PROFILES

JOYCE CAROL OATES'S RELENTLESS, PROLIFIC SEARCH FOR A SELF

In more than a hundred works of fiction, Oates has investigated the question of personality—while doubting that she actually has one.

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Oates kept a journal for twenty-six years. Throughout its four thousand pages, she alludes to a secret. “It’s always there,” she wrote. Photographs by Andrea Modica for The New Yorker

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When Joyce Carol Oates was thirty-four, she started a journal. "Query," she wrote on the first page. "Does the individual exist?" She felt that she knew little about herself—for instance, whether she was honest or a hypocrite. "I don't know the answer to the simplest of questions," she wrote. "What *is* my personal nature?"

The journal, which she began in 1973, eventually swelled to more than four thousand typed, single-spaced pages. Throughout, she alludes to a secret. "It's there, it's always there," she wrote in 1978. "I wish I could give a name to it, even in code." She thought about the secret so often, she wrote, that the journal could be named "The Person Who Has Written This Journal Lives a Secret." She couldn't "help but wonder (and here fiction won't help me, art won't help me) whether it is a secret embedded deep within everyone's life, but particularly within the life of the creative artist." At times the secret felt as "awkward as a hammer stuck in my pocket, getting in my way . . . at other times small and contained and indeed unobtrusive as a tiny pebble."

Oates, who has written sixty-three novels, forty-seven collections of short stories, and numerous plays, librettos, children's novels, and books of poetry, told me that she remembered little about the journal, which is stored in nine boxes in the archives of Syracuse University. "It's sort of like words written on water," she said. Although thinking about the "tsunami of unrevised, written-swiftly-off-the-cuff material" filled her with dread, she allowed me to read the whole thing, which covers twenty-six years. She stopped keeping the journal when she began regularly using e-mail; she expected that she would print out her e-mails and they would serve as her new diary, but she

never got into the habit. She also gave me permission to read thousands of pages of her letters, stored along with the journal. “I can’t bear to even think of glancing back,” she wrote me, adding that it would be like glimpsing through “the slats of a venetian blind the life or lives I was living at the time, a much happier time, irrevocably lost now.”

The first time I met Oates, at a restaurant near Princeton University, where she has taught since 1978, she had just returned from a trip to Scandinavia. She is eighty-five and very slim and agile, with perfect posture. She shows almost no signs of physical frailty. On her trip, after spending the days touring and giving interviews, she worked on her next novel in her hotel room every night, from 9 P.M. to 1 A.M. When I asked if she was jet-lagged, she said, “Oh, no—I’m totally over that.”

She seemed uniquely incurious when I read her lines from her journal. “Well, I don’t know what to say about the journal because it represents work that I didn’t revise,” she told me.

I had decided to write about Oates after learning that she had documented so much of her life. I thought that the journal might explain why she had never tired of her own mind. Perhaps no other writer in the past century has been so focussed on the products of her own imagination. Many authors grapple with a central preoccupation in the course of a career, until the mystery eventually loses its pull, but Oates, who has long been concerned with the question of personality and says she doubts whether she actually has one, has never exhausted her curiosity. There are only so many ways to dramatize the problem of being a self, one might think, but Oates keeps coming back to it, as if there is something she still needs to figure out.

I read her a passage from 1978 in which she described her secret as “the vexing riddle,” the “koan of my life.” I asked if she remembered what she meant.

“Definitely,” she said.

“Is it still a secret?” I asked.

“I’m not going to say,” she said, softly. “That’s certainly part of my—yeah. It’s a thought that I have every day.”

A few minutes later, she told me, “I think I’m sort of worn out.” Before I could pay the bill, she stood up from our table, which was outdoors, stepped over a pebble garden, and walked away so quickly and weightlessly she seemed to be gliding.

In college, at Syracuse, Oates sometimes referred to herself as a character called “the writer.” In a letter to a friend, she noted all the books “the writer” had just read (“approve of all the king’s men tho it was written with one eye on the typewriter & one eye on Hollywood & the old man & the sea & for light reading wuthering heights”) before disavowing her lofty tone: “This aint me talkin, this is the ‘writer.’ She talks too much.” In another letter, she inhabited the perspective of her younger brother, Fred, Jr., who did not go to college: “Yes, I am her brother—& long have I lived under the shadow of her infamy. (Tho I am not jealous. I am merely in pain.)”

