

JOYCE CAROL OATES

BY JESSICA TEISCH

"A FUTURE ARCHEOLOGIST EQUIPPED WITH ONLY [JOYCE CAROL OATES'S] OEUVRE COULD EASILY PIECE TOGETHER THE WHOLE OF POSTWAR AMERICA."

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR., *THE NATION*.

Joyce Carol Oates is one of America's most prolific fiction writers—her impressive body of work includes almost 30 novels, more than 400 short stories, dozens of volumes of poetry, nonfiction, literary criticism, and essays, as well as dramas and screenplays. Her genre is as diverse as her style, which ranges from realistic (*We Were the Mulvaney's* and *Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?*) to gothic and surrealistic (*A Bloodsmoor Romance*). Her excavation of America is consistently dark, a penetrating search into the abysmal human condition. "I am concerned with only one thing," Oates claims: "the moral and social conditions of my generation" (*Chicago Book World*). But what she mines—violence combined with spiritual, sexual, and intellectual ennui—speaks to men and women of any era.

Oates derives many of her themes from her working-class upbringing in rural New York. She was born in 1938 in Erie County, where she attended a one-room schoolhouse. She earned her BA at Syracuse University and MA in English at the University of Wisconsin, where she met and married Raymond Smith. In 1962 they settled in Detroit, where Oates wrote her first bestseller, *them*. That same year she published her first short story, "The Fine White Mist of Winter," which was se-

lected for both the *O. Henry Awards* and *Best American Short Stories*. Following a ten-year stint at the University of Windsor in Canada, she moved to Princeton, New Jersey, in 1978, where she continues to teach Princeton University's creative writing program (along with Toni Morrison, John McPhee, and Edmund White). Oates and her husband also run a small press and publish a literary magazine, *The Ontario Review*.

"Women Writers" and Violence

Oates's works have raised considerable controversy over what it means to be a female writer. When critics address the violence in her writing, they often conclude that her childhood must have somehow distorted her vision of humankind. "You had an unhappy childhood?" some ask. "You were often frightened by life?" (*The New York Times*, 3/29/81). Oates, who hates being pegged as a "woman" writer, considers these questions "insulting" and "sexist," for they assume that the sphere of "male" writing includes war, rape, and murder, while the "female" one is exclusively domestic (*The New York Times*, 5/10/92).

Nor should such gender categories exist. For all "serious" writers, Oates claims, "take for their natural subjects

WHERE TO START

A daunting task, as Oates has been prolific across numerous genres and media. Oates is a master of the short story, and **WHERE ARE GOING...** is a collection of some of her best work. For classic Oates, turn to **THEM**. For Oates with a dash of hope, try **WE WERE THE MULVANEYS**.

the complexity of the world, its evils as well as its goods." The writer "bears witness," transforming reality into an aesthetic vision (*The New York Times*, 3/29/81). And much of this reality is violent—from Detroit's race riots to adultery. Women are no less familiar than men with violence and no less apt to write about it—particularly its psychological effects. Critics often hail *A Bloodsmoor Romance*, for example, as a modern-day *Little Women*. Yet the former explores few of Louisa May Alcott's more polite themes. Similarly, *On Boxing* explores the "romance" of violence, the "mysterious and terrible brotherhood of men" from a female perspective (*The New York Times*, 3/19/89). Yet Oates is more interested in what she calls "the phenomenon of violence and its aftermath," the psyches of perpetrators and victims (*The New York Times*, 3/29/81). Most of her female victims seek identity through sexual relationships, marriage, and motherhood. ("What does it mean to be a woman?" asks Maureen Wendall in *them*.) Yet their powerlessness to affirm the roles they choose leads to victimization, obsession, irrationality—and another cycle of violence.

MAJOR WORKS

Expensive People (1968)

Oates planned *Expensive People* as the second in a trilogy of novels, which included *A Garden of Earthly Delights* and *them*. This novel, like the oth-

er two, examines the American dream gone awry.

THE STORY: "I was a child murderer." Those words aptly summarize Oates's chilling look into an affluent, morally corrupt suburb, where the precocious Richard Everett, a 250-pound 18-year old, impassively chronicles the murder of his mother seven years before.

