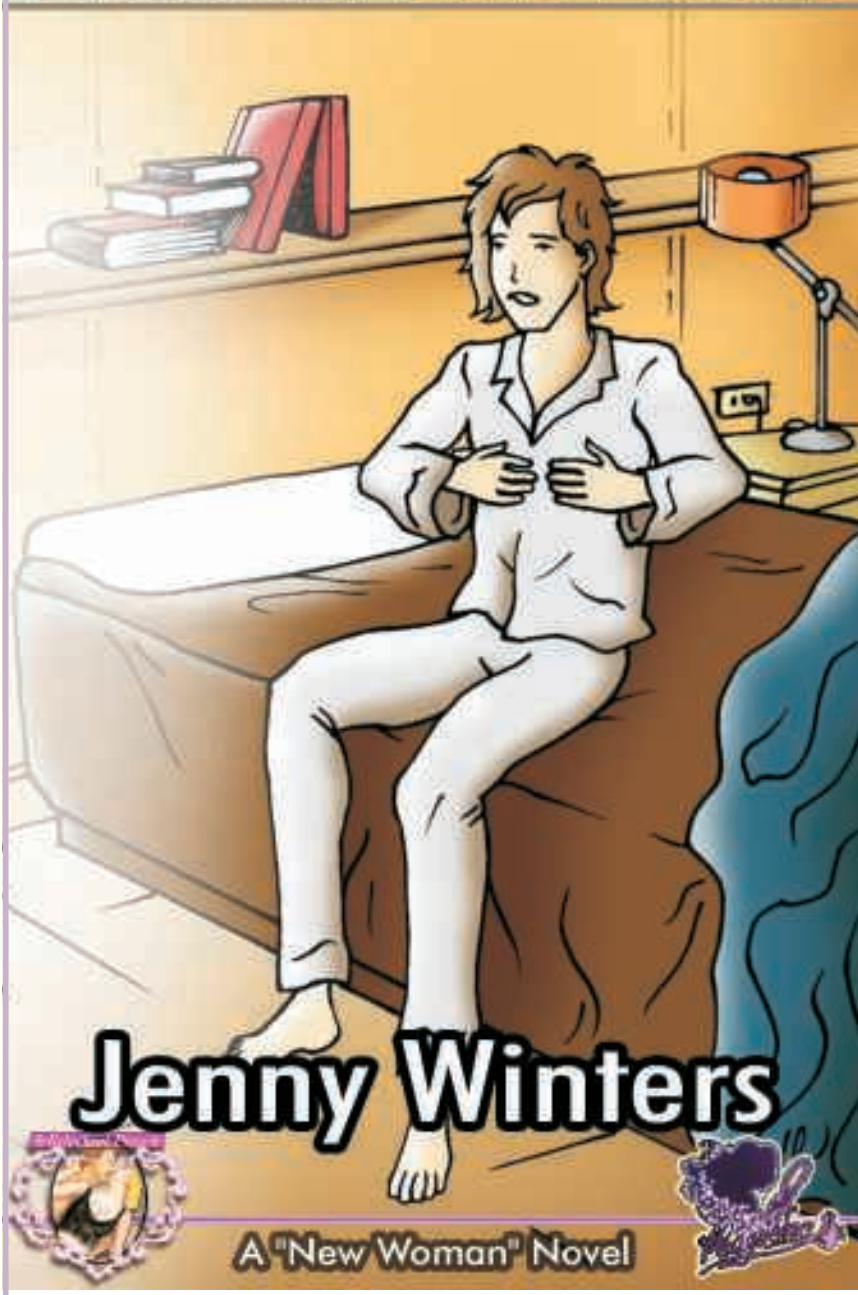


Zoltan: The Book



Jenny Winters



A "New Woman" Novel



Reluctant Press TV/TS Publishers

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Zoltan: The Book

By Jenny Winters

Was this ever what I wanted? I stood nervously as my dress was arranged around me, then I checked my makeup for the fifteenth time.

I could hear the sounds from the next room which would soon change to my cue to enter. I took a deep breath as the veil was adjusted over my hair and face and then it was time.

I put my hands put to receive my bouquet, then slowly started to walk towards the front where the celebrant stood watching. Andy stood with his back to me and I felt a real shudder of excitement as I walked towards them.

We stood facing each other as the words were spoken. I didn't really listen until there was a pause. This was my cue.

"I do," I said.