Oates had grown up on a small farm in a relatively impoverished area of western New York and gone to the same one-room schoolhouse as her mother. She was the first in her family to continue beyond eighth grade. At Syracuse, where she had a full scholarship, her housemates talked about the constant noise of her manual typewriter, which they heard through the early hours of the morning. If another student came into her room, she would put something on top of the novel she was working on, hiding her words. Her

writing professor sent a letter to her father, informing him, "This I do know, as a matter of conviction rather than opinion, and wish to pass on to you for whatever interest a detached observation may have: that she has gifts of the mind and the imagination which are extraordinary." Fred, Jr., who became a mechanical draftsman, told me, "It was so new to us. My mother was very proud of Joyce, but she was not an intellectual-type person, and I don't know if she really understood what was going on."

Oates was the oldest of three children. The youngest, Lynn Ann, was born when Oates was about to leave for college and was "my replacement," Oates wrote in an essay. She chose Lynn's name. They shared a birthday and looked uncannily similar. "A mirror-self, just subtly distorted," she wrote. "Sister-twin, separated by eighteen years." But Lynn never learned to say a sentence. As Oates remembers it, she would make high-pitched cries or grunts and tear at the pages of books with her teeth. She was eventually diagnosed as having severe autism. "Lynn Ann has lots of little traces of Joyce, this girl has a wonderful memory," Oates's mother told the Buffalo *News*, in 1987. "We have two opposites, one's a genius, one's retarded," Oates's father, who worked at a radiator factory for forty years, interjected. "I wish Joyce could trade a little back the other way."

When Lynn was fifteen, Oates's mother had a kind of nervous breakdown and, against her husband's wishes, placed Lynn in the West Seneca Developmental Center, a state facility in western New York that housed nearly two thousand people with mental disabilities. In archived letters from the early seventies, Oates's parents offered cursory updates about Lynn, who came home once a month to visit—"she no longer has those terrible nervous spells and is much quieter," her father reported—but in response Oates never asked after Lynn or mentioned her. In a letter, she told a friend that she had written a story based on her sister, but that it had not yet been accepted for publication—"perhaps because it is so unattractive a subject." The story was about a speechless girl who walks around in a daze, chewing on uncooked spaghetti, and whose silence—like "terrible monstrous blocks of stone"

—seems to mock the idea of words.

Oates's first book, "By the North Gate," a collection of short stories, was accepted for publication in 1962, when she was twenty-three. She had just finished a master's in English, at the University of Wisconsin. When she called her husband, Raymond Smith, whom she'd met in graduate school, to tell him the news, "my vision was blotched, my breath was shallow and my heartbeat erratic," she later wrote. "My fingers and toes had gone icy-cold—bizarrely my tongue was numb." The stories were about dispossessed people, many of them farmers, coming to an awareness that there was no higher meaning, and no hope of rising above their class, but in a letter to a friend she underplayed her ambitions, explaining, "No matter what I write about in stories, the real theme of my life is my marriage and nothing else is of comparable importance."

Oates at home, in New Jersey.

By the time she was thirty-three, she had published five novels, four of which were nominated for the National Book Award. Her novel "them," which dramatized the 1967 uprising in Detroit, won the prize. Oates and Smith, who were both teaching English at the University of Windsor, in Ontario, came to New York City for the ceremony, in 1970. After two days of parties and interviews, Oates was eating breakfast with her agent when she felt "earthshaking chasms of pain," she wrote to a friend, the novelist Gail Godwin. But she continued to conduct herself in a "feminine gentle way." Then a limousine took her to a studio in Greenwich Village, where her picture was taken for *Vogue*. She thought she heard some sort of explosion, but she assumed it came from inside her body and "kept on smiling because one *must* keep on smiling, perfect hostess, etc," she wrote. When she stepped

outside the studio, though, she saw smoke. A bomb had exploded in a town house occupied by the Weather Underground, the leftist militant group, a block away. As she was shuttled to more events, she felt an increasing sense of unreality. By the time she returned to Windsor, she felt as if there were a cloud inside her head, expanding slowly, until it was as thick as concrete.

She saw a number of specialists to determine if something was wrong with her. One day, lying in bed, she thought about how much time she had spent on appointments with doctors. "I thought—well—what a waste of time, really, why not write a story about all of this?" she told Godwin, implying that her symptoms had been psychosomatic. The story was called "Plot," and it depicts a male author, on the verge of a nervous breakdown, who transposes each of his moods into a characterization or scene. Oates told Godwin that art could create the conditions for sanity. "If I feel uneasy, I write about an uneasy person," she explained. "If I feel like disintegrating, the natural thing is to disintegrate into something else." The same method could be applied, she wrote, to the dilemma of having a "large, complex soul" that somehow manifests in public as a "thin, glassy trickle." When Oates reread "Plot," published in *The Paris Review*, she thought, "My God!—was that me?" she wrote Godwin. "And did I get through it, did I triumph over it? Yes, indeed." Fiction, she wrote in her journal, could function as a kind of "counter breakdown."