"Miss Oates is an intelligent writer with considerable mimetic skill if not, on the face of it, much originality. ...

[Her] talents are evident enough; but the real question is what she intends doing with them, and whether she can see herself going beyond the imitation of established masters and the reenactment of familiar cultural myths." Bernard Bergonzi, *The New York Review of Books*, 1/2/69.

"[Expensive People] is satire, confession, dream, report on suburbia, gothic tale in contemporary dress, with even some touches of the pop novel thrown in to show that the author can find a valid use for the screech of that untuned fiddle, too. But though her technique is eclectic, parodistic, sheer magpie, her bits of everything are fused into a prophetic novel as singular in effect as the night cry of a hurt animal." R. V. Cassill, *Washington Post Book World*, 11/3/68.

THE BOTTOM LINE: A gothic tale worthy of Oates novices and experts alike.

EXPENSIVE PEOPLE

JOYCE CAROL OATES

OATES: SELECTED WORKS

We have included a sampling of her other novels here. For descriptions of all her novels, please visit our website:
www.bookmarksmagazine.com.

With Shuddering Fall (1964)

Oates's first novel. An obsession between two lovers ends in explosive self-destruction.

A Garden of Earthly Delights (1967)

♦ *National Book Award finalist, 1968*
♦ *Rosenthal Foundation Award of the National Institute of Arts and Letters*
Clara's world revolves around four men who pull her in competing directions. Like the Bosch painting, the pleasures of the flesh are extolled, but not without transgression.

Wonderland (1971)

♦ *National Book Award finalist, 1971*
Oates delves into the human psyche with Jesse, whose boyhood is shattered by murder and whose parent-hood is marred by the spiritual loss of his child.

Bellefleur (1980)

♦ *Nominated for a Los Angeles Times Book Prize in fiction, 1980*
Oates explores six generations of the Bellefleur family's gothic empire and its quirky members—including a mass murderer, a brilliant boy-scientist, and a female vampire.

A Bloodsmoor Romance (1982)

Like Bellefleur, a magical masterpiece set in nineteenth-century Victoriana. One by one, each of the five Zinn daughters escapes her family—through kidnappings, scandalous marriages, and work.

American Appetites (1989)

Ian and Glynnis McCullough embody the American Dream. At least that's how it appears to their ambitious

and admiring friends, colleagues, and lovers. But after 26 years of marriage, their lives begin to crack from within—and the American dream shatters.

Foxfire: Confessions of a Girl Gang (1993)

Oates explores a sisterhood of blood involving five high school girls in a blue-collar town in upstate New York in the 1950s. Their bond triumphs over massive violence, sexual abuse, and exploitation.

Zombie (1995)

♦ *Bram Stoker Award for Horror, Horror Writers of America, 1996*
♦ *Fisk Fiction Prize, 1996*

Based loosely on the life of Jeffrey Dahmer. Quentin P. is a bit of a problem child, a sexual psychopath and killer. He describes his murders from the perspective of an innocent outsider, creating a narrative full of psychological distortion.

them (1969)

✦ National Book Award winner, 1970

Oates based the character of Maureen on her friendship with a student at the University of Detroit. Her initial feeling about her student's life was, "This must be fiction, this can't all be real!" Maureen's world had such power over Oates that she claimed in her Author's note that the novel wrote itself.

THE STORY: "them" is Loretta Wendall, her daughter Maureen, and her son Jules, a trio held together by hatred, love, and history. The story takes place in Detroit between 1937 and 1967, where the family is trapped in a cycle of violence and poverty. Loretta attempts to flee her past mistakes, but watches in horror as her children repeat them.

"them has genuine power and pathos, but it often manifests a talent exasperatingly misguided about itself. . . . What she is good at is . . . a generalizing or common psychology, the observation which is poignantly shrewd about how people behave." Christopher Ricks, *The New York Review of Books*, 2/12/70.

