is how everyone feels, first reading those sixty pages and beyond. It is yours, made just for you. What is more, to some unfathomable degree, it is your story too, in more ways than you thought possible. Circumstances changed. By the time Graham had finished the novel, I had moved to become editor of Picador. In those days Picador was solely a paperback house, but happily, partly thanks to our previous relationship, it came about that *Waterland* would be published by Heinemann in hardcover and a year later in paperback, at Picador. I would edit the novel, along with David Godwin at Heinemann. It was a big book for me. It was a big book for Graham. Its a big book for everyone who reads it. This is a personal introduction, because it seems to me that is what *Waterland* is. A personal book, a book that speaks to the innermost core of the reader, digging into the psyche, asking questions, unearthing feelings, seeding ideas, suspicions, that have laid dormant, as to who you are and where you came from, and why it is that doubt, unease, a sense of unspoken, fearful history, is always there, floating under the surface of the waters of the unknown. In that respect there is a quality to it reserved for the most part to the symphony, an underlying motif, an inference, which travels through the novel almost in a different life form, hovering above it all a note, a call, which lies beyond what is written, emanating from a place that is at one and the same time familiar and utterly new.

Resonance. You travel through *Waterland* on its reverberation. *Waterland* is a strange book in that, contrary to accepted wisdom, it lies outside Swifts usual canon. If one removed *Waterland* from the body of his work and followed the progression of the other novels, they take on a very particular trajectory, his aim (or at least one of them) concentrated on quite a specific target, with clear markers laid out along the way, from *The Sweet Shop Owner* right through to *Wish You Were Here*. Swifts overriding intent, as a writer of prose, is to reduce that prose, the word, the sentence, down to its purest form and thereby to unleash the latent power lying within. Swift becomes, if you like, the novelists equivalent of a nuclear physicist, working towards the day when, freed from impurities, he breaks the word down into its seemingly lightest, most weightless form, releasing moments of dazzling, almost limitless energy. Two instances of this spring immediately to mind. The airport scene in *The Light of Day* a scene of almost religious intensity and, more recently, the moment in *Wish You Were Here* when Major Richards, an army officer and the bearer of bad news, steps out of a car and puts on his cap. That is all he does. He reaches out for his peaked cap resting on the passenger seat, gets out of the car and puts it on, yet in that brief action the weight of the world billows out in shock waves. It is difficult, if not impossible to understand quite how or why. Take the sentences apart, examine them and the power simply slips away, but together, under Swifts tutelage, the intensity is (to use the word in its correct context) awesome. You stand in awe of it. It takes your breath away. But if all his other novels have been fashioned by the novelist from Los Alamos, then *Waterland* has been put together in a more familiar manner, made with more familiar tools, from more familiar elements, and in a more familiar design (albeit an astonishing one). *Waterland* has the appearance of a magnificent engine, a shining and brilliant marvel of construction. It has its oiled wheels, its cogs, its ratchets, its levers. It breathes power. Once begun, there is no stopping *Waterland*; every part sets another part in motion. It is a glorious, bravura construct, producing story after story in a seemingly unstoppable flow. Reading it, we are conscious of it all (*Waterland* like a gleaming Flying Scotsman, perfect and polished, powering over the land), and (in the same vein as up on that railway bank, watching the behemoth pass) we stand in wonder of *Waterlands* physical appearance, beguiled by its complexities, thrilled by the rhythm and hum of it as the novel does its work. (*Waterland* does that other steam-engine thing too being in its presence makes us feel good, makes us feel

part of it. It uplifts.) The people the passengers are similarly held in thrall to this powerhouse, working through its influence, serving its purpose, carried by its energy and its working parts, its locks and waterways, its relentless little pump houses. They, like us, are in its power. But though we are (players and readers alike) conscious of it, this great thing, breathing like a beast, its presence never detracts from its intent, never diverts us from its purpose, why it is there, its reason for delivering its stories and its people with a memorizing fecundity, setting them down and moving them (and us) along. We do not mind how deliberately it lies both outside and inside of us, how its power is experienced both internally and externally; in fact we crave it, and are tied to this Waterland as much as those strapped within. We are all affected, readers and passengers alike, harnessed to the wheel, the