The year after her National Book Award, her third book of short stories, "The Wheel of Love," was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize and described by *Library Journal* as "quite simply, one of the finest collections of short fiction ever written by an American." Her short stories from the time, many of which revolve around romantic betrayals, are so precise about the impossibility of trying to cohere as a personality in the world—and the constant risk of mimicking other people, or of being forced into a relationship with them—that they are often subtly funny. But Oates found her literary good fortune almost unbearable. "I am so spiritually exhausted," she told Godwin, "that I would like to arrange a funeral for 'Joyce Carol

Oates' and escape with the bit of protoplasm I have, in what's left of this body I somehow got born into." She was five feet eight inches tall but weighed only ninety-five pounds. "The appeal of 'anorexia' is no mystery," she wrote in her journal. "A way of 'eluding' people who pursue too closely; a way of channeling off energy in other directions." She found eating boring and didn't have breakfast until 1 P.M. (and then often just an apple and cottage cheese, which she could eat while writing), a habit she still keeps today. "I catch myself thinking *I will starve you into submission!* " she wrote. "Not to punish the body, or to become unnaturally thin; but simply to exert one's will." She longed to "be perfect—which is to say absolutely even-tempered," she wrote. "I want to be invisible, I want to dissolve."

In the fall of 1971, feeling helpless and trapped, she took a leave from teaching, as did Smith, and the two of them went to London. She dragged herself to the typewriter each morning to "write it all out, somehow, anyway, thinking I might as well get some use out of going mad," she told Godwin. "I had the idea of 'suicide' with me the way the dial tone on the telephone is there—always—just lift it up, there it is." One day, she was sitting outside her rented flat after sunset, wondering how long she had to live. Suddenly, she felt as if whatever mysterious substance held her together as a single individual was gone. It was as if "the 'field' of perceptions and memories that constitutes 'Joyce Carol Oates'—was funneled most violently into a point," she wrote in her journal. "Another second and I would have been destroyed. But another second—and it was over."

In the weeks afterward, she felt calm and optimistic. When she was cooking spinach and the water boiled over, she smiled and thought, How interesting, this scene of a woman mopping up green water. Her depression was gone. She was filled with new writing ideas, increasingly ambitious and formally inventive ones. She felt separated from the "arbitrary collage of quirks, opinions, mannerisms, emotions, habits" that had made up her identity. "I felt as if my sojourn as 'Joyce' was through," she wrote.

While she was in London, she published "The Edge of Impossibility," a collection of essays, some of them previously published in academic journals, about tragic experiences in literature. "Being is an empty fiction," she wrote, in an essay on Eugène Ionesco. "We must fill it up ourselves—we must invent, we must create." A review in the *Times* described the book as brilliant but disorderly, as if written in a rush. In a letter to the editor, Oates responded, "Since critics are constantly telling me to 'slow down,' I must say gently, very gently, that everything I have done so far is only preliminary to my most serious work." She went on, "There is a sense in which 'I' do not exist at all, but am a process recording phases of American life."

In the midst of writing a novel, Oates sometimes felt so powerful—as if singled out—that she was startled when she passed store windows and saw her small, ordinary reflection. She made use of any stretch of free time, plotting the end of a novel while she was getting a cavity filled, or writing in the car on the way to book events. If her writing was going well, she didn't want to stop ("one image, pursued, exhausted, then begets another"), and if it was going badly she also didn't want to stop, because she needed to "get through the blockade, or around it, over it under it, any direction!—any direction, in order to live." (After a few hours away from her desk, revising felt "as if one is coming home.") Her friend Emily Mann told me, "I've seen her, in the middle of a party, check out, and I think, She's just written a chapter." To waste time made her feel "slithering, centerless," she wrote in her journal, "a 500-pound jellyfish unable to get to this desk." Oates was friends with Susan Sontag, who had a busy social life, and after the two spent time together in New York City Oates told her, "In some respects, I am appalled by the way you seem to be squandering your energy." She reminded Sontag that "the pages you perfect, day after day," will be the "means by which you define your deeper and more permanent self."