"Miss Oates wrote a vehement, voluminous, kaleidoscopic novel, more deeply rooted in social observation than current fiction usually tends to be . . . she has furnished [her characters] with a nice little streak of domesticated craziness that keeps the novel fluid and enables it to hit us, every so often, a crashing unpredictable blow over the back of the head." Robert M. Adams, *The New York Times*, 9/28/69.

THE BOTTOM LINE: Oates's first masterpiece, a classic reimagining of the American experience during one of the nation's most turbulent periods.

On Boxing (1987)

Oates first became interested in boxing as a child. Her father took her to Golden Gloves matches and instilled in her an appreciation for the sport. Now, Oates shows how boxing "has become America's tragic theater" (*On Boxing*).

THE ESSAY: A nostalgic look at boxing from every conceivable angle: boxing and gender, boxing in literature and film, boxing and symbolism, women and boxing, boxing and American culture.

"At least Oates is honest about what appeals to her in boxing. It is the blood." Garry Wills, *The New York Review of Books*, 2/18/88.

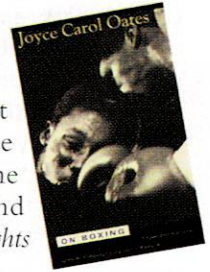
"Joyce Carol Oates['s]. . . writing on boxing may be the finest the sport has inspired." Salon.com, 9/21/99.

"Ms. Oates takes the violence of boxing in her stride, for



she knows as well as anyone that many of us do violence to other people - in love, in business, in friendship and in print, and that each of these is more painful than punches." Anatole Broyard, *The New York Times*, 3/15/87.

THE BOTTOM LINE: *On Boxing* is not just for boxing aficionados, but also for those interested in exploring the masculine mystique. See Joyce Carol Oates and Daniel Halpern, eds., *Reading the Fights* (1988).



Because It Is Bitter, and Because It Is My Heart (1990)

Oates whisks us back to American life in the 1950s and '60s, where an invisible color line separates society. She based Iris's personality on aspects of herself, and Jinx's life on a boy she knew in junior high school.

THE STORY: Fate links two upwardly mobile families—the Courtneys, who are white, and the Fairchilds, who are black. After Iris Courtney witnesses a murderous fight between Jinx Fairchild and an aggressor, she and Jinx form a bond that redefines their roles in a racially divided nation.

"Oates has put aside the fear common to white writers that they will be considered presumptuous in attempting to comprehend the lives of black people, and has lived up to the novelist's obligation to imagine the lives of her people. At its most powerful, [the book] shows us history refracted through fiction, as it becomes moral knowledge." Patricia Storace, *The New York Review of Books*, 8/16/90.

"The real spine of the book may be its brilliant depiction of downward mobility, the painful fragility of the Courtneys' standing in the world. . . . [This] is less a novel about public history than one about private memory, the narratives by which we fashion our lives." Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Nation*, 7/2/90.

THE BOTTOM LINE: Considered one of Oates's most significant achievements in its dramatization of an interracial teenage romance.



Black Water (1992)

✦ Pulitzer Prize finalist, 1993

✦ National Book Critics Circle Award, finalist, 1992

A fictional rendering of the Chappaquiddick incident, from the viewpoint of the drowning young woman.

THE STORY: Kelly Kelleher is an idealistic 26-year old when she meets the Senator at a Fourth of July party. We enter Kelly's thoughts as she becomes the Senator's lover. But her affair, as we well know, ends in tragedy.

"What is even more impressive is the fact that the spec-

tacle here is provided by an incident we had previously consigned to the tabloids, or to cocktail-party speculation, or to the footnotes in history books. . . . Taut, powerfully imagined and beautifully written, *Black Water* ranks with the best of Joyce Carol Oates's already long list of distinguished achievements." Richard Bausch, *The New York Times*, 5/10/92.



"[O]ne must wonder if it would have received such deserved attention had not its plot so closely resembled the Kennedy-Koepchne tragedy at Chappaquiddick."

Randy Souther, *San Francisco Chronicle Book Review*, 8/4/96.

"In the novel value and power are so disproportionately ascribed by society, that the 'normal,' 'All-American girl' is nameless, insignificant, without choice, and effectively snuffed out." Jacquelyn Bradley, *The Explicator*, Fall 1997.

