Joyce Carol Oates

Joyce Carol Oates (born June 16, 1938) is an American author. Oates published her first book in 1963 and has since published over forty novels, as well as a number of plays and novellas, and many volumes of short stories, poetry, and nonfiction. She has won many awards for her writing, including the National Book Award,[1] for her novel them (1969), two O. Henry Awards, and the National Humanities Medal. Her novels Black Water (1992), What I Lived For (1994), Blonde (2000), and short story collections The Wheel of Love and Other Stories (1970) and Lovely, Dark, Deep: Stories (2014) were each nominated for the Pulitzer Prize.

Oates has taught at Princeton University since 1978 and is currently the Roger S. Berlind ’52 Professor in the Humanities with the Program in Creative Writing.[2]

1 Early life

1.1 Literary career

Oates was born in Lockport, New York. She is the eldest of three children of Carolina (née Bush), a homemaker of Hungarian descent,[3][4] and Frederic James Oates, a tool and die designer.[3][5] She was raised Catholic but is now atheist.[6] Her brother, Fred Jr., was born in 1943, and her sister, Lynn Ann, who is severely autistic, was born in 1956.[3] Oates grew up in the working-class farming community of Millersport, New York,[7] and characterized her as “a happy, close-knit and unextraordinary family for our time, place and economic status”.[3] Her paternal grandmother, Blanche Woodside, lived with the family and was “very close” to Joyce.[7] After Blanche’s death, Joyce learned that Blanche’s father had killed himself, and Blanche had subsequently concealed her Jewish heritage; Oates eventually drew on aspects of her grandmother’s life in writing the novel The Gravedigger’s Daughter (2007).[7]

Oates attended the same one-room school her mother attended as a child.[3] She became interested in reading at an early age and remembers Blanche’s gift of Lewis Carroll’s Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland (1865) as “the great treasure of my childhood, and the most profound literary influence of my life. This was love at first sight!”[8] In her early teens, she devoured the writing of Charlotte Brontë, Emily Brontë, Fyodor Dostoevsky, William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, and Henry David Thoreau, whose “influences remain very deep”.[9] Oates began writing at the age of 14, when Blanche gave her a typewriter.[7] Oates later transferred to several bigger, suburban schools[3] and graduated from Williamsville South High School in 1956, where she worked for her high school newspaper. She was the first in her family to complete high school.[13]

Oates earned a scholarship to attend Syracuse University, where she joined Phi Mu.[10] Oates found Syracuse “a very exciting place academically and intellectually”, and trained herself by “writing novel after novel and always throwing them out when I completed them.”[11] It was not until this point that Oates began reading the work of Franz Kafka, D. H. Lawrence, Thomas Mann, and Flannery O’Connor though, she noted, “these influences are still quite strong, pervasive.”[9] At the age of 19, she won the “college short story” contest sponsored by Mademoiselle. Oates graduated from Syracuse University with a degree in English as valedictorian in 1960[12] and received her M.A. from the University of Wisconsin–Madison in 1961. She was a Ph.D. student at Rice University when she made the decision to become a full-time writer.[13]

Evelyn Shrifte, president of the Vanguard Press, met Oates soon after Oates received her master’s degree. “She was fresh out of school, and I thought she was a genius”, Shrifte said. Vanguard published Oates’ first book, the short-story collection By the North Gate, in 1963.[14]

2 Career

The Vanguard Press published Oates’ first novel, With Shuddering Fall (1964), when she was 26 years old. In 1966, she published “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?”, a short story dedicated to Bob Dylan and written after listening to his song “It’s All Over Now, Baby Blue.”[15] The story is loosely based on the serial killer Charles Schmid, also known as “The Pied Piper of Tucson”. It has been anthologized many times and adapted as a film, Smooth Talk starring Laura Dern (1985). In 2008, Oates said that of all her published work, she is most noted for “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?”[16] Another early short story, “In a Region of Ice” (The Atlantic Monthly, August 1966[18]), features a young, gifted Jewish-American student. It dramatizes his drift into protest against the world of education and the sober, established society of his parents, his depression, and eventually murder-cum-suicide. It was inspired by a real-life incident (as were several of her works) and Oates had been acquainted with
the model of her protagonist. She revisited this subject in the title story of her collection Last Days: Stories (1984). “In the Region of Ice” won the first of her two O. Henry Awards.[18] Her second novel was A Garden of Earthly Delights (1967), first of the so-called Wonderland Quartet published by Vanguard 1967 to 1971. All were finalists for the annual National Book Award.

