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Susan Lerner

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A Conversation with Joyce Carol Oates

Abstract

*In the Kenyon Review, Joyce Carol Oates once wrote, "Writing is our way of assuaging homesickness," and this is the quote that came to mind in the fall of 2015 when Oates read as part of Butler University's Vivian S. Delbrook Visiting Writers Series. At Clowes Hall, she read from her memoir, *The Lost Landscape: A Writer's Coming of Age*, which tells of her childhood home and her formative years. She read with ease, pausing occasionally with a humorous aside. Oates, the serious-looking woman on the book jackets of countless dark novels, is funny.*

*In the introduction to *The Best American Essays of the Century*, an anthology Oates edited, she wrote: "Art should provoke, disturb, arouse our emotions, expand our sympathies in directions we may not anticipate and may not even wish." Oates carries this sentiment through in her novels and stories, which provoke and disturb by employing plots that often spark from an act of violence. The author's empathetic prose never excuses her characters' cruelty, but informs it by providing a window into their deepest hurts and desires.*

*Oates's list of accomplishments, still growing after fifty years in the field, is so vast and unwieldy that it defies attempts to catalogue. Her work ethic embodies the historically American idea of success—a Horatio Alger story—that a dream can be achieved through perseverance and hard work. But Oates's career also fits another narrative of success, that some individuals are born with a bounteous talent. In *The Lost Landscape* Oates reveals that as a girl she told stories by coloring pictures with her Crayolas because her desire to narrate came before she learned to write. Oates's oeuvre fills bookshelves and includes novels, short story collections, memoirs, essays, and literary criticism. The *New York Times* has included dozens of her books on its list of notable books of the year, and other honors include the National Book Award; nominations for the Pulitzer Prize; the National Humanities Medal bestowed by President Obama; and the PEN Center USA Award for Lifetime Achievement.*

After her reading, Oates fielded questions from the audience, and the next morning she sat in a room with thirty students to answer more questions. In this more casual setting she spoke about being a formalist. She explained that different stories call out for specific types of language, and that she is always seeking forms to tell the multitude of stories that crowd her head and fill her files at home. "I'm really happy when I'm running," she said. "I get lots of ideas when I run." Before Oates headed home she sat down with Booth.

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A JOURNAL

May 20, 2016

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by Susan Lerner

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Susan Lerner: You're best known as a fiction writer, but you have recently penned two memoirs: *A Widow's Story* and *The Lost Landscape*. Some reviewers of *The Lost Landscape* have commented that they've sensed a reticence or guardedness in your autobiographical writing, and one review included your quote: "Nothing is more offensive than an adult child exposing his or her elderly parents to the appalled fascination of strangers." Confessional memoir has become so popular that it has recently been coined "The First-Person Industrial Complex." What are your feelings about confessional writing?

Joyce Carol Oates: There are many degrees of confessional writing. I think that if one feels a compulsion to confess in great detail, particularly medical features of one's life, I don't understand why one would feel that way, but I wouldn't say that you shouldn't do it. I would say that one might think twice about revealing medical details about one's parents. Confession is one thing, and I don't really think it's a good idea, but to confess for other people, it is really morally questionable.

SL: Even if facts about other people impact your own life?

JCO: Everything impacts everything. We have digestive problems sometimes. Do we need to write about that? We live in physical bodies. It's not necessary that we have to detail everything. Some of us go to the dentist. We have our teeth cleaned. That may impact your life for a day, but do you need to write about that? Something like that is not that significant. Look, everybody dies. Everybody has parents who get elderly and die. Do we really need to know aesthetic, excruciating details of each case? I don't think so. It's not illuminating. It's sort of morbid and meretricious.

SL: In *The Lost Landscape* you wrote that as a child you understood books to belong to one of two categories: books for children and books for adults. Literature for young adults does venture into more sophisticated themes these days, and many adult fans of young adult books claim that this genre travels the same emotional territory as literature for adults. Others insist that fiction written for adults provides a more enriching reading experience. I'm curious, because you've written both young adult and adult fiction, what your thoughts are.

JCO: You just quoted me. What exactly is the question? My thoughts on young adult writing?

SL: My question was whether you thought that books for young adults—for instance, I loved *After the Wreck, I Picked Myself Up, Spread My Wings, and Flew Away*—if you feel as though adults who are fans of YA literature can get the same kind of enriching literary experience as by reading adult literature.

JCO: I'm not sure that's a question. I don't understand. Yeah, that sounds like a good idea. Possibly people are reading young adult fiction because the vocabulary is simpler. They're easier to read. They're much easier to read than Virginia Woolf, or James Joyce, or Faulkner. So they're reading young adult fiction because it's easier to read. *Huckleberry Finn*, you could say, is young adult fiction. *To Kill a Mockingbird* is young adult, [as is] *Catcher in the Rye*. There are young adult books of fiction that are quite relevant. *Huckleberry Finn* is a great classic. There's nothing wrong with reading it. I think that's why they're reading it—it's easier to read.

SL: In 2012, when Philip Roth retired, the *New York Times* quoted him: "I knew I wasn't going to get another good idea, or if I did I'd have to slave over it. Writing is frustration—it's daily frustration, not to mention humiliation." How do you feel about the writing process?

JCO: I know Philip. He's a friend of mine. Philip's attitude toward writing is different from my own. It was much more grim and difficult for him. He wasn't happy with his last several books. They're very short books, short novels. He also had health problems. He had a quadruple bypass, and he has had other problems, so I think physically—he was eighty-something—all that's part of it. I don't think he would have written that or said those things when he was forty years old.

SL: In *The Lost Landscape* you wrote about your love of literary journals. Bill Henderson, the publisher and editor of the Pushcart Prize, wrote in 2012 that "Instant Internet publication is damaging to writers." As a cofounder of the *Ontario Review*, what are your thoughts concerning the legitimacy of online literary journals?