In whatever story or novel she was writing, Oates often identified an alter ego. "Norma Jean *is* me," she wrote in her journal while working on

"Blonde," a remarkable portrait of the transmutation of Norma Jean, an abandoned child, into Marilyn Monroe. Oates has described the novel, which was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in 2001, as "my Moby-Dick," an epic tale of American self-invention. She weaves in quotes from acting manuals as she depicts the ontological anxiety of a woman whose life has become a sequence of performances. In her journal, Oates wrote that Monroe was "an image of us all, a nightmare emblem." "*I live now for my work*," Monroe reflects, at the end of the book. "*I live for my work. I live only for my work. One day I will do work deserving of my talent & desire. One day. This I pledge. This I vow.*"

The problem with writing novels, Oates observed, is that one must finish them. "It's that husk-like state I dread," she wrote. She recognized that no one would feel sympathy for a writer grieving a completed work, but each time she finished a novel the sense of loss was acute. In 1976, after she completed "Son of the Morning," a novel exploring the nature of mystical experience, she felt such grief that she immediately began writing short stories inspired by the mood. "How odd," she wrote in her journal, "that I may find myself writing a 'love story' in which the male character is in reality a completed novel I feel I have 'lost'!"

Oates was concerned about "spinning completely off into the dark, into the abstract universe," and she took care to anchor herself to this world, through her teaching, her friendships, and her marriage—in each case fulfilling her role so responsibly that in her journal she marvelled over how "absolutely sane" she was. The writer Edmund White, who became close with Oates after she moved from Ontario to Princeton, described her as a "good girl—

the kind of lower-middle-class girl who always does her homework, never gets in trouble, and always helps her parents." Half her wardrobe was sewn by her mother, who regularly mailed her silk blouses and other clothes.

Oates had become engaged to Smith when she was twenty-two, after knowing him for three weeks. "My meeting him had the aura of one of the more suspiciously idyllic romance narratives, or suspiciously convenient," she wrote a friend at the time. More than a decade later, she still felt as if there were no two people with so "satisfactory a marriage or relationship as we have." They never had kids. "The thought of having children, while not repulsive, simply doesn't interest me at all," she wrote in her journal. She handled housecleaning; Smith dealt with their finances and was in charge of the garden. He drove her to the Princeton campus in the morning and picked her up at the end of the day. "I don't tell Ray my troubles (I advise this for a good marriage!)," she wrote to a friend. But one spring day in 1978, on a long walk, she did tell Smith "my secret—which I should term The Secret," she wrote in her journal. "I hinted at it, he didn't seem to exactly grasp it, or at any rate, its significance to me. A helpful but not a very profound conversation."

Together, they established a small literary journal and press, the *Ontario Review*, which they worked on for more than thirty years. Smith escorted her to readings and public events, but he didn't read her fiction. "He sometimes says 'Should I read this, honey?,' " she told a *Newsweek* reporter, "and I usually would rather he didn't." In her journal, she described how Smith read a glowing review in the *Times* of "Son of the Morning," and then told her, sliding his hand around her waist, "I feel I don't even know you." She tried to change the subject. She wanted to protect him and her friends from knowing "how very deeply I am involved in writing, in a perpetual ceaseless meditation that totally excludes them, as if they had no existence at all."

ates once said to an interviewer, "I have a laughably Balzacian ambition to g

Her body of work, as one long unfolding scroll, is perhaps more impressive than any individual novel, but some of her short stories—she has won more Pushcart Prizes than any other writer—feel perfect, like tight circles around a kind of unspoken abyss. Her characters, confronted with some form of terror or catastrophe, are often stripped of their social selves, reduced to a naked core. Edmund White told me that, if every writer has a signature scene, Oates's involves "a teen-age girl, holding her books tight to her very flat chest, and crossing a field while being pursued by a madman." Her writing, Don DeLillo once wrote to her, has "a kind of trapped animal quality, an inner desperation that strikes me as an accurate rendering of the voice of the culture." Writing in *The Nation*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., proposed that "a future archeologist equipped only with her œuvre could easily piece together the whole of postwar America."

By 1979, Oates was on the shortlist for the Nobel Prize, according to the Washington *Post*, and since then she has been rumored to be on the shortlist several more times. One year, she was told that she was the runner-up; another year, the book-review editor of the Philadelphia *Inquirer*, acting on incorrect information, informed her that she had won. "I'm sorry that Daddy was disappointed—again!—by the Nobel Prize," Oates wrote her parents in 1993. "I think, over all, it might be better not to be concerned about it; at least, we don't have to discuss it."

