

Chapter I

Life and Career of Joyce Carol Oates

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I. Her life

Joyce Carol Oates, one of the most successful and highly prolific writers, was born on 16th June 1938, in a small settlement in Lockport, upstate New York. She grew up on her grandparents' farm, surrounded by beautiful Erie Canal. During her childhood, her parents took great troubles and hardships to survive. Frederic Oates, her father always burdened with severe economic worries because of the unemployment, workers' strikes, and work-layoffs, — the ill-consequences of 'Great Depression' of 1920s. After a long struggle, he improved himself by attending a night school. He studied Engineering subjects and became a tool-and-die designer at Harrison's company. Joyce recalls her parents' persistent struggle in following words:

I am from that part of the world and an economic background where people don't even graduate from high school. My father probably went to about seventh grade— he had to get out and work when he was 11 or 12, and his whole life has been colored by that, the Depression. And my mother, the same way. But if I have any artistic talent, I think I inherited it from them. ¹

However, Joyce never felt deprived of anything. She attended a small rural school located at a walking distance from her home. The school with its lovely surroundings left a lasting impact on her mind. In 1949 she was sent to John Pound Elementary School to attend sixth grade. She was sincere and hard working throughout her entire education. She transferred to North Park High School to complete her eighth and ninth grade in 1951. The city of Lockport, where these schools situated left a profound impression on her mind during her childhood.

After the completion of her ninth grade she went to Williamsville High School. In the academic year 1950-51 the school authorities selected her as an "Outstanding Girl" of the year. ² She participated in a number of extra-curricular activities. She served as an editor for high school newspaper

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Billboard as well as contributed her stories to the student literary magazine. Her literary talent was clearly visible. She composed many short stories during her high school years. One of the stories entitled *A Long Way Home* appeared in 'Will O' the Wisp', the student literary magazine.³

In 1956 she entered Syracuse University to pursue her graduation on 'New York State Regents scholarship'. She distinguished herself among her friends because of her sincerity and studious nature. She had developed a reading habit long before she joined high school. She read extensively the mysteries, adventures, science fiction and a long list of classics.

At the same time her literary career flourished because of the warm affection she received from her enthusiastic professors such as Walter Sutton, Donald Dike, and Arthur Hoffman. They read her stories carefully and encouraged her to send them to national magazines for publication. She participated in literary contests. In 1959 she won *Mademoiselle* College Fiction Award for her story *In the Old World*. However, during these years she concentrated more on her studies.

In 1960 she received her B.A. as a class valedictorian and immediately applied for M.A. at Wisconsin University. Here she met her future husband Raymond Smith, a fellow graduate student and a literary scholar. Recalling their first meeting, Greg Johnson writes:

Ray was in his last year of doctoral studies in 1960, the year he met Joyce at a faculty tea. He recalled that his attraction to Joyce "was an emotional and romantic one, but more importantly, I found Joyce a very open and warm and yet modest young woman. It was easy to talk with her—our conversations seemed effortless." Joyce gave Ray an offprint of an article she had published on Samuel Beckett, and Ray "glimpsed the quality of intellect and imaginative boldness of the girl I was to marry. I was awed." The relationship developed swiftly. They met on October 23, became engaged on November 23, and married on January 23, 1961.⁴

He was working on his Ph.D. They married in 1961 after a short courtship. Joyce completed her M.A. in less than a year because of her exceptional genius. Smith completed his Ph.D. He accepted a job as an Assistant Professor at Lamar State College of Technology, Beaumont, Texas. Joyce applied for Ph.D. program at Rice University.

One day while browsing through the books in a library, she came across a new volume of *Best American Short Stories*. Martha Foley, a renowned critic, edited it. Her short story *A Legacy*, she found, in the 'Honor Roll' at the back of the book.⁵ This incident in the library changed her way of thinking. She decided to become a writer. Within a year her first volume of short stories, *By the North Gate* (1963) published by Vanguard press, New York.

However, because of the unhygienic atmosphere, the slums, and especially the racism and violence, it became unbearable for the couple to continue their stay in Beaumont. Both of them received better job opportunities in the universities in Detroit. They moved to Detroit and began their teaching careers anew. Oates accepted instructorship in the 'University of Detroit', (U.D.) and Smith worked in Wayne State University. About the contribution of this city, she writes in her "visions of Detroit":

So much of my writing from approximately 1963 to 1976 centers upon or has been emotionally inspired by Detroit and its suburbs (Birmingham Bloomfield Hills, to a lesser degree Grosse Pointe) that it is impossible for me now to extract the historical from the fictional. Life is fecund, art is selective. Even the photographer, that most apparently forthright of artists, isolates the subject, enhances it, drops out the surrounding world. If we had never come to the city of Detroit I would have been a writer (indeed, I had already written my first two books before coming here, aged twenty three) but Detroit, my "great" subject, made me the person I am, consequently the writer I am – for better or worse.⁶

Living in Detroit was an altogether a different experience for her. In the ten years she lived there, she acquainted with the heartbeats of the city.

