Joyce Carol Oates Reread: Overview and Interview with the Author

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Oates was born in 1938. She had a working class upbringing in a farming community near Lockport in upstate New York. During her studies at Syracuse University, on a scholarship, she began to publish her first short stories. Since then she has continued to write and publish industriously – an average of one or two books a year. In 1962 Oates taught at the University of Detroit where she wrote her early masterpiece, *them* (intentionally written with lower case t), which explores life in the inner-city, and challenges the taxonomy of the naturalistic novel. In 1968, she joined the English Department at the University of Windsor, in Canada, where she and her husband started a small press and published a literary magazine, *The Ontario Review*. Oates moved to Princeton in 1978, where she is the Roger S. Berlind Distinguished Professor of the Humanities and teaches creative writing.

More interested in enriching her oeuvre with new plots, forms and styles than in sticking to winning formulae or following the more acclaimed trends of the times, Joyce Carol Oates counteracts the prevailing notion of the isolated, minimalist and exclusivist literary genius. Her work defies pre-established views about the parameters of ‘serious’ writing, not only because of its astonishing prolixity but also for its ability to attract a popular readership. Oates’s phenomenal productivity is uncommon in twentieth-century literature. To date (27 February 2006) Oates has written fifty novels and novellas, twenty-eight short story collections, eight poetry collections, eight volumes of drama, and eleven volumes of essays and criticism.

Anxieties about the volume of her oeuvre have partly fuelled the image of Oates as an ‘automatic writer.’ Yet the massive number of manuscripts and typed drafts of texts collected in her archive in Syracuse University attest to Oates’s insistent and careful revisions. Growing up during the Depression, she experienced at close hand her father’s struggle to find work and make ends meet. This created in Oates a strong and resourceful work ethic, which shaped her approach
to writing as a craft guided as much by passion and imagination as by persistence and discipline. Given her amazing output, the quality of work discloses inevitable heterogeneity. The varying quality of her individual works should not underestimate her ultimate achievements. In the process of writing major and minor works, always stretching her writing into new forms and themes, Oates has created such undeniable masterpieces as them, Bellefleur, The Wheel of Love and Marriages and Infidelities, which deserve a place among the best contemporary American fiction. Her work has been the recipient of countless awards. Oates’s first published text was the prize-winning story ‘In the Old World’ printed in Mademoiselle in 1962. Since then, her short fiction – which is considered, by some critics, to be the best part of her work – has received twenty-eight O. Henry awards and seventeen of her stories have been chosen for The Best American Short Stories. Oates was the winner of the National Book Award for fiction, for them (1970), and the PEN/Malamud Award for Excellence in Short Fiction, among many other prizes. More recently, she won the Commonwealth Award for Distinguished Service in Literature (2003) and she was awarded the Prix Femina Étranger for her novel The Falls (2005).

Her oeuvre encompasses a wide range of generic forms, and registers and amazing variation of styles and subjects. Oates’s novels, for instance, include naturalistic portrayals of suburban inner-city life such as them and Victorian family sagas such as Bellefleur; but then she can also write a Gothic Romance like Bloodsmoor Romance, the historical detective story Mysteries of Winterthurn, suspense thrillers such as her Rosamund Smith novels, among a variety of other literary ventures. Her literary range is broad. As John Barth pointed out, ‘Oates writes all over the aesthetical map.’2 Oates’s significance as a writer stems from her willingness to take risks and from her pledge to carry on testing the limits of fiction, exploring different genres, and using different types of character, setting and social milieu. She has refused to adjust herself to any literary school or aesthetic category.

However, what continues to puzzle, if not disturb, much of the academic establishment is Oates’s ability to reach both highbrow and popular audiences. Since the early 1970s Oates has created explicit re-rewritings and revisions of the ‘masters’ of the western canon, inviting intertextual readings with great appeal for the literary critic. Many of her works are crowded with references – Oates is, after all, also an academic. However, the understanding of these literary
allusions is rarely essential to the enjoyment of her texts. Oates’s works often invite diverse readerships. While academic critics keep on tracing literary allusions in her work, a large popular audience continues to enjoy the energy with which she describes the myriad of obsessions and anxieties that shape American experience.