As Oates transitioned from a precocious young woman to a middle-aged lady still operating at the same intensity, people began to tire of all her words and the operatic quality of her work. "I've seen her, and to see her is to loathe her," Truman Capote said in an interview. "To read her is to absolutely vomit." In a 1982 review in *Harper's* titled "Stop Me Before I Write Again," James Wolcott wrote that Oates slops "words across the page like a washerwoman flinging soiled water across the cobblestones." Oates often responded aggressively to bad reviews—in a letter to Michiko Kakutani, the critic for the *Times*, she wrote that "though seemingly so friendly over the

phone, you are a most vindictive woman in print!"—but she also found it hard not to assume that on some level she deserved to be punished. She recognized that, if she were someone else, she might resent her productivity, she wrote in her journal—"as if the very existence of such a bulk of material were . . . I don't know: what *is* it?"

Her œuvre began to feel to her like an enormous brontosaurus tail, "dragging through the mud and the mire," she said. In 1987, she wrote a novel about twin brothers who were "mirror-images"—a phrase she has used to describe her sister—but one twin denied the other's existence. Oates decided to use a pseudonym, Rosamond Smith, and hired a new agent, so that she could publish the book secretly. But shortly before publication her editor called her. "He said, 'Joyce, what have you done?' And I was just crushed. I felt like I was four years old," she said. Her authorship had been uncovered. In an article in the *Times*, she apologized. "I wanted to escape from my own identity," she said.

Oates continued using the pseudonym (without hiding her real name) to write seven more books, all of them involving twins. In her novel "48 Clues Into the Disappearance of My Sister," from 2023, written under her own name, the narrator describes "the double mirror that would haunt me for decades": was the "double mirror the means by which I 'saw' into a profound and inexplicable mystery, or was the double mirror the profound and inexplicable mystery itself?"

Oates has not seen her sister, who now lives in a group home, in fifty-two years. She said that Lynn likes routine, and she does not want to disrupt it. In an essay about Lynn, she wrote, "Your sister has no idea who you are, what you are." At one of our meetings, I asked if that could really be true.

"I know this sounds a little harsh, but there was not that connection with my sister," she said. She spoke about the ways in which parents project onto their children—seeing a "glimmer of significance" where there may be none. In

1992, Oates's parents mailed her a clipping from the Buffalo *News* featuring a photograph of her sister: the article was about facilitated communication, a method of assisted typing for people who don't speak, and the paper reported that Lynn had learned to write. "It's just amazing that she can spell," her mother said. The technique has since been discredited, and Oates said she only vaguely remembered the episode. "She is an individual without language," Oates wrote in the essay. "It is not possible for you to imagine what this must be, to be without language." Fred, Jr., occasionally visits Lynn at the group home, but, Oates said, "it would be sentimentalizing to say that there's some connection between them." Fred told me he agreed with her characterization.

When I asked about her sister's daily life, Oates interrupted, saying, "I don't know why we're talking so much about Lynn." The more relevant family member, she said, was her grandmother, who gave her her first typewriter and took her to the local library. "Whether my sister was or was not at home, or this, that, and the other—that probably meant nothing. I can't remember a thing about it. She was being taken care of. I mean, I'm really interested in forms of fiction, in writing and language."

I mentioned the recurring presence of estranged twins in her work, and she looked at me as though I were trying to do something violent. "Many people write about twins," she said. "It's a gothic theme."

Oates told me that once, in college, when she said she was angry at someone, a friend responded, "Joyce, you won't even remember this in a day or two. You never stay angry." Of her capacity to compartmentalize emotional pain, Daniel Halpern, her editor at Knopf, told me, "I think a lot of people wonder what her early life was really like, and maybe she does, too."

Her fiction often dramatizes grisly news headlines, involving kidnappings, serial killings, disappearances, and rapes, prompting so many questions about

her preoccupation with violence that she felt compelled to publish an essay in the *Times* criticizing this line of inquiry. "The question is always insulting," she wrote. "The question is always ignorant. The question is always sexist." Her fiction, she explained, was simply reflecting the cruelty in our world. "We seem to have inherited, along with its two or three blessings, the manifold curse of psychoanalysis: the assumption that the grounds of discontent, anger, rage, despair—'unhappiness' in general—reside within the sufferer rather than outside of him."