THE BOTTOM LINE: Truth or psychological and sexual voyeurism? You decide.

Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?: Selected Early Stories (1993)

◆ Title story and others included in *Prize Stories: O Henry Award Winners* (1968), *The Best American Short Stories* (1967), and/or *The Best American Short Stories of the Century* (2000).

Drawn from six previous collections of short fiction published between 1963 and 1972, this volume contains 27 of Oates's award-winning short

stories. She wrote each one in the "psychological realism" mode, with the hope of "bearing witness" for those who couldn't record their own stories. Many foreshadow themes and characters in her later novels.

THE STORIES: Oates's classic stories, including "The Fine White Mist of Winter," "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?," "How I Contemplated the World from the Detroit House of Correction," and "In the Region of Ice," deal with memory, emotion, solitude, and the pain of adolescence and victimization. Connie of the title story has become a feminist icon. "[Oates] does not look like the author who will unmask the evil of everyday life, who will see allegory in the backyard and real darkness among the metaphoric daises. But she is."

Laura Kalpakian, *The Southern Review*.

"The themes are vintage Oates: aggressive feminism, violence and the disintegration of values, and sexual tension." Kerry Kilbane, *Booklist*.

"What makes [these stories] so memorable is not only the precise rendering of the central character's evolving response to the male intruder in her world, but also the richness and clarity of thematic statement in each story." Joanne V. Creighton, *Studies in Short Fiction*, Fall 1978.

THE BOTTOM LINE: The "best of" Oates's short fiction.

What I Lived For (1994)

◆ Pulitzer Prize finalist, 1995
◆ Pen/Faulkner Award finalist, 1995

Like *them* and *Because It Is Bitter, and Because It Is My Heart*, Oates's 24th novel explores the turbulent American psyche—this time, from the male perspective.

THE STORY: Jerome "Corky" Corcoran rises through the political machine in a fictitious city in upper New York State to become a successful real estate developer and respected local politician. Yet he ultimately succumbs to his own narcissism and, in a series of violent acts, returns to his haunted past.

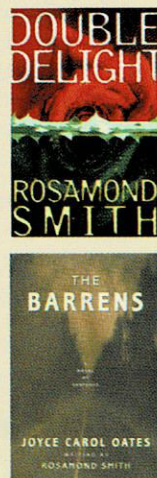
"One may approach *What I Lived For*, as I did, with a certain skepticism, but in the reading it grows and grows, accumulating authority, picking up pace and finally leaving the reader awed—at this writer's achievement, yes, but also, and more forcefully, at the surviving human capacity for doing what is right." James Carroll, *The New York Times Book Review*, 10/16/94.

"In a twist on the theme of the sins of the fathers being visited on subsequent generations, Oates has written a suspenseful, compelling study of human vulnerability. . . . This is arguably her best work since *them*." Peggy Saari, *The Antioch Review*, Spring 1995.

THE BOTTOM LINE: An American "Inferno," as *The New York Times* puts it.

THE ALTER-EGO

Even author-celebrities like Joyce Carol Oates need to escape from their identities once in a while. Hence the reason for publishing under the pseudonym Rosamond Smith (a feminization of her husband's name, Raymond Smith). Because *Lives of the Twins* differed so greatly from her previous work, Oates didn't want to publish it under her own name. She also wanted a "fresh reading" from editors and critics. So her friend (conveniently an agent) submitted the novel to an editor, Nancy Nicholas, at Simon & Schuster, pretending that Smith was a first-time novelist. Nicholas accepted the novel and paid an advance of \$10,000. News, however, leaked. Oates's prank upset everyone, including her editors and long-time agent. Despite her embarrassment, Oates has long admired pseudonyms, claiming that they simply take "the mysterious process a step or two further, erasing the author's social identity" (*The New York Times Book Review*, 12/6/87).



We Were the Mulvaney (1996)

♦ New York Times Best-Seller List

Oates describes this novel as the one "closest to my heart," a "valentine to a passing way of American life, and to my own particular child- and girlhood in upstate New York." Her childhood pet, Muffin, even makes a cameo appearance (*A Reader's Guide to the Recent Novels of Joyce Carol Oates*).

