

Jean Rhys & Wide Sargasso Sea: Background



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Jean Rhys, born on August 24, 1890, in Dominica (then part of the British West Indies), was a British author of Dominican and Welsh descent. Her full name was Ella Gwendolen Rees Williams, but she adopted the pen name Jean Rhys when she began her writing career. Rhys spent her early years in the Caribbean and later moved to England at the age of 16 to attend school. Her experiences of displacement, cultural alienation, and a sense of not belonging strongly influenced her writing.

Rhys wrote *Wide Sargasso Sea*, published in 1966, as a response and prequel to Charlotte Brontë's classic novel, *Jane Eyre*. Rhys was inspired by Brontë's portrayal of the "madwoman in the attic," Bertha Mason, who is presented as a mysterious and villainous character. Rhys sought to give voice and agency to this marginalised character, whom she named Antoinette Cosway.

Wide Sargasso Sea explores the backstory and experiences of Antoinette, a Creole heiress in 19th-century Jamaica who becomes the first wife of Mr. Rochester, the male protagonist in *Jane Eyre*. Rhys delves into Antoinette's childhood, her relationship with her mother, her struggles with identity, and her eventual descent into madness. Through the novel, Rhys addresses themes of race, colonialism, power dynamics, and gender inequality.

Wide Sargasso Sea is considered a seminal work of postcolonial literature and a significant contribution to feminist and Caribbean literature. It reflects Rhys' own personal experiences and her exploration of identity, displacement, and the effects of colonialism on individuals and cultures.