"I now pronounce you man and wife."

More words; I didn't really hear them, then Andy lifted my veil and pulled me into a soft kiss. I heard the applause from our friends and colleagues gathered to be our witnesses.

Together, hand-in-hand, we walked back through the throng. I loved the feeling. This was tradition.

There was the food and the drink, the speeches and the first dance. It was really happening to me.

But I wanted it to be over quickly so that I could get my hands on him.

"Why do you want to go in there?"

"It's a junk shop. You never know what's in there until you look."

"But there can't be anything you want in there," Andy persisted. "If it's any use, it's not going to end up in a Goodwill shop."

"You never know until you've had a look."

"But we're here for the beer and the girls."

"Don't I know it? My head says we did a lot of the beer. Remind me; how did we do with the girls?"

"I don't think we did so well there."

"Maybe that's because we had too much beer?"

"I guess so. Even you wouldn't go out with me in the state that I was in when I got to bed last night."

“You got to bed? I woke up on the floor, fully dressed.”

“I think I slept on the floor before I got to bed.”

“If you’re going in there, I’ll meet you in the bar at the end of the street.”

“Okay, I don’t expect that I’ll be long. Mine’s a beer anyway. I remember it’s your turn.”

“I’ll believe it’s my turn but I don’t believe you remember anything about last night.”

I looked in the window. It was dusty and everything was in a jumble, looking like it had been there a long time and it was just as long since someone last dusted in there.

An old-fashioned bell sounded as I walked through the door. There was stuff everywhere; on the floor and in cabinet, piled precariously and in tumbled heaps. I didn’t know where to start looking, not that I knew what I was looking for anyway.

I loved the smell though. It wasn’t musty and neglected despite all the chaos and seeming neglect. I looked at the old guitars; that’s always where I start but there was nothing to catch my eye as a bargain. They were all brands I didn’t know, obviously copies of better things, and sounding dull.

The bookshelves had that scent of old books. Surprisingly there was no sign of Harry Potter, or Buffy; no “Fifty Shades” or Chick Lit. There were books in French and Spanish, of which I had a little knowledge. Books in Cyrillic script or far eastern languages were completely foreign to me.

You’ll have to forgive the pun.

On the left hand end of the bottom shelf was a really old looking volume. The spine wasn't printed or gold leaf. It looked like it had been handwritten very carefully in an old-fashioned script which I couldn't make out at that distance.

I picked it up and opened it to the title page. It was also hand written in the same script as the spine. "Zoltan: The Book" I read and started to turn the pages. The feel told me that it was probably years since anyone had done the same.

The more I looked, the more I became fascinated. It wasn't a printed book in the normal sense, although the pages had been bound at some time. It was a compilation of sorts, although for what purpose was unclear.

There were printed pages, some in French and old German. Some looked to be eastern European, maybe Bohemian was my guess, and then there were some pages onto which handwritten notes had been pasted. The more pages I turned, the more fascinated I became. I recognised a few words and guessed it was a collection of fables and maybe of old magic.

I put it down, wondering if there was a shopkeeper anywhere as I looked further. I looked at old chess sets and a few battered lanterns, but the book seemed to call me back and I picked it up again.

I turned the pages, oblivious to time passing and my beer going flat on the end of the bar. I wondered if the translation programme on my laboratory computer could make sense of the languages. I was fascinated and I knew that I was going to buy it whatever the cost.

I stood at the counter; surely someone would have heard me by now. I waited and then called a soft

“hello” but there was no response. I rattled a coin on the shelf, breaking the silence with a hard noise, and waited. I thought I could hear some movement in the rear but still no one came.

I knew I’d have to move on. Andy would be waiting for me and he’d probably have drunk my beer as well as his own by now. I pulled a fifty from my wallet, thinking it was way above what the book would have cost.

I put it on the counter and was about to leave with the book in my hand when a voice called.

“Aren’t you going to wait for your change?”

I turned to see an elderly lady, dressed as if she’d popped out of a Victorian novel. Her eyes were bright and her smile made her seem much younger than she had at first appeared. Her accent was stilted and a little guttural but don’t ask me where she could have come from.

“I see Zoltan’s book has chosen you,” she said. “I have been waiting so long for you to come to my shop.”

“There must be some mistake,” I said gently. “I’ve never been here before. I saw your shop as I was passing.”

“That’s good,” she said. “I’m not here as often as I used to be.”