Interview

This interview with Joyce Carol Oates took place on 25 May 2005 at the Gore Hotel in South Kensington in London. During her short stay in the U.K., Joyce Carol Oates promoted her most recent novel, The Falls, and gave an open lecture at the University of Oxford. In this interview Oates speaks about the books which consolidate her canon, recent trends in contemporary American fiction, the influence of the classics on her writing, her future projects, among other subjects.

Susana Araújo: References to your phenomenal productivity and versatility as a writer are somehow unavoidable in an introduction to your work. You have written more and experimented with more literary genres than is usually expected from a ‘serious’ writer. Is it difficult for you as a writer to discern your own ‘canon,’ that is, to decide what your ‘best’ works might be within your vast oeuvre?

Joyce Carol Oates: I think it is a very complex situation. For instance, we are bringing together a short story collection which will be published in 2006 called New and Selected Stories of 1996–2006. I had to go back and look at stories from my earliest collections. And I found it very difficult to make decisions. Some stories had been anthologised many, many times and so they seemed to me to be available. And then others that I considered just as good, had not been anthologised at all. So my problem was to decide if I should include the stories that have been anthologised, and are relatively known, or if I should leave them out. But my editor said that I would have to include the popular stories because people would expect them. So, once again, stories that I consider just as good are being left behind. I think it is inevitable. And maybe it falls to readers sometime in the future to rediscover the work. We are always re-reading. When we re-read a great writer such as D.H. Lawrence we are always looking for
a book that isn’t so well known and there are many short stories by D. H. Lawrence that are excellent and which are not often anthologised. But I think that, on the whole, the writer takes some advice from editors and scholarly critics. My biographer, Greg Johnson, suggested a whole list of stories that he felt should be included. And I felt it was very helpful.

It is interesting to hear you speak about the influence of the critic in the process of discerning your canon. Do you read criticism on your work?

**JCO:** I sent my table of contents to Greg Johnson and he said ‘Oh but you left out X and Y, you can’t leave these out.’ I thought maybe I’ll bring them in now. Because other people have intelligent thoughts and they have reasons for the thoughts. Whereas the writer might just think, ‘Well this isn’t a good story.’ So, I do read some criticism. Some of it is very thoughtful. Not all but some.

**What are those titles going to be?**

**JCO:** Well, ‘The Dead’, ‘The Lady with the Pet Dog’, and I guess ‘Upon the Sweeping Flood’, ‘Where Are You Going Where Have You Been’… these are some of those which are more well known.

**Will we find there any of your least known or less anthologised stories?**

**JCO:** ‘Unwritten Unmailed Letters,’ I think. That was one of my less anthologised stories.

**And in terms of novels? What are the novels which you think will mark your canon?**

**JCO:** There are three of my titles that have been reprinted. Some of them are *them* and *Garden of Earthly Delights*, which I rewrote part of for Modern Library. *Expensive People* and *Wonderland* have also been reprinted quite a few times, whereas *With Shuddering Fall*, my first novel, I had not looked at for a while. *The Assassins*, I had not also looked at for a while. Those seem to be major novels from that period.
It is interesting that Wonderland and The Garden of Earthly Delights have two different endings – the later reprinted editions convey later and more mature endings. I also feel that many of your stories seem to encompass within themselves two different conclusions. There is something like a second ‘turn of the screw’ in many of your stories. This can be seen, for instance, in stories such as ‘Sacred Marriage’ where you add a second epiphany to the story which rewrites and contradicts the first. Is this double ending a conscious strategy for you?