Oates has described an idyllic relationship with her parents. Her only complaint, she once wrote in a letter to a psychoanalyst, was that economic hardships had prevented them from developing their talents. She grew up seeing violence as part of the normal order. Her mother's father was beaten to death in a tavern, and her great-grandfather killed himself, immediately after beating his wife with a hammer, events that Oates learned more about through research done by the writer Greg Johnson for a biography of her, "Invisible Writer," published in 1998. When Oates was nine, boys at her school (who were often "pummeling, pinching, punching, mauling and kicking" her, she wrote) dragged her into an outhouse and sexually assaulted her, then ordered her not to tell anyone. But she underplayed the violation, describing herself as having been "molested in some trivial way." In an essay about her childhood, called "Happy Chicken," she seems to surrender any claim to autobiographical authority. The piece is narrated from the perspective of her favorite chicken, who observes that "the little girl Joyce" would hide in an old silo, "breathless and frightened but why, the little girl would not afterward recall." It's as if she's simply absorbing the intensities of her environment without integrating them into a life story. At the end of the essay, "little girl Joyce" realizes with horror that the chicken who was supposed to be narrating her life is no longer on her family farm, and that she may have unknowingly eaten it.

In a letter, the poet Anne Sexton, puzzling over how Oates could create such violent worlds while also seeming so content, proposed to Oates that she was

investigating “something that is so deeply lodged within you like a gall stone that no one has discovered, and you know it not.” When Oates’s editor at Vanguard Press remarked that Oates couldn’t be as peaceful as she appeared, “I did not contradict her, I murmured some vague sort of assent,” Oates wrote in her journal, adding that she had a “frantic desire to remain hidden somewhere behind, beneath, & beyond the projections. For though I haven’t any idea who or what I am I don’t really want other people to know of my predicament.” One night, she dreamed that she looked at her face in the mirror and saw no features.

Like people who cut themselves because the pain is a reminder that they can feel, Oates seems to be drawn to violence as a kind of enlivening act. In her play “Ontological Proof of My Existence” (1980), the heroine, who is described as “a piece of matter the spirit has left,” proposes that “slaps, kicks, love-maulings, a fistful of your hair pulled from your head—these are proofs that other people exist.”

Her novel “Black Water” (1992), a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize, dramatizes the 1969 death of Mary Jo Kopechne, who was the passenger in a car that Senator Ted Kennedy accidentally drove off a bridge. In Oates’s retelling, Kopechne is an idealistic woman named Kelly, who spends the book suffocating in the car, which the senator has abandoned. Though the book is powered by a sense of injustice—the senator steps on Kelly’s head to get out of the sunken vehicle and waits hours before reporting the crash—there is almost a kind of excited charge, as if maybe now, under several feet of water, severed from all forms of communication, we might discover what a person is really made of.

As she wrote such scenes, Oates felt so composed that she wondered if she had “left the emotional life, so to speak.” She had spent her twenties and early thirties cycling through intense moods, but “the years pass and one has been there before,” she wrote in her journal. A decade of emotions felt like enough. She had a large circle of friends and was a devoted teacher,

mentoring many students; under her guidance, at least four of them, most prominently Jonathan Safran Foer, turned their senior theses into published novels. In her first twenty years at Princeton, she never missed a class. She and Smith often hosted parties, sometimes with up to fifty guests. One day, gazing happily at a river in her back yard, roses blooming nearby, Oates wondered if she was living in paradise. "And it has no connection that I can gauge with my writing—no connection at all," she wrote in her journal. "The biographical 'science' is a lie."

In 2008, when Oates was sixty-nine, Smith developed pneumonia. After eight days in the hospital, he had a cardiac arrest. Oates had just fallen asleep at home when the hospital called. She arrived less than half an hour later, but Smith had already died. "I was asleep, miles away," she wrote in "A Widow's Story," a memoir. "Asleep! The enormity of this fact is too much to comprehend, I feel that I will spend the remainder of my life trying to grasp it."

Few books have so rigorously captured the appalling fact that a person, in the course of minutes, can become matter. At the hospital, Oates gathered the objects that Smith had brought with him—shaving cream, deodorant, colored pencils, the books he had been reading—and was overwhelmed by "the vanity of our lives." She waited in his room for some signal from him. "Honey?" she said. "I think they want me to go now." She stood there, uncertain. Finally, recognizing that there was no logical moment to leave, she turned her back and walked away.