“It’s pure chance I saw the book,” I said. “I came for a short break; girls and beer, before the next term starts.”

“But the book has chosen you.” She handed me some notes as change; I didn’t look and put them in

my pocket. "It has its own case which I shall get for you now."

She reached under the counter and gestured for me to give her the book. She put it into a case, closed it with a loud click, and handed it to me. It was an old and burnished leather folder with a clasp that looked like old brass.

"Isn't there a key?" I asked.

"The true owner needs no key. It will always open for you when you want it, but no others may open it."

"Do I need to ask you to show me how to open it?"

"There is no need. Use it well and do no harm; it will send harm to you if you try," she said. "The book will always look after you."

"I don't know if I'll be able to understand it all," I said.

"You will, have no fear. The book has always chosen its keepers well."

I didn't know how to reply to that. I smiled, nodded to her, and left the shop with my purchase under my arm.

"What took you so long? Andy asked when I arrived in the bar. "I thought you'd gone to the wrong place."

"I'm sorry; it took longer than I expected in the shop." I waved to the barmaid to bring another couple of beers.

"I see you couldn't resist buying something." Andy raised his glass in a mock toast. "Here's to the shop-

keeper. That guy could recognise a mug when he saw one.”

“It was a lady,” I replied. “It didn’t cost much either.”

I pulled the crumpled notes from my pocket to pay the barmaid. I handed her a twenty and looked at the notes again. I remembered giving a fifty in the shop but now I seemed to have much more than that on the bar in front of me.

I counted it out. There was four hundred and fifty there in crumpled notes. I counted it again and got the same result.

“I’ll have to go back,” I said. “She’s given me far too much change.”

“You don’t need to go back right now,” Andy said. “You’re already a couple of beers behind and we’ve done nothing yet.”

“But I wouldn’t like her to think I was dishonest,” I said. “She may have closed by the time we pass there again.”

“You can always push the notes through the door on the way back to the hotel later if she’s closed. She probably never noticed anyway.”

“How do you open this thing?” Andy tried the clasp on the book’s case. “It seems to be jammed.”

“It does.” I tried too and failed. “The book slipped in when I was in the shop. The lady didn’t tell me that there was any secret to opening it.”

“It must really be something to have a case like this.” Andy turned it over.

“I’ll try it when I get back to my room,” I decided. “I don’t want to damage it by forcing it open.”

With that I tucked the case under my arm as Andy and I continued on our way from bar to bar. I was careful not to get as over served as I had been the night before and didn’t try to keep up with Andy. He always seemed to have hollow legs whenever we went out.

And the book stayed with me. I don’t know how, for I was careless as we meandered from bar to restaurant to bar and bar again. I remembered it usually but when I didn’t, there was always someone who ran after me and pushed the case with the book into my hands.

It was as if the book had chosen me and I couldn’t lose it.

Next day, I was up early and resolved to return the money to the lady in the shop. I retraced my steps, or I thought I did. I tried again but couldn’t find the shop. I asked in my hotel and asked a passing police officer who looked at me as if I’d gone mad.

“There’s nothing like that anywhere near here. If there was, I’d have seen it and I haven’t,” he told me. “Are you sure you hadn’t been drinking and just thought there was a shop?”

Of course I had been drinking but I was sure that I had a clear head when I went into the shop.

“It’s been a good break,” Andy said as we shook hands at the end of our trip. “At least we got the beer right, even if the girls didn’t seem to like us much.”

“I think that could be something to do with all the beer,” I replied, hiding the fact that I wasn’t too disappointed. “After Chania, I’m not really in the mood for another relationship right now.”

“I think I know how you feel,” Andy replied. “Your dating history is worse than mine.”

I went back to my townhouse and unpacked. I went back to work the next day and the book lay ignored on my desk as I cleared the backlog of reports waiting for me.

I worked long hours in the laboratory; it wasn’t the most exciting work but it stopped me from feeling sorry for myself and my solitary state. I was testing additives for detergents at the time, looking for cheaper and more effective ingredients. Yes, life really was that exciting.

It was a few weeks later when the book re-appeared in my life. It had been under a stack of loose papers which suddenly fell to the floor. My eyes were drawn to the case, rather than to the mess I’d have to clear up later.

I picked up the case and looked at the ancient tooling of the leather. It was quite beautiful and had aged well. As it lay in my hands, there was a click and the clasp opened to my touch. I took the book in my hands and put the case on the desk.