Oates’s novel them (1969) won the 1970 National Book Award for Fiction.[1] It is set in Detroit during a time span from the 1930s to the 1960s, most of it in black ghetto neighborhoods, and deals openly with crime, drugs, and racial/class conflicts. Again, some of the key characters and events were based on real people whom Oates had known or heard of during her years in the city. Since then she has published an average of two books a year. Frequent topics in her work include rural poverty, sexual abuse, class tensions, desire for power, female childhood and adolescence, and occasionally the supernatural. Violence is a constant in her work, even leading Oates to have written an essay in response to the question, “Why Is Your Writing So Violent?” In 1990 she discussed her novel, Because It Is Bitter, and Because It Is My Heart, which also deals with themes of racial tension, and described “the experience of writing [it]” as “so intense it seemed almost electric”. [19] She is a fan of poet and novelist Sylvia Plath, describing Plath’s sole novel The Bell Jar as a “near perfect work of art”; but though Oates has often been compared to Plath, she disavows Plath’s romanticism about suicide and among her characters, she favors cunning, hardy survivors, both women and men. In the early 1980s, Oates began writing stories in the Gothic and horror genres; in her foray into these genres, Oates said she was “deeply influenced” by Kafka and felt “a writerly kinship” with James Joyce.[20]

In 1996, Oates published We Were the Mulvaneys, a novel following the disintegration of an American family, which became a best-seller after being selected by Oprah’s Book Club in 2001.[17] In the 1990s and early 2000s, Oates wrote several books, mostly mystery novels, under the pen names “Rosamond Smith” and “Lauren Kelly”.

For more than 25 years, Oates has been rumored to be a “favorite” to win the Nobel Prize in Literature by oddsmakers and critics.[21] Her papers, held at Syracuse University, include 17 unpublished short stories and four unpublished or unfinished novellas. Oates has said that most of her early unpublished work was “cheerfully thrown away.”[22]

One review of Oates’s 1970 story collection The Wheel of Love characterized her as an author “of considerable talent” but at that time “far from being a great writer”. [23] Oates’s 2006 short story “Landfill” was criticized because it drew on the death, several months earlier, of John A. Fiocco Jr., a 19-year-old New Jersey college student.[24][25]

2.1 Teaching career

Oates taught in Beaumont, Texas, for a year, then moved to Detroit in 1962, where she began teaching at the University of Detroit. Influenced by the Vietnam war, the 1967 Detroit race riots, and a job offer, Oates moved in 1968 with her husband across the river to Ontario, and to a teaching position at the University of Windsor.[3] In 1978, she moved to Princeton, New Jersey, and began teaching at Princeton University.

In 1995, Princeton undergraduate Jonathan Safran Foer took an introductory writing course with Oates,[26] who took an interest in Foer’s writing, telling him that he had “that most important of writerly qualities, energy”. [27] Foer later recalled that “she was the first person to ever make me think I should try to write in any sort of serious way. And my life really changed after that.”[27] Oates served as the advisor to Foer’s senior thesis, an early version of his novel Everything Is Illuminated, which was published to wide acclaim in 1999.[20]

She expects to teach her last Princeton writing seminar in the fall of 2014, and to formally retire from teaching the following July.[28]

3 Personal life

At the University of Wisconsin–Madison, Oates met Raymond J. Smith, a fellow graduate student, whom she married in 1961.[7] Smith became a professor of 18th-century literature and later, an editor and publisher. Together the couple founded The Ontario Review, a literary magazine, in 1974, on which Oates served as associate editor.[29] The magazine’s mission, according to Smith, the editor, was to bridge the literary and artistic culture of the U.S. and Canada: “We tried to do this by publishing writers and artists from both countries, as well as essays and reviews of an intercultural nature.”[30] In 1980, Oates and Smith founded Ontario Review Books, an independent publishing house. In 2004, Oates described the partnership as “a marriage of like minds—both my husband and I are so interested in literature and we read...
the same books; he’ll be reading a book and then I’ll read it—we trade and we talk about our reading at meal times [...] it’s a very collaborative and imaginative marriage”. Smith died of complications from pneumonia on February 18, 2008. In April 2008, Oates wrote to an interviewer, “Since my husband’s unexpected death, I really have very little energy […] My marriage—my love for my husband—seems to have come first in my life, rather than my writing. Set beside his death, the future of my writing scarcely interests me at the moment.” After six months of near suicidal grieving for Raymond Smith, Oates met Charles Gross, a professor in the Psychology Department and Neuroscience Institute at Princeton, at a dinner party at her home. In early 2009, Oates and Gross were married.

Oates is devoted to running and has written, “Ideally, the runner who’s a writer is running through the land- and cityscapes of her fiction, like a ghost in a real setting.” While running, Oates mentally envisions scenes in her novels and works out structural problems in already-written drafts; she formulated the germ of her novel You Must Remember This (1987) while running, when she “glanced up and saw the ruins of a railroad bridge”, which reminded her of “a mythical upstate New York city in the right place”.

