

Topic Page: [Oates, Joyce Carol, 1938–](#)

Definition: **Oates, Joyce Carol** from *Philip's Encyclopedia*

US novelist, short-story writer, and poet. Oates' debut book of short stories was *By the North Gate* (1963). Her works, such as the trilogy *A Garden of Earthly Delights* (1967), *Expensive People* (1968) and *Them* (1969), are grim chronicles of violence and deprivation in modern America. Other novels include *The Assassins* (1975), *You Must Remember This* (1987), and *We Were the Mulvaneys* (1996).

Summary Article: **Oates, Joyce Carol**

from *Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Literature: The Encyclopedia of the Gothic*

Joyce Carol Oates (1938–) states in *(Woman) Writer* (1988: 6) that writers are vampires of their own lives, so – as one might expect – her extensive body of work in numerous genres includes plenty in the Gothic mode. Her novels written under two pseudonyms, Rosamond Smith and Lauren Kelly, routinely make use of the doppelgänger (see doubles), but varieties of the Gothic are just as prevalent in the more than fifty novels and more than thirty story collections that she has produced alongside volumes of essays, poetry, and plays.

A Professor at the University of Windsor, Ontario, until 1978 and thereafter at Princeton, Oates was born in 1938 in Lockport, New York. She studied at Syracuse and Wisconsin before abandoning a PhD at Rice to become a writer, publishing her first book, a story collection, in 1963. Her literary fiction reveals a core concern with personality and identity in interaction with the intricacies of American society. This gives rise to such themes as maniacal ambition, psychological and physical tyranny, and illicit or aberrant love. Many of her protagonists struggle to rise through social strata, often escaping overbearing individuals and transcending internal and external conflicts on the way.

Oates' first novel, *With Shuddering Fall* (1964) anticipates later works in being about a claustrophobic relationship that can also be read as a struggle between solipsism and engagement. *Wonderland* (1971) is about the social rise and emotional alienation of a neurosurgeon, and more generally an exploration of consciousness. Oates subsequently suffered a mental crisis that produced a sense of the fallacy of the unified self. From this came *The Assassins* (1975), *Childwold* (1976), and *Son of the Morning* (1978), where she sought to rethink the ways fiction renders selfhood. Such works build on the narrative innovations of Gothic forebears Edgar Allan Poe and Fyodor Dostoevsky. Her narrators switch between first and third person, and render ambiguous the balance between perspective, imagination, and reality.

In the 1980s, Oates produced historical novels with Gothic elements. *Bellefleur* (1980) is about a dynasty beset by strange manifestations including the ghosts of those they exploited to attain land and wealth. *A Bloodsmoor Romance* (1982) tells of a patriarchal father whose daughters flee his influence. The most notable of the daughters, known as Deirdre of the Shadows, is kidnapped by a black balloon and reappears as a medium. *Mysteries of Winterthurn* (1984) involves a nineteenth-century detective's pursuit of a killer who may be himself, while the title of her Gilded Age novel, *My Heart Laid Bare* (published in 1998 but written in the 1980s), is from a Poe statement that anyone setting down such truth would witness the page burn up even as they wrote.

Many of Oates' subsequent present-day novels focus on horror invading everyday life. In *American Appetites* (1989) a man kills his wife during an argument about a woman who resembles the wife's

younger self. *Black Water* (1992) is told from the viewpoint of a drowning girl. In *Blonde* (2002), Marilyn Monroe tells her story posthumously. *The Rise of Life on Earth* (1991) and *Zombie* (1995) are about psychopaths. Other Gothic works include *First Love* (1996), *Beasts* (2002), and *The Gravedigger's Daughter* (2007). Also with Gothic elements is *My Sister, My Love* (2008), a meditation on the murder of a child beauty pageant winner.

Equally important in terms of her Gothic side are Oates' story collections. She claims clairvoyance in *The Poisoned Kiss* (1975), tales of a mythical Portugal supposedly written under the influence of an unknown Portuguese writer. Overtly Gothic collections include *The Hungry Ghosts* (1974), *Night-Side* (1977), *Haunted* (1994), *Demon and Other Tales* (1996), *The Collector of Hearts* (1999), *The Female of the Species* (2006), and *The Museum of Dr. Moses* (2007). But even her best-known early story "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" is about a girl who accepts a ride from a creepy stranger who may be an incarnation of the Devil. In *Wild Nights!* (2008) Oates imagines the last days of Poe, Dickinson, Twain, James, and Hemingway, with varying emphasis on loneliness, strangeness, violence, and aberrance.

SEE ALSO: American Gothic; Dostoevsky, Fyodor; Doubles; James, Henry; Poe, Edgar Allan.

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