**JCO:** When you write a story there is an ending that seems inevitable, but then when you think about it and leave with the story or the novel for a while, it seems to be possible to go on a little further. I had an interesting experience in adapting the Tattooed Girl from the novel to the stage. Because the novel ends at a certain point which is very tragic and final. But for the play I thought that I would not have the tragic ending but I would have a simulated or compromise ending. And so, now, it goes into the future a little bit. So that was a very interesting experience. Having lived with the novel for a year after it was published I could see possibly a compromise ending with the young woman almost not killed. She is injured but she is not killed and she is able to have more of an adjustment to life without Joshua Sigmund. And that was a good experience. I feel that my characters are alive in some way. And that they are not just characters in a story. And that they have a livingness and a psychology that overlaps the formal constraints of the fiction. So the characters can still keep on living.

It is precisely that sense of livingness – the sense that the characters and their narratives, continue to live after they were first drafted by you – which is so distinctive of your work. In that sense, your work distances itself from the many parodies of post-modern fiction, where, particularly from the 1960s onwards, we start to find characters which are less rounded and psychologically developed subjects than flat allegories or caricatures.

**JCO:** Yes… those characters seem like puppets. When I wrote Blonde there were a number of outtakes (by which I mean chapters that were not kept in), which might be published as short stories. But Norma Jean Baker seemed to me very living. And I could write five thousand pages about her but only one thousand pages corresponded to the
novel and she would still be alive. I could write a story about Norma Jean right now. Because say, when she was eleven years old there was an interlude I didn’t have time to write about. When she’s twenty-two, when she’s thirty-one ... there are all those parts of her life I didn’t have the opportunity to write about. Yet still she is very alive to me.

You continue to write short stories as well as novels. You mentioned elsewhere that you tend to write short fiction in the intervals between novels. How different is for you the creative process of longer and shorter pieces?

**JCO:** Two evenings ago I met Kasuo Ishiguro and he was asking me exactly the same question. He was saying that he never wrote any short stories but wants to do so. And he asked me what the differences are. I said that, basically, a short story has much more structural unity and you begin with the end of your story. You have maybe one, two or three characters but no more than that. And the time element is usually quite short. There are obviously exceptions to what I am saying but this is generally it. A novel obviously requires much more space and if you are writing about a family, which I often am, the short story is not adequate for that. You need a lot of space, you need chapters and you need to have a certain elasticity, paragraphs that go over the past and exposition. A short story cannot accommodate that. You just have to move much more smoothly. And I like both forms very much. I read both short stories and novels with much admiration. And because I am a writer, myself, I am always looking at the structure: what is the first paragraph, how is the first scene introduced and how is the ending written. For me reading is very much the part of writing. When I am writing I read very widely and the books I’m reading help me somehow to think. I may read some Collete, I read Henry James, I might go back and read Kakfa. And they all help me to think.

I was wondering if you could also tell us about the visual element in your writing. Your stories and novels have a striking cinematic quality. Is the strong emphasis on the visual a result of an interest in visual culture (such as painting and cinema) or a more unmediated visual sensitivity to what is around you?

**JCO:** Part of it is intuitive. It is a response to the visual: how selecting the right details allow us to present character. It is like a portrait –
if a portrait is good, the painter just selected a few things. Roland Barthes talks about the image of the photograph that has a kind of background, but then there’s something in it …

I think he calls it ‘punctum’ …

**JCO:** Yes! The ‘punctum’, the ‘prick’, the ‘punctuation’ that makes it unexpected or special. And I think that the background is sort of the background of the story and the ‘puncture’ is somehow a gesture or reaction against the two. It is very interesting how, in his book on photography, Roland Barthes talks about the photograph of his mother but he never shows it. Because if he had shown it, the image would be somehow venal. And that is interesting too. That real life, unless it becomes heightened by art, would seem to be vain. It isn’t really vain but it would seem to be vain to a stranger. And because of that Barthes didn’t want to expose that photograph of his mother when she was a girl, which meant so much to him. He didn’t want to expose that to the gaze of the stranger who would not see the art of it, would only see a kind of banality. That’s very interesting too. It seems to suggest that to make our lives art they have to be subjected to some kind of artificial heightening.