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Because of the gradual rise in crime, violence and racial riots of 1967, the couple began to feel insecure. Ms. Oates's literary career was flourishing. In 1970, she received the 'National Book Award' for her fourth novel "them" (1969)

She secured a job as a Professor of English at the University of Windsor in 1968, and the couple moved to Windsor, Ontario. In spite of her busy schedule of teaching and writing, she took a new initiative. She founded a literary journal, *Ontario Review* with her husband in 1974. Between 1968 and 1978, she taught at the University of Windsor in Canada. Princeton University, one of the highly esteemed institutions offered her lectureship in the creative writing program. She accepted the offer and moved to Princeton, New Jersey. They took their literary journal with them.

Smith resigned his job in order to devote all his time to edit the journal and the small press, *Ontario Review Press*. It became immensely popular. Speaking about Raymond Smith's contribution, Greg Johnson remarks:

Thanks to the strong reputation of *Ontario Review* in the literary world, Ray was able to attract such distinguished contributors as John Updike and Margaret Atwood, but he prided himself on finding and publishing writers at the beginning of their careers as well. One of these was Joyce's former Princeton student Pinckney Benedict, whose collection of stories *Town Smokes*, published by Ontario Review Press in 1987 when the author was only twenty-three, was one of Ray's most successful titles.⁷

The journal publishes fiction, poetry, essays, drama, and interviews with contemporary writers. Herbert Mitgang recalls the "memories of Leonard and Virginia Woolf's Hogarth Press in London, though on a smaller scale. For the editor is Raymond J. Smith, and the associate editor, his wife, is better known as Joyce Carol Oates".⁸

Oates published books at the extraordinary rate of two or three per year, while teaching full-time. Initially, her position at the Princeton was on tenure basis. In 1987 the university made necessary arrangements to create an endowed chair. Finally, in the fall of 1987, Ms. Oates became a Roger S. Berlind's Distinguished Professor of Humanities.

II. The Influences

During childhood Blanche Woodside, her paternal grandmother was the first to realize and to nurture her granddaughter's artistic and literary talents. She sent her a copy of Lewis Carroll's universally popular children book, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. This book and the other, *Through the Looking Glass* remained her all time favorites.

She often mentioned the influence of Lewis Carroll in her interviews and informal conversations. She concludes saying: "Being Lewis Carroll was infinitely more exciting than being Alice. So I became Lewis Carroll. One part of Joyce Carol Oates lodges there but to what degree, to what depth, I am unable to say".⁹

Another book that has made a strong impression on Oates during her adolescence is Thoreau's *Walden*. She admits that this book "struck a deep a chord with me. Henry David Thoreau is very independent-minded, very iconoclastic and had quite a corrosive sense of humor. He reminded me of my father in fact."¹⁰

Similarly her father was a lasting source of inspiration for her. Although, he never intervened in her writing, his interests like music, boxing, and flying small airplanes profoundly influenced her. She describes him as:

For nearly his entire life my father has played and loved playing, the piano: Classical music, popular music, Scott Joplin, jazz. He is a precise sight-reader of music but he can also play by

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ear and improvise, neither of which I can do; he is far more naturally musical than I, though I have inherited from him a temperament that must be called “musical”¹¹

Writers like William Faulkner, Franz Kafka, Flannery O’ Connor and Earnest Hemingway were among the earliest influences on Oates’s writings. She read *The Critical Biography of William Faulkner* when she was 14 or 15 years old. *Synchronal*, her short story suggests the influence of Flannery O’ Connor”¹² Reading sharpened her insight and enriched her experiences. She promptly replied to Joe Bellamy that:

I read constantly in three areas – the reading of old works (I’m going through *Ulysses* again), the reading of an avalanche of literary quarterlies, magazines, reviews and so on, that come into our home steadily.... and new novels.¹³

Earnest Hemingway’s short collection in *In out time* inspired her during her sophomore year, to write short stories about rural people of “Eden Country”, an imaginative country which served as setting for most of her early stories. The poems of Emily Dickinson exerted quite strong influence on her. She summarizes her influences as:

I was bowled over by Faulkner. I haven’t reread him in years, but will this year-I’m teaching *The sound and the Fury* Then Franz Kafka, Kafka I’ve continued to read” Later: “Freud, Nietzsche, Mann-they’re almost real personalities in my life. And Dostoevsky and Melville. Stendhal is a later discovery. And Proust.¹⁴

A Catholic by birth, she could not deny the influence of religion and philosophy. About religion she remarks: “I think of religion as a kind of psychological manifestation of deep powers, deep imaginative, mysterious powers, which are always with us.”¹⁵

III. Literary Career

A born storyteller, Joyce Carol Oates began her literary career as a short story writer at an early age. Her stories appeared in national magazines and

literary quarterlies such as *Mademoiselle*, *Hudson Review*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *Arizona Quarterly*, *The Kenyon Review*, *Epoch*, *The southern Review*, *The Literary Review* and *Virginia Quarterly*. By *The North Gate*, her first short story collection published in 1963. Since then, she has published thirty-one short story collections comprising around seven hundred short stories.

