

Pre-publication review: *Without the Veil Between*

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Anne has always, and unfairly, been the least celebrated Brontë sister, her work considered less important than that of her siblings and, indeed, even threatened with suppression by her own sister, Charlotte, author of *Jane Eyre*, who wrote to her publisher:

Wildfell Hall it hardly appears to me desirable to preserve. The choice of subject in that work is a mistake, it was too little consonant with the character, tastes and ideas of the gentle, retiring, inexperienced writer.

Inexperienced? Hardly, as DM Denton's meticulously researched and beautifully written account of Anne's life so acutely delineates. Now, of course, we recognise *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Anne's second and final novel, as being far ahead of its time in its close study of a woman's determination to escape her abusive marriage.

Without the Veil Between catches both the triumph and the tragedy of Anne's short but quietly courageous and determined life. Her disappointments and heartbreak patiently borne; her originality of thought in opposition to contemporary mores; her searing and unflinching insights into the experiences of women and the need for resistance and positive action that we now call feminism.

This is no cosy account of three sisters living in harmony in their parsonage home while happily creating their masterpieces for posterity. DM Denton convincingly explores the tensions that existed between the sisters as well as their mutual love and support; and the security and emotional comfort Anne found within her family juxtaposed with the need to separate herself in some way. This is perfectly captured in the author's precise description of both Charlotte and Anne being "torn between the calling to leave and the longing to stay". Here, also, we see the author's careful and measured examination of the different personalities at work within the Brontë family: Charlotte is driven to venture out

more by “curiosity and enterprise”, while Anne’s purpose is a serious and morally driven desire to develop character and endurance, and demonstrate what she is capable of. And, indeed, it is she of all the sisters who does endure for longest in the world of work: five years as a governess before she resigned, probably due to the ignominy of her brother Branwell’s disastrous liaison with her pupils’ mother.

DM Denton skillfully captures Anne’s distinctive personality and strength of character while poignantly contrasting this with her frail constitution, blighted by asthma and then the tuberculosis that killed her at such a young age. The final pages of the book leading to Anne’s inevitable demise are written with a simplicity and restraint that is intensely moving and wholly convincing.

Above all, DM Denton reveals the Anne that Charlotte could not – or would not – see. This book gives us Anne. Not Anne, the ‘less gifted’ sister of Charlotte and Emily (although we meet them too as convincingly drawn individuals); nor the Anne who ‘also wrote two novels’, but Anne herself, courageous, committed, daring and fiercely individual: a writer of remarkable insight, prescience and moral courage whose work can still astonish us today.