**Another important feature of your work is its versatility and the way your oeuvre crosses different literary genres. How do you engage with genre? Is the possibility of trying different genres seductive because it allows for literary experiment?**

**JCO:** I find that is true. Different genres are opportunities for experimental fiction. The ‘young adult genre’, for instance, is very demanding. You cannot have any exposition really, and you have very little description. So I find that in young adult novels I had to throw away what I usually love – I love description and I love analysis of characters. What I have to revise is dramatic scenes and dialogue. And very little description. Very little background, and a strong plot. Say that I have, for example, ten fingers for the piano. When I write a young adult novel I can only use three fingers … And to me that is very much a challenge. I don’t have a natural aptitude for the ‘young adult novel’ so it is something which I find … which I’ve discovered. And I find the ‘mystery’ of the ‘suspense novel’ something I think I have a little more aptitude for. Because there you can use different
powers, you can use description, background. But in the ‘young adult novel’ you must move forward, very dramatically in each chapter. And that’s very different from a Jamesian novel where you move very, very leisurely, and the revelations are quite subtle. Here they happen to be quite explicit. You can’t have subtlety. And so that takes away another one of my predilections. The suspense thriller, the psychological, horror or detective novel have to have a final chapter where everything is resolved. And that’s not my natural predilection either. So, to me, the genres demand experimental approaches.

**Do you find yourself deciding to work on a specific literary genre or do you encounter and discover ‘the genre’ of a specific work in the process of its composition?**

**JCO:** The big novels *Bellefleur, Bloodsmoor Romance, Mysteries of Winterthurn,* and *My Heart Laid Bare* (which is really part of that sequence) I consciously wanted to write *genre*: works of gothic, the detective novel (*Mysteries of Winterthurn* was a meta-detective novel) and *Bloodsmoor Romance* is, of course, a romance. I am looking at the language of the nineteenth-century novel in a way that I found very exciting. Last night, at the bookstore reading, an Englishman came up to me. He said ‘Of all your works, the novel that I really love is *Mysteries of Winterthurn.* I loved that novel. Why did you write it?’, he asked. He really wanted to talk about it. Somehow that is one of the closest novels to my heart because of the language and the way it is so nostalgic. A person is looking back on these early cases and talking about them through historical perspective. Everything is seen as through a telescope in the nineteenth century. Whereas if you are writing a contemporary novel it is completely different. You no longer have that language. So for me those long novels and genres were an experiment in language.

I am also interested in your use of intertextuality. *Marriages and Infidelities,* a collection which was written in the early 1970s, is a book where your engagement with intertextuality – your rewriting and interrogation of a number of canonic male writers – becomes particularly conscious and explicit. Do you think that since then intertextuality has become less self-conscious in your work?
JCO: Yes, I think so. Since having written Marriages and Infidelities I have done a couple more. I have done another look at the ‘Turn on the Screw’ at a later collection which is I think maybe in Raven’s Wing …

… isn’t it in Haunted: Tales of the Grotesque?

JCO: …Yes, Haunted! I loved writing that story, ‘Accursed Inhabitants of the House of Bly.’ Of course that is an allusion to ‘Turn of the Screw’ which I take to be a really quintessential nineteenth twentieth century novella. It was published in 1899, at the turn of the century, but Henry James sort of rises above his own limitations and that novella becomes something like a gem. It is really a gem of the twentieth century more than of the nineteenth century in that it looks ahead into a century of suggestiveness and secrecy and having to do with women and men and sexuality and so forth. So, to me, I find that really quite haunting and fascinating. I guess I am re-spinning Henry James – his mind – as if I could get into his mind by writing the ‘The Turn of the Screw’ and ‘Accursed Inhabitants of the House of Bly.’ Apart from that, doing an allusion to a story, which is also another story, might seem to me more artificial or willed and I haven’t done it for a while. I’ve been more likely to make references. My novel Blonde has many references to other literatures and Marilyn Monroe is sometimes remembered as having read The Time Machine by H. G. Wells. As in this case, I’ll be more likely to have the work alluded to, specifically.

The abundant and often surprising epigraphs which permeate your novels are one of the means through which intertextuality maintains a certain degree of visibility in your work. What are the roles of the epigraphs in your writing?