THE STORY: The Mulvaney are the typical American family—a successful father, loving mother, three sons, and a pretty daughter. They live a picture-perfect life in rural New York until Valentine's Day, 1976, when 16-year old Marianne is raped. The father banishes her to the home of a relative, and the family unit disintegrates. Narrated by Judd, the youngest sibling, the novel chronicles the Mulvaney's fall and ultimate redemption as Patrick, a son, exacts justice for his family.

"Reduced to the bare essence of its plot, Oates' book sounds uncomfortably like a movie-of-the-week melodrama . . . The Fall of the House of Mulvaney. . . . [But this] is a novel that comes close, very close, to being as rich and as maddeningly jumbled as life itself." David Futrelle, Salon.com, 9/26/96.

"[The novel] works not simply because of its meticulous details and gestures, or because 'family' is a hot-button issue these days, or because Ms. Oates has borrowed the primal narrative of Western culture to give her story subliminal oomph. . . . What keeps us coming back to Oates Country is something stronger and spookier: her uncanny gift of making the page a window, with something happening on the other side that we'd swear was life itself." David Gates, New York Times Book Review, 9/15/96.

"Oates has written an uncharacteristically cathartic book with a provocatively happy ending. . . . Perhaps sentimentality—forget divine will or scientific logic—is the perverse-ly simple secret survival code of the American family." Valerie Miner, The Nation, 10/28/96.

THE BOTTOM LINE: Since this is Oates, you expect darkness and tragedy. The novel, however, offers considerable hope for its characters.

Blonde (2000)

♦ National Book Award finalist, 2001

♦ Pulitzer Prize finalist, 2001

Some see this 738-page tome on Marilyn Monroe as the "equivalent of a tacky television mini-series" (*The New York Times*, 3/31/00). But Oates

FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG ADULTS

Joyce Carol Oates recently stepped into the world of young adult and children's literature. *Come Meet Muffin!* (ages 4-7), recounts the plight of Muffin, a kitten found on the roadside by the Smith family. One winter morning,

Muffin gets lost in the woods and must rely on his own cleverness to return home. Oates also wrote her first novel for young adults, *Big Mouth & Ugly Girl*, which explores the stereotypes, loyalties, and first loves of high school kids facing difficult situations.

[Discussed in the Younger Readers column of the Nov/Dec 2002 issue.] *The New York Times* praised the novel as "a new first" for Oates (5/19/02). ■



claims that *Blonde* reaches the "poetic, spiritual, 'inner' truth" of Monroe's tragic life (*The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 3/12/00).

THE STORY: How did Norma Jeane Baker, the all-American girl, become Marilyn Monroe, the American legend? Oates chronicles Norma Jeane's "reinventions" through a look at her childhood, early career as a pinup girl, marriages to Joe DiMaggio and Arthur Miller, affair with JFK, and tragic death. She concludes that even those who loved Monroe idealized her, creating an iconic image that Norma Jeane could never fulfill.

"[Oates] does to Monroe what she did to Edward M. Kennedy in *Black Water*, her embarrassing 1992 fictionalization of Chappaquiddick, playing to readers' voyeuristic interest in a real-life story while using the liberties of a novel to tart up the facts. . . . [Blonde] turns out to be just the latest effort to exploit the tragedy and fame of Marilyn Monroe." Michiko Kakutani, *The New York Times*, 3/31/00.

"Blonde is fat, messy and fierce. It's part Gothic, part kaleidoscopic novel of ideas, part lurid celebrity potboiler, and it is seldom less than engrossing." Laura Miller, *The New York Times Book Review*, 4/2/00.

"Blonde is a tale of freakish overcompensation, impossible wishes granted, awesome power ill-used, demons finally undefeated—the story of an injured child who can't be healed, even by the love of the millions. . . . Hyperreal and overwrought, the book stuns by its relentless energy." Pam Rosenthal, Salon.com, 4/18/00.

THE BOTTOM LINE: We might never know the truth about Marilyn Monroe's life, but Oates gives us plenty to think about in this controversial but stellar work. ■