JCO: Oh, I think they're fine. I don't have any strong feeling. *Narrative Magazine* is online, and it's quite excellent. I think what Bill Henderson meant was that probably the writers were not being edited, so that there's a lot of, evidently, unedited work. I think it's pretty harmless.

SL: I have a question about the dustup last year with the white male poet who used the Chinese pseudonym. How do you feel about this as a road to publication?

JCO: I don't have any strong feelings about it. I don't know why people have to have strong feelings. Everybody gets angry about things, and lots of them got angry with him. Obviously as a poet he would have preferred being published under his own name. He is a serious poet. He got more easily published under this other name that turned out to be somebody's name from his high school. He just had some bad luck. Rather than just see it as a kind of farcical thing, people seem to be really attacking him and choosing to be really unhappy about it.

SL: In Meg Wolitzer's piece for the *New York Times Sunday Book Review* in 2012 titled "The Second Shelf," she wrote that much literary fiction written by women is relegated to a lower tier, a category labeled "women's fiction," while the top shelf is reserved for books of prominence, which are, for the most part, written by men. What are your thoughts on "the second shelf"?

JCO: I'm not so much aware of it. I'm sure it may be true.

SL: I wonder if that might be because you've reached a stature at which you're less aware, maybe, of women who haven't quite made a name for themselves?

JCO: There are many, many, many men who don't even get published, and a lot of them, too, are on the second or third tier, but nobody knows their names. There are a whole lot of mid-list writers, and I do know a lot of male writers who don't do very well. Women writers have more of a built-in audience. Jennifer Weiner does complain about not being considered on the same shelf with Jonathan Franzen, but she has a very wide readership. A male writer of her stature or quality or subject matter would not have those readers.

SL: Jennifer Weiner—

JCO: She's a former student of mine.

SL: Jennifer Weiner came out in support of women who write all over the gamut of literary arts. She lamented about the solidarity, or the lack of solidarity, amongst women writers. She said that male literary writers, for the most part, don't object to the meager coverage of male genre writers, whereas female literary writers react badly to any coverage of female genre writers, horrified that this might take attention away from them. What—

JCO: Who's horrified, where's this coming from?

SL: That's something she said.

JCO: Horrified? I can't think of one person who's horrified by any of that. I mean, I really don't know what she's talking about. Maybe some friends of hers in Brooklyn, or wherever she lives. Basically, I have no idea what she's talking about.

SL: You don't sense a lack of solidarity among women writers?

JCO: I don't know what kind of an issue it is. What she means . . . I have no idea what she's talking about. She wants more attention for her books. You know, many people do. Many people want more attention for their books—and she's one of them. But she does make a lot of money; she's an enormous bestseller. Jodi Picoult, another Princeton student, sells millions of copies of her books. There are many male writers who sell a fraction. They may have better literary reputations than the women writers, but that doesn't really transfer into anything real. Some of the people who Jennifer and Jodi would like to emulate don't sell a fraction of what they do. It's hard to have both. You could have a large readership, like *Fifty Shades of Grey*, and probably the common denominator readership is fairly low. You're not going to have a huge readership for Faulkner, because it's difficult. So if Jennifer Weiner wants a large readership, she can't also have an elite reputation. Basically, you can't really do both. There are some good writers like Toni Morrison who have a wide readership, but nothing like *Fifty Shades of Grey*. If you want enormous bestsellers, you can't write difficult novels, and probably they're not going to have difficult literary themes. So basically, you can't do both.

SL: Let's get back to your memoir, *The Lost Landscape*. I've thought about the passage in which you wrote that the childhood scenes required some invention. In that ongoing debate about truth in memoir, the James Frey issue—

JCO: Right, but he didn't say that and he didn't have an afterword. I put it in an afterword, so I said it. I'm making it very clear that these are composite figures and I invented things, so if somebody is upset by that, they shouldn't read the book! With James Frey I think it was the idea that it was true. But probably, if he had to do it over again, he'd have an afterword. James Frey had written a novel, it was basically a novel, and his editor said, "No, we'd rather have it as a memoir." He was a young writer, and he was sort of tempted. I won't say he was coerced, but he wouldn't have done that on his own. He had written a novel. And then it was published as a memoir, and it was attacked for having fictitious elements.

SL: So when I ask you what measure of fact a memoir writer owes readers, your answer to that is . . .

JCO: It depends on who they are. How do we know whether any memoirs are true? How do we know whether biographies are true? There are a dozen biographies of Robert Frost that present the man in different ways. One of them is maybe more true than the others, but we don't know which one. Where is the truth? There are memoirs that claim that people have been reincarnated, or taken up in UFOs. There's a memoir about a boy who went to heaven and came back. They're all different. Readers can sort of make judgments for themselves. I like Mary Karr's writing very much, and I assume that she has to be inventing some of the dialogue that took place fifty years ago because nobody could remember that. But I think she's pretty truthful in talking about the memoir, using elements of fiction and trying to be truthful to the essence. If there was a girl in your high school to whom something awful happened, you could write about that without giving her name and her address and everything about her. You could write about the circumstances without revealing the person.

Susan Lerner is a student in Butler's MFA in Creative Writing program. She reads for *Booth: A Journal* which also published her interview with Jonathan Franzen. Her essay "Only A Memory" was a finalist for the *Crab Orchard Review* 2016 Rafael Torch Literary Nonfiction Award. Her work has appeared in *Word Riot*, *The Believer Logger*, *The Rumpus*, *Front Porch Journal*, *Atticus Review*, *Literary Mama*, and elsewhere. Susan lives in Indianapolis with her husband, three teenagers, and Mischief, the family's dog.