In her journal, years earlier, Oates had described the idea of losing Smith as "an unthinkable thought," like "the obliteration of time." Her friend Ronald Levao, who came to Oates's house the night Smith died, said that she told him, trembling, "I don't know if I'll ever write again." She threw out much of her wardrobe, mostly clothes that she had worn to parties, because she felt that her life was over, too. Until Smith's death, she realized, she had been

"shielded from the knowledge of your own insignificance, your trash-soul."

Her friends worried that, alone, she wouldn't eat enough to survive, and they were relieved when she immediately got back to work. "You just find yourself continuing," she told me. Halpern, her editor, said, "She protects herself by moving into that world where she's creating a story with people she identifies with. When she's in that world, she's gone. The rest of the world is gone."

In the weeks after Smith's death, Oates went through his belongings and found a novel he had started and then abandoned, a little more than a decade into their marriage. It was clear to her that the narrator was an alter ego for Smith, and his girlfriend—a "brilliantly talented, troubled poet," whose "writing gives her an identity"—was a version of her. In Smith's notes for the novel, he described a nervous breakdown he'd had, after dropping out of a Jesuit seminary, and a lobotomy administered to his sister. Oates had never seriously discussed these subjects with him. "I had never wanted to upset my husband," she wrote. "To be *not loved* seemed to me the risk." Now Oates was shaken by the idea that, despite forty-seven years together, their imaginative lives had never really touched. She had not appreciated the depth of his literary ambitions. She barely even knew his parents, she realized. To get in touch with one of his sisters, so she could notify her of his death, she resorted to asking a *Times* reporter, who had called her about an article on an unrelated subject, for help. "Maybe I never knew him, really," she wrote. "Maybe I knew him only superficially—his deeper self was hidden from me."

At the end of "A Widow's Story," which was published in 2011 and chronicles Oates's early months of grief, she describes hosting a dinner party seven months after Smith died. "One of these guests was a stranger to me," she wrote. The man was Charles Gross, a Princeton neuroscientist, and they began taking walks together. She married him half a year later. While Smith had been quiet and passive, Gross, a Jew from Brooklyn, was extroverted, boisterous, and prone to monologues as soon as he woke. Her

friend Emily Mann said that Oates would often remark, fondly, "He's so noisy." Oates assumed that Gross would not read "A Widow's Story," but, according to her, "he said, 'What? Of course! Of course I'm going to read it.' " He continued to read all her books.

Oates does not mention her second marriage in "A Widow's Story," and a review in *The New York Review of Books* accused Oates of a "breach of narrative promise." In response, Oates wrote a letter explaining that her personal biography "did not seem that relevant or crucial to the original experience of loss." The Joyce Carol Oates who was writing a book about grief in her study appeared to have a separate existence from the woman who was taking walks and falling in love.

In 2018, nine years after they married, in an interview with a Swedish filmmaker, Stig Björkman, who was making a documentary about Oates, she and Gross tried to explain, with tender awkwardness, the speed of their courtship. In the film, they sit in desk chairs pushed next to each other in Gross's study. Oates explains that, when they first met, "he was extremely gracious." She adds, teasingly, "And then later on I never saw that person."

"I probably paid for the first meal," Gross, one of the founders of the field of cognitive neuroscience, says. He has a bushy white beard and straight hair that falls to the bottom of his neck.

"You probably paid for the first meal," she says, starting to laugh. "That's amazing."

"Then we decided to get married."

"Later," she says, laughing. "Not right away."

"A few weeks later," he says.

"Oh, a few weeks"—she bends over, giggling. "You're just making these

things up."

"Two or three months later."

"It might have been longer." She reaches for his arm.

"And then what happened was we started getting invitations to engagement parties but we had already gotten married," he says.

She laughs again, covering her mouth. "You're jumping way ahead."

"But we wanted to accept these invitations, so we didn't bother telling people we were married."

"No. This is"—she lowers her head again, trying not to laugh.

"You can correct me," he says.

"I don't know if this was such a good idea," she says.

Gross died a year after the interview, of cancer. In a novel, a short story, and a poem, Oates depicts the same scene: a wife tells her dying husband what a wonderful spouse he has been, and he responds, "*But I failed you by dying.*" In recent years, Oates has mapped out the landscape of outliving the people one loves. Her characters haunt the sites where they once lived, seeing beloved men who might be ghosts. "There is not one person to whom you matter, now," she writes in one story. "This is the crossing-over." In another story, a widow refers three times to her "old, lost life" and observes that the new life "had become ridiculous as a weathered old wind sock whipping in the wind."