JCO: The epigraphs – that’s right…. Some of them I make up. Some are invented and some are real but they are part of the same thing. In The Falls, for instance, I have three epigraphs. I’ve made them all up, because I couldn’t find them. Maybe someone has written them, but I couldn’t find them, you know. So I had to make them up. But I think that your earlier point is a very good one. That it isn’t just me, but I think other writers too have somehow drawn back from the self-conscious experimentation. My friends and colleagues, Bob Coover and...
John Barth, still write that way but they seem very dated now. Nobody is really reading them. And other writers like Richard Ford, Russell Banks and Bob Stone seem more contemporary because they are looking at social reality now. My interest swings between a realism which is actually very exciting if you are writing about a dense realistic political social world. That’s actually very engrossing and then the world that’s more dream-like and surreal and you kind of go back and cross between the two. I’m the only writer of my acquaintance who does that. Most of my friends are realists. For instance, Edmund White who is a very good friend of mine is a realist of the social scene – especially of the gay scene. He writes about his own life. He doesn’t usually invent much. He is very much an autobiographical writer. I have not done very much of that at all, myself. *I’ll Take You There* has been the only one – probably the only one where I would write more autobiographically. And there are other languages … My own language is not really abbreviated and everything in it is quite realistic.

**I am also curious about the way your work is able to target a double readership – both a popular and an academic readership. Is the readership something you have in mind when you are writing a novel or a story?**

**JCO:** I don’t really anticipate any readership at all, actually. But when I began writing I think I had a narrow concept of what literary fiction was. I had read a lot of Henry James, Faulkner and James Joyce. Then as I kept on with my reading basically I saw all these other possibilities and I think that, as time goes on, whatever you have been doing starts to seem not so adequate for your new ideas. The next novel that will come out in the Fall in the U.S., and also here, is very much a woman’s novel. I think I may have talked about that. I wanted to write a novel with no irony in it, which is very difficult for me. Maybe there is irony in that and I am not able to see that. I deliberately worked on a vocabulary that is not very extensive and sentences that are somehow simple or compound sentences but not too complicated. So I will see how that turns out. In England it is called *Mother, Missing* but in America it is *Missing Mom*. Here in England the term ‘Mom’ does not exist. They have ‘mum’ and they have ‘mother’ but they do not have ‘mom.’ And so they couldn’t translate the title at all. And to me *Missing Mom* is the real title. To me it’s a really interesting word, it’s a diminutive and it’s a very comforting word and it’s a kind venal
word, it’s very ordinary. If you say ‘mother’ that’s formal, ‘mammy’ it’s infantile or baby child-like, but ‘mom’ is some odd little word.’ It’s just the way it is spelled: it is very simple and kind of venal. It doesn’t seem to have any beauty or art to it and my character is just an ordinary ‘mom’ (m-o-m). I just got very interested in the word. So ‘missing mom’ gets translated into *Mother, Missing*, but *Mother, Missing* is a very different title. So, over here in England and in the U.K. it will seem like a very different novel. So we will see what happens…

**I was wondering if you can tell us more about the lack of irony in the novel.**

**JCO:** Yes, I don’t think there is much irony in the novel. There is a little irony, but not the kind of linguistic irony that I usually have. The narrator is a woman who is not an intellectual. She is intelligent, she is not foolish, she writes journalism. She goes around with her tape recorder and she interviews people in upstate New York and she works for a little newspaper. And she doesn’t have much of a career, she has never really got a good job, she never really got a good education. She falls in love and she falls out of love and her life is kind of going nowhere. She is thirty-one and she is not going anywhere. I think of her as very different from me, in that I have a certain ambition and I teach college. But she has somehow never got her life together. She has a good heart and she doesn’t have the certain cynicism that I might have. She’s a much more ordinary, normal person, I think. So in the novel that she writes, she is telling a story about her mother. I think it is much more of an average story that might be told in America. Very different from *I’ll Take You There* which is very much my own sensibility, where the girl is always thinking… she’s thinking about Spinoza, thinking about Nietzsche or Plato, etc. She’s always having these thoughts whereas the woman in *Missing Mom* is not like that. She has very little or no intellectual allusions.