In 1973, Oates began keeping a detailed journal documenting her personal and literary life; it eventually grew to “more than 4,000 single-spaced typewritten pages”. In 2008, Oates said she had “moved away from keeping a formal journal” and instead preserves copies of her emails. Oates is a member of the Board of Trustees of the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation.

4 Productivity

Oates writes in longhand, working from “8 till 1 every day, then again for two or three hours in the evening.” Her prolificacy has become one of her best-known attributes; The New York Times wrote in 1989 that Oates’s “name is synonymous with productivity”, and in 2004, The Guardian noted that “Nearly every review of an Oates book, it seems, begins with a list [of the number of books she has published]”. In a journal entry written in the 1970s, Oates sarcastically addressed her critics, writing, “So many books! so many! Obviously JCO has a full career behind her, if one chooses to look at it that way; many more titles and she might as well... what?...give up all hopes for a ‘reputation’? [...] but I work hard, and long, and as the hours roll by I seem to create more than I anticipate; more, certainly, than the literary world allows for a ‘serious’ writer. Yet I have more stories to tell, and more novels [...] “. In The New York Review of Books in 2007, Michael Dirda suggested that disparaging criticism of Oates “derives from reviewer’s angst: How does one judge a new book by Oates when one is not familiar with most of the backlist? Where does one start?”


5 Select awards and honors

Winner:

- 1967: O. Henry Award – “In the Region of Ice”
- 1968: M. L. Rosenthal Award, National Institute of Arts and Letters – A Garden of Earthly Delights
- 1970: National Book Award for Fiction – them
- 1973: O. Henry Award – “The Dead”
- 1990: Rea Award for the Short Story
- 1996: Bram Stoker Award for Novel – Zombie
- 1996: PEN/Malamud Award for Excellence in the Art of the Short Story
- 2002: Peggy V. Helmerich Distinguished Author Award
- 2003: Kenyon Review Award for Literary Achievement (The Kenyon Review)
- 2005: Prix Femina Etranger – The Falls
- 2006: Chicago Tribune Literary Prize (Chicago Tribune)
- 2006: Honorary Doctor of Humane Letters, Mount Holyoke College
- 2007: Humanist of the Year, American Humanist Association
- 2009: Ivan Sandrof Award for Lifetime Achievement, NBCC
- 2010: National Humanities Medal
- 2010: Fernanda Pivano Award
• 2011: Honorary Doctor of Arts, University of Pennsylvania[50]
• 2011: World Fantasy Award for Best Short Fiction – Fossil-Figures
• 2012: Stone Award for Lifetime Literary Achievement, Oregon State University
• 2012: Norman Mailer Prize, Lifetime Achievement[51]
• 2013: Bram Stoker Award for Best Fiction Collection – Black Dahlia and White Rose: Stories

Finalist:
• 1970: Pulitzer Prize for Fiction – The Wheel of Love and Other Stories[52]
• 1993: Pulitzer Prize for Fiction – Black Water[53][54]
• 1995: Pulitzer Prize for Fiction – What I Lived For[53]
• 2001: Pulitzer Prize for Fiction – Blonde[53]
• 2015: Pulitzer Prize for Fiction – Lovely, Dark, Deep: Stories[53]

Nominated:
• 1963: O. Henry Award — Special Award for Continuing Achievement (1970), five Second Prize (1964 to 1989), two First Prize (above) among 29 nominations[18]
• 1968: National Book Award for Fiction – A Garden of Earthly Delights[55]
• 1969: National Book Award for Fiction – Expensive People[56]
• 1972: National Book Award for Fiction – Wonderland[57][58]
• 1990: National Book Award for Fiction – Because It Is Bitter, and Because It Is My Heart[59]
• 1992: National Book Critics Circle Award, Fiction – Black Water[47]
• 1995: PEN/Faulkner Award — What I Lived For[60]
• 2000: National Book Award – Blonde[61]
• 2007: National Book Critics Circle Award, Fiction – The Gravedigger’s Daughter[47]
• 2013: Frank O’Connor International Short Story Award for Black Dahlia and White Rose: Stories[62]

6 Bibliography

Main article: Joyce Carol Oates bibliography

7 References

[13] “Joyce Carol Oates, Where are you going, Where have you been?”.
[15] “Dedication Of Joyce Carol Oates Short Story To Dylan”.
8 External links

- Celestial Timepiece: A Joyce Carol Oates Patchwork (Official Web Site)
- Heath Anthology of American Literature Biography
- Works by or about Joyce Carol Oates in libraries (WorldCat catalog)
- Papers of Joyce Carol Oates at Syracuse University
- Interview with the Oxonian Review in June 2010
- Joyce Carol Oates Bookworm Interviews (Audio) with Michael Silverblatt
- Interview October 13, 2015 WNYC Leonard Lopate show
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