piston, to the circumstance, to the sluice gates and the waters as they swirl and surround us and carry us off. Here we have it then Swift as Brunel, brilliant inventor, master builder, blueprint wizard, plotter and planner, a visionary, a user of all materials, creating this Waterland, this wonder of the age, setting his creation free to steam across Great Britain, then continents and oceans to the wider waiting world. Waterland. There it is. He made it for you and me. What did he do, this hatless Isambard? What did he create exactly? What is it, this novel? What is it? Let us start, as the narrator might suggest, at the beginning. Open the first page. Take a look at the blueprint. The Contents. They will give you pause for thought. The first two entries are 1. About the Stars and the Sluice, followed by an oddly resonant phrase (a phrase which accidentally transports us to an age after the book was written), 2. The End of History. So we have three elements already in the mix. Stars - the heavens (space, distance, time), Sluice, a mechanism for controlling current (storing up, letting go a novelists device if ever there was one), and thirdly, The End of History, an unsettling notion, pointing almost to the end of time itself, or when the earth has no more need of it when perhaps the stars have gone out). For our third and fourth chapters we are delivered to firmer, more habitable ground: About the Fens and Before the Headmaster (place and character), and with Bruise upon a Bruise following in their wake, we have the other stuff of novels: conflict. Read on. Back and forth it goes, like, dare I say it, a shuttlecock, the book laying its pattern down, weaving its web: About the Story-telling Animal, About the Rise of the Atkinsons, About Accidental Death (note the philosophical plural there), then suddenly, De la R evolution, a title in French, and later on after Lock-keepers and Grandfathers Aux Armes (is that not from the Marseillaise? Aux armes, citoyens! Formez vos bataillons?) It must be, because after Coronation Ale (back to England and English monarchs complete with heads) comes the Fourteenth of July, again in French, Quatorze Juillet, and following fast, the instruction, despite all that, to Forget the Bastille. This novel, it is clear, will be playing with us, taking us we know not where, from one place to another, dropping us in, whipping us out, past, present, water, land, in, out, up, down, round and round. Yes, forget the Bastille, its not about that at all, its About the Eel, and About the Saviour of the World, About the East Wind, Contemporary Nightmares, Empire-building. In fact, its The Whole Story. The Whole Story? Is that what it is? Here you have an inkling, if not a map, of where this novel intends to take you. Everywhere. Waterland is history, it is exploration. Waterland is geography, lineage. It is commerce, decline and fall, the industrial revolution (the French one too, with heads lopped off) and, like everything around us, it bears the scars of the two great wars of the twentieth century. It is family saga, family secrets, love, licit and otherwise; it is, above all, an exploration into what it is, this history thing, that affects us all, your history, mine, ours. It is saying that we are all part of it, that we are, to use a current phrase, all in it together, that I am connected to you, as you are connected me, though we may not know the how and the when, but theres a link somewhere, back in time, stuck in the roots, or if not there, floating out there, seeds to the future. We cant escape it, this web, this history. Were caught in it. We move along its sticky lines, struggle helplessly in its grip. So where do we begin to make sense of it? How do we begin (the storytellers eternal once-upon-a-time question)? Here then, with Waterland, we have the story as DNA, the novel as gene pool. Which story? His? Hers? How far back? How far forward? Stories and histories, histories and stories, each one fighting for supremacy, Waterland the referee, bringing some semblance of order to the clash between them. The end of History! Price the teenager declaims (a theory Fukuyama offered up as his own decades later for a different reason. Price was closer to a possible truth.) No, its the beginning of a story, Tom Crick, his history teacher says, just not the story youre expecting. Its not King Canute or Robespierre. Its lock-keepers and mad women, bargemen and brewers, attics and funerals; its money and mud, silver and silt, whisky and water, beer and abortions. Its children, children. Its children, what they inherit, what they leave behind . . . the stories they tell . . . But sense. It is possible to make sense? Isnt the schoolboy Price right? Havent we known since 1945 that nothing makes sense anymore? Or is it just that we need help, help to see the sense, if only we could, that unless we hear the stories, listen to them,