**Your novels convey a very strong sense of space. I remember you saying that for your early works you used to create maps of the landscapes where your stories and novels were set.**

**JCO:** Yes. I used to do that. I used to love that.
How important is geographical and human landscape in your work and how do they interact?

JCO: Even when I don’t draw maps I still see the place very clearly. But I remember in the Niagara Falls novel that I did draw the neighbourhoods and avenues. There are certain avenues which recur between Rape: a Love Story and The Falls. And there’s a certain scene in The Falls when Aria is probably in her thirties or so and she has some young children. Dirk is taking them on a drive and they are driving out of Niagara Falls and Aria looks around, she sees all this development: ‘Oh this used to be like a field and now there are these factories here and these buildings.’ And I can kind of envision what that would be. And I met a man last night who was at the London Book Review bookstore, another man who follows my work. He is English but has been in the United States. He was in Niagara Falls and he went to Lockport. And so there were three of us talking about Lockport, including this British man, and he found that Upstate New York was very interesting. He said that those small towns are quite different from other places in the states. So yes, see clearly where my stories are set. To me it is very visual. I just know exactly where their driving at. That seems important.

There is always a strong interaction between the human landscape and the geographical space in your works. Your characters are always strongly rooted in a physical and economical landscape.

JCO: Yes, very much so. I feel very strongly about that. It is not that we really have to be or stay in one place but we sort of come from a place and we have a romantic connection and a mystical connection with it. It is like Anthea, the mythological character who has to touch the earth and is astray from the earth. And if I write anything it has to have some specific place and I have to know where the characters come from. But they can go somewhere else.

I am also interested in the way you read and write. Because of your work teaching creative writing at Princeton and your work as an editor, alongside your husband, Raymond J. Smith, in the Ontario Review Press, I imagine that you continue to read a lot of new fiction. How do you balance your time between reading the classics and more recent works?
JCO: I like to re-read the classics quite often. I am almost always re-reading something. I am re-reading Collette recently. Her writing is very different from my own writing actually. But I just took Collette along on this trip, actually. Then I am reading another novel I re-read just recently, a novella called *Ethan Frome* by Edith Wharton which I probably hadn’t read in twenty-five years and that was very interesting. Then I will re-read Edith Wharton when we are flying back tomorrow. In this long flight of five or six hours you have a lot of time to read and I also work on my own novel. And Edith Wharton has such a sense of place. Actually, that is very strong in her works, unlike her friend Henry James whose sense of place seems to be attenuated.

**Can you tell us a bit about your most recent writing? Do you have any new project after *Missing Mom*?**

JCO: The next novel after *Missing Mom* will be called *Blood at the Root*. It is about two girls in 1970s who were roommates in college. One is Black and the other is Caucasian. It is really a portrait of the Black girl and a portrait of the relationship between the two. And it is in the early 1970s. I think it is 1971 or 1972. And it is set at a college outside Philadelphia something like Redmoor but not exactly Redmoor. It is called *Blood at the Root*. And I think that will be very controversial because the young Black woman is very difficult. She is not a simple nice, positive, affirmative character. She is very strong and very difficult. So I think that it will get some angry reviews. But I feel that at this point in our history of relations with Black people we can, now, show minority people as being as horrible as the majority of people.

**Your summary of your last novel *Blood at the Root* seems to highlight something which is quite pertinent, at the moment, given the contemporary political climate. There seems to be danger, today more than ever before, for a writer to feel restricted by an inflated political correctness which might prevent us from exploring and in a way drafting and imagining characters of different cultures?**

JCO: That’s right. It prevents us from experiencing the world as complex. And I feel that too many white people are just worried or timid about writing about Black people at all. But if they do, the characters tend to be flat, or really, really good, like saints. I would never write
about people who are saints because there is nothing authentic about that. I just feel that this will probably be a controversial novel and will not be met with a uniformity of response.

Notes