I opened the cover and read the frontispiece, where the date 1686 was inscribed. To my surprise, the pages had the texture and style that I remembered but now they were in a language that I could understand. They crackled as if brittle as I turned the pages.

I'm not going to quote the exact words as I read them but the book purported to be a book of magic; a book of spells for the owner to use whenever and wherever they wished. It promised endless delight as long as no harm was intended or came as a result. It was a guide to endless pleasure.

As I read, the options seemed impossible. Surely this was a book of the deranged fantasies of someone with a mental illness, undiagnosed in those bygone days. I read again.

In an old-fashioned language, the book's chapters unfolded spells and incantations. They were only to be used by the owner of the book; that was made very clear. They could only act upon the owner of the book and the world would shape itself in accord with the owner's choices and actions.

I didn't understand it at all. I'd be misleading you if I pretended that as I read, all the implications of the words became clear to me. Far from it; I think the more I read, the greater my disbelief.

I put it aside with a sigh. The world has long lost its belief in magic and all that nonsense. I scoffed and put the book back into its case and clicked it shut.

But if only any of the things I had read could be true.

Life gets lonely sometimes. Chania was a distant memory; even the lingering scent of her perfume had faded from my bedroom. It was another weekend and since I'd worked such long hours, there was no reason to head to the laboratory.

I took a late breakfast in my local coffee shop. I wasted time having nothing pressing to do. I wandered aimlessly by the lakeside, watching as the world passed me by, reluctant to go home until rain made me head back.

I remember that day so well. I tried to read a journal article which my boss had emailed to me but my heart wasn't in it and I couldn't concentrate.

I looked at the table beside my desk. The book was there. How it got there, I didn't know. I must have put it there myself; there was no one else who could have moved it. It was as if it was calling to me. I know it sounds silly but that's what I could feel right then.

I picked it up and took it from the case. I opened the book randomly and the way it fell made me wonder if it had chosen that page for me. I began to read and this time I discovered that I had more attention. No, that's not right; I had more belief in what I was reading.

It said that if I wanted to use any of the charms or magic spells, I had to cleanse and sit calmly alone in the centre of a circle of eight candles burning in the evening. That was a day when I'd nothing else to do and nowhere to go.

I headed for the shower, then remembered that I hadn't any candles. Somehow, it felt urgent that I get some so I didn't go to eBay. I got my jacket, went shopping for candles and remembered to buy a lighter as well.

I headed for the shower again, scrubbed and shampooed under hot water and then a quick burst of cold to wake me up. I dried and dressed again. I arranged my candles in a circle and lit them.

I was feeling a little stupid and self-conscious as I sat in the centre of the circle but there was no one to know what I was doing. I sat and waited for something to happen. Nothing did.

I stepped out of the circle and picked up the book again. This time I re-read it carefully. I'd come this far, surely it couldn't harm to pay more attention to the instructions. I flipped to the page again. This time, it was even easier to read. It was like the book was adapting to me; it wanted me to understand.

It told me that I needed to have some object in mind when I sat in the circle, something I desired. I should think carefully about what I wanted to achieve. It said that I should sit facing South and leave my clothes outside the circle. I had to sit comfortably and have the circle wide enough for me to lie down if I needed to do so.

I read it again. It was hard to believe that the instructions which I'd read as so vague were now so detailed and clear. The extra bit this time was that I had to hold the book on my lap, inside its case, whilst I was in the circle.

What object should I have in mind? That was difficult. Should I ask a question like I would with a fortune teller? Should I ask for wealth, everlasting youth, or wish a plague upon people who weren't friendly like Chania who never seemed short of friends and good times?

Then I remembered the admonition to do no harm. I stepped into the circle and sat. I placed the book back into its case and heard the click as it secured itself. I thought of Chania, her friends, and good times. I didn't make a wish, I simply thought of how good her life seemed to be since she dumped me.

I must have fallen asleep or maybe I was in a trance or, as a scientist might say, an altered state of being. I was still naked and the book was still in its case on my lap but the candles had burned away and gone out.

I blinked, then I moved. I knew at once that something had changed when a heavy lock of hair fell in front of my eyes; I looked down and couldn't believe what I saw. I had breasts; not male breasts but full feminine ones with brown areolae and firm nipples.

I had to touch them to make sure that they were real. I could feel the swell of the breast under my hands and when I brushed my fingers lightly over the nipples, I knew they were real and that they were really part of me.