She depicts in her stories the themes such as perpetual struggle of mankind in the hostile world, man-woman relationship, a quest for identity, the problem of adolescents and the horror of human existence. Like Flannery O' Connor and Henry James, she explores the darker aspects of human psyche and the changed morality of the modern world. "Where Are Going, Where Have You Been?" her frequently anthologized short story about victimization of a girl, bears close resemblance to Flannery O' Connor's "A Good Man is Hard to Find."

She is an equally powerful master of fantasy and horror stories. Her horror stories published separately in the collections like *Haunted: Tales of the Grotesque* (1994) and *The Collector of Hearts: New Tales of the Grotesque* (1998). Her stories also appeared in 'The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror' annual anthologies.

She is immensely successful as a novelist. She has published forty novels the first being, *With Shuddering Fall* (1964), seven suspense thrillers under the pseudonym 'Rosamond smith' and three more as 'Lauren Kelly' (another pseudonym) In addition, she has written six novellas.

Her novels deal with the social, legal, political and cultural aspects of life. *Do With me What You Will* (1973) for instance, discusses legal issues. *Angel of Light* (1981) has to its centre, religion. Her second novel, *A Garden of Earthly Delights* (1967) won the "Richard and Hinda Rosenthal Foundation Award". them the fourth one received National Book Award, and established her fame as a nationally published writer.

She published two series, informally known as *The Wonderland Quartet* comprising her four early novels, and *The Gothic Quintet*, a series of five gothic novels. The novels in these series are thematically interlinked. In her gothic novels, she has attempted to redefine the genre 'New Gothic'. Paula Guran who calls her the "Gothic Queen" comments: "But for those of us in the horror field she's the Grand Dame of the *New Gothic*. The only woman to receive, the Horror writers Association's highest accolade, the Bram Stoker Award for Lifetime achievement."¹⁶ Her most recent novels are: *The Gravedigger's Daughter* (2007) and *My sister, My Love: The Intimate story of Skyler Rampike*, (2008) published till date.

She is equally successful as a poet and dramatist. About poetry, she once revealed to Michael Schumacher: "Poetry is my other world, my solace of a kind. I love both to read and write – poetry as a means of escape from the strain of prose fiction. It is also an extremely personal form for me."¹⁷ She published eight volumes of poetry and eight volumes of dramas and one-act-plays.

A renowned critic, she published several volumes of essays and criticism. She provides a valuable insight into the writings of such modernist writers as Anton Chekhov, Eugene Ionesco, D. H. Lawrence, Samuel Beckett, Sylvia Plath, Norman Mailer, Dostoyevsky, George Bellows, Earnest Hemingway, as well as many aspiring contemporary writers.

Furthermore she has written three books for children and four for adolescent readers. In addition, she co-edited reputed series of annual anthologies of short stories, essays and criticism such as *The Best American Short Stories* (1991), *American Gothic Tales* (1996), *The Norton Anthology of Contemporary Fiction* (1998), *The Best American Mystery Stories*, *The Best American Essays*, *The Best American Essays of the Century* and *The Best New American Voices* (2002).

IV. Critical Reception

An exceptionally gifted and a painstaking artist, Joyce Carol Oates received worldwide recognition within a short span of time. In 1959 her story *In the Old world* won her the coveted Mademoiselle College Fiction Contest. Her stories received a number of O. Henry Awards and included in the prize-winning anthologies like, *O. Henry Prize Stories*, *Best American Short Stories*, and *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror*. She received numerous awards and nominations for her novels. Her one-act-play *Tone Clusters* is the co-winner of Heidemann Award.

She has written in different eras and in a variety of genres: short stories, novels, poems and plays to name but a few. However, along with fame, she faced harsh and often biased criticism especially from the established literary circle. Her productivity and the violence in her works were the most argued issues. She points out that: "I believe I have reputation for writing a great deal only because the older, the healthy tradition of the writer as an extremely hard working and persistent craftsman is no longer fashionable".¹⁸

The subjects like poverty, drunkenness, murders, rape and sexual abuse often appear in her stories and novels. Her story, "By the North Gate", for instance deals with the slaughter of a dog by farm boys. *Zombie* (1995) is about a serial killer. However, she makes it clear that:

I'm probably writing about my experience as an American. I don't pretend the violence isn't there. There are some writers who could like to live in a Virginia Woolf kind of refinement. But I'm more or less of the school of writer as witness. Witness to history and society.¹⁹

Critics often compared her with Theodore Dreiser and Honoré de Balzac. However she calls herself "a romantic writer in the tradition of Stendhal and Flaubert".²⁰ Her constant commitment to literature brought her numerous lifetime achievement awards. In 1996, she received 'PEN' Malamud

Award for Lifetime Achievement in American Literature in 1998. She accepted 'Carl Sandburg Literary Award for Lifetime Achievement' (2002). 'Commonwealth Award of Distinguished Service in Literature' (2003). 'Fairfax Prize for Lifetime Achievement in Literary Arts' (2004) and 'Humanist of the Year Award' (2007). In addition, she received a number of honorary degrees like "Doctor of Letters" and "Doctor of Humane Letters", from universities and institutions of high repute like University of Michigan, Rutgers University, Lawrence University, Syracuse University, Bucknell University and Brandeis University.

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