understand, acknowledge, there can never be any sense, that stories are our only salvation, that we have to string them together to see the shape they make, the shape we are in. Marooned by the insistent voice of self, we stand by the waters edge, send messages out, hoping that one day someone will hear us, that help will come. Here, our narrator, our history teacher, our storyteller (Tom Crick, of course, sharing the same surname as the Francis Crick who nailed the DNA molecule in 53. Accident? Design?) stands at the canals edge and drops his stories in one by one, hoping that his pupils, his readers, will pick them up as they bob by. They are all one story, naturally, all the same story, just different parts of it stuck in different bottles, and he sends it out, hoping that by writing it down he might make sense of it all too, hoping that help or understanding will come to hand, hoping that he will not go mad in the telling of it. So many things in it to cause madness. The landscape drives people mad. Family life drives people mad. War drives people mad. Sex too. Everything can drive people mad. Madness even. Madness drives people mad. There they are, bottled messages of hope and madness, held in his shaking fingertips, fermenting in a stopper. Except of course that the first bottle, the opening bottle as it were, is an empty one, drained of its (Coronation) ale. The bottle is the message. And the ale itself the Coronation Ale why it transforms people. It (guess what) drives them mad. It wilds the civil breast, sets the mob in it alight. Obscenities are sung, ships run aground, breweries burn down, the whole town leaps about possessed ... the whole town? What about the book? What about Waterland? Now we have it, now we know why Waterland is what it is. Surely Swift must have drunk a fair quantity of Coronation Ale himself, been overcome by a fierce and unstoppable energy which has him dancing over the centuries, gathering stories like a pied piper, having them run in his wake, jostling for attention. For it is true that this Waterland is aflame, that something has happened to the author of *The Sweetshop Owner and Shuttlecock*, that he has been seized by something, a force, a force which has risen up from the flat lands of the fens, its water, its marshes, and driven him to the brink of Waterland's edges . . . Or could it be that nothing is made up, that this is all real, from the drainage to the railway lines and the canal structures, the fires, the deaths, even the body floating in the water? Is that why Waterland strikes such a chord, because it is real, isn't fiction at all, because Coronation Ale was simply a wonder-brew that transported him back to . . . its hard to say exactly when or where? It reads as if true, this Waterland, not simply like a story, but more like a voice, a memory, recalling ... But true or not, it's the beer what done it ... Or if not the beer, perhaps it's the wind, the East Wind, another fabled mixer of minds, which like so many subjects in this encyclo- paedic novel has a chapter all of its own. The East Wind. It seems to me that as a nation we are divided into those who incline to the west coast and those who favour the east. The West is warm, where the Gulf Stream runs, where the winds are wet, where the milder climate lies, where the coast looks out onto vast amounts of empty water. The East is the wind from the Urals and the Russian steppes, cold, unforgiving. The East is the North Sea. The West may have the heat of the sun but the East has its light, the dawn, the dance of time, the beginning. We are a northern race, raised by northern light and northern climes. We are Saxons, Angles, Vikings, Normans. It is from the east that invasion came. It is on, or over, our eastern shores that we have won and lost our battles. Eastern land, eastern seas, invasions and influence and history. So it was no accident (as Melville's Nantucket was no accident for his journey into the heart of America) that Swift chose the Fens for his journey into the heart of England, the eastern tip. Riding in a railway carriage, travelling over the rolling flat, he thought his mind might lay its seeds on this surface, that here might be a land wet enough to spawn a book which could be host to a whole forest of tales, a land half-real, half-concoction itself, a land made in the minds of men, a mix of mist and matter, where his drifting tales could be drained and channelled and poured into the body of the work ... so that this Waterland, this Fen country, is now a land teeming with untold histories, untold mysteries, a land full of people with songs to tell of who and how they were, their hymns ancient and modern. Forget the Sargasso Sea (forget even the Bastille), there's enough stuff here. There is always enough stuff here.

AudioFile Tom Crick, narrator of this fictional autobiography, has just been sacked from a thirty-year teaching career. Waterland, his final lecture to a class of prep school boys, covers his own history, as well as that of the Fens of England. Christian Rodska's portrayal of Crick captures the fine nuances of British irony, bitterness and humor so richly layered throughout the story. His accounts of empire-building are no less fascinating than the entire cassette devoted to the reproductive lives of European eels, and their role in the reproductive lives of certain of the book's characters. Rodska washes the story with an overwhelming sense of melancholy, entirely fitting to Swift's plot. R.P.L. (c)AudioFile, Portland, Maine