You'll know what I did next. My hand went to feel between my legs. There was nothing dangling there; nothing protruding. My fingers felt inside the lips I found there. They felt the warmth and moisture, the sensitive bit just inside.

A tremor ran through me and I knew what it would feel like to have a big penis there again. How I got to that feeling, I can't remember. Maybe it was instinct. All I know is that I did.

I took a deep breath and sighed to calm down. I ran my fingers through my hair and pulled it forwards to see how it was now a gorgeous shade of light russet brown, so long that it would fall between my shoulder blades.

I looked for the book. It was nowhere to be seen. My apartment wasn't as I remembered it either,

When I looked out of the window, I didn't recognise anything.

As I sat and thought, I wondered why I wasn't feeling a great sense of panic. Instead I felt a wonderful sense of calm and completeness. I'm not putting this well, but you have to understand; while all this was new to me, it didn't feel that way. The world seemed to be in its right place.

The light of the day was fading as I stood, pulled the drapes, and switched on the light. I blinked and the first thing I saw was a pair of heels, not high heels but distinctly female heels, nude and shiny with an ankle strap and open toes.

I knew that these weren't the suede loafers that I'd taken off, yet I knew somehow that they were my shoes.

I looked at the pile of clothes that I'd roughly discarded before sitting in the circle. I picked them up and saw a pale blue bra and matching panties, tights, and a denim skirt covering a black silk shirt with long sleeves. I didn't think twice this time; I knew that they were my clothes.

I dressed easily; I didn't have to think about it at all. It was as if I'd been wearing a bra and heels all my life. I walked into my bedroom and something told me that all had changed but right then I couldn't tell what it was.

This was a woman's bedroom. There were perfumes on the dressing table and a bulging makeup bag on the bed. I knew it was Saturday evening and that I was single. I should be going out on the prowl.

I remembered who I was, or rather, I remembered who I'd been and went to collect the book. I looked

round and placed it carefully at the bottom of my wardrobe, right at the back under the long skirt of my favourite black formal dress.

It was really strange. I knew I was a man but feeling and acting like a girl seemed only natural. I wanted to call Andrea, my best girlfriend. I knew we'd go out together, a meal and a few drinks somewhere special, and then I'd find a man to bring home.

I knew I wanted to bring a man home. There was a feeling of emptiness deep inside me. It had been a long time since someone had wanted me. Tight there and then I had a great urge inside me and I wanted it filled with a man's lust.

"Andie, are you ready for a night on the town?" I asked as soon as she picked up my call.

"Sure am, honey, I thought you'd never call," Andie replied. "It seems ages since we went hunting together."

"Those boys won't know what's hit them," I replied. "I'll get an Uber and see you at the Sahara Club in an hour."

That arranged, I brushed out my hair and piled it into a messy sort of up-do. It looked great, if I do say so myself. My fingers seemed to know exactly how to do it.

It was the same with makeup. I knew how to make my eyes dark and dramatic. I glued my false lashes perfectly, then did my lips to kissable perfection. On a whim, I changed my blue bra and panties for black silky ones. I loved the way the bra pushed up my breasts to an almost indecent cleavage.

What to wear over it? I looked through my wardrobe and then my second wardrobe. As a girl, I sure had a lot of clothes and shoes.

“It’s got to be something black and short,” I said to myself. “There’s no easier way to make the boys look and the way I’m feeling, I don’t want any of them to miss me.”

I took dresses from the rack and held each in turn against me and looked in the mirror. I chose the one with the cap sleeves and the deepest neckline. It was quite low cut at the back but I didn’t care if they got a glimpse of my black bra straps. It would add to the image. I laid the dress on the bed.

“Garter belt or tights?” I asked myself.

I thought for a moment and decided on the garter belt. I knew the dress was really short and tight and the tabs might show, but putting the goods on display was a form of advertising anyway.

“Girl, you look ready to challenge any man,” I said to my lingerie-clad reflection and blew a kiss coquettishly.

I was enjoying all this. Deep down I knew that this wasn’t me but there was some sort of mental disconnect. I was a man. I knew that but I was this girl, this *woman* who was going on the prowl.

It should have seemed different and wrong, but it didn’t. I knew that the book had done this through some kind of spell but I’d never believed in magic. Now I knew that magic existed but I didn’t question it. I didn’t wonder how to get back to being myself.