Oates has dinner with friends a few times a week. Although many of them have had aspects of their lives dramatized—the turnaround between event and literary rendition can be rapid—they seem at peace with it, touched by her attention and grateful for her friendship. She rarely speaks about her fiction with them. "You sort of learn early on that is not part of the landscape

of friendship," Barry Qualls, a retired Rutgers professor, told me. Some of Oates's closest friends spoke about her protectively, as if anticipating the stereotypes: she is fun, they said; she is a relentless reviser; she has not really written that much, when you think about the fact that all it takes to write a hundred books is about two pages a day over the course of a lifetime.

Oates has kept roughly the same routine that she had when she was twenty-five: she works for about five hours in the morning, and then in the afternoon, if she's not teaching a class, she bikes or runs or takes a long walk. There's a country road near her house, and, when she jogs up the hill, ideas are waiting for her, she said. She usually returns to work until about 8:30 P.M., when she has dinner, often while watching a movie.

Mann, who took walks with Oates almost every day during the pandemic, said Oates often complained that without Gross life felt temporary, like a dream. "I think she held on to both of her husbands as a way to feel real," Mann said. She said that sometimes when she parted with Oates, telling her to have a nice rest of the evening, Oates responded, "Oh, Emily, you know I can't. Don't say that again."

In Henry James's short story "The Figure in the Carpet," a famous novelist named Hugh Vereker tells a young critic, the story's narrator, that no one has ever uncovered "my little secret," which he describes as the "very string . . . that my pearls are strung on!" Every author, Vereker explains, has a secret—it's the "part of the business in which, for him, the flame of art burns most intensely." Vereker's own secret is like "a piece of cheese in a mouse-trap," he confides. "It governs every line, it chooses every word, it dots every i, it places every comma."

"Is it a kind of esoteric message?" the critic asks.

"Ah my dear fellow," Vereker responds. "It can't be described in cheap journalese!"

The critic spends years trying to divine the secret, a goal he pursues so ruthlessly that he comes to see human lives as containers for knowledge he might forcibly obtain. But at the end of the story he has come no closer to unravelling the mystery. Vereker and those who may have known his secret have died. The critic is "shut up in my obsession for ever—my gaolers had gone off with the key."

Of course, I found myself becoming James's narrator. Oates's secret felt like a riddle: it had to be small, because it had been successfully hidden, but it also had to be large, because Oates thought about it every day. Anytime I read an Oates passage in which a character described something as a secret, or unbearable, or incommunicable, I was wild with hope. But I also began to worry that maybe the secret was a way of humbling readers like me, who might presume that an artist's private life was a key to the work. In 1977, when Oates read the letters of Emily Dickinson, she was taken aback by their intimacy. "The exposure, the relentless systematic digging-out of every secret by 'scholars' and 'critics' and voyeurs is appalling," she wrote in her journal. "Even more appalling is the prospect of future treatment by one who has no secrets. For surely former friends and acquaintances and students and strangers will simply invent whatever they wish." In an interview in 2002, Oates said, "I think that sharing with other people is a kind of—maybe a fantasy, a delusion." Confessions, she explained, were always a mistake. "The other person starts to be solicitous and very thoughtful and they want to hear more—so you make up," she went on. "You start exaggerating, and it wasn't even that bad. And then the other person has a little hook in you, and then you may break up with that person—next year you may not even be friends—and that person has a little part of you in him. I don't do anything like that. That's not my way at all."

When I met Oates at her house, shortly after she'd returned from another work trip, to Wisconsin, I began talking about "The Figure in the Carpet" and the fact that the secret is never revealed.

“Well, of course there wouldn’t be any real secret,” Oates interrupted. “It would be too trivial. That would make it a trivial story.”

She lives in a palatial home, in a rural area near Princeton University, that she and Gross bought after marrying. The house overlooks a creek, and large metal farm animals are pinned to the lawn. A table in the kitchen was devoted to relics from Gross’s life: the original copy of his dissertation from the University of Cambridge, a book about his neuroscience lab, photographs of their travels together. We sat on the back patio, and Oates periodically cooed at her two cats in a high-pitched voice that was surprisingly feline. “Are you a kitty person?” she asked. I admitted that I wasn’t, but she either misheard or wanted to protect her cats, because she told them, “There’s a visitor here who does like kitties. She does like kitties.”

“The Figure in the Carpet” has baffled critics, but Oates told me, “The secret is the idea that there is a secret, that an artist can be found in his art—that doesn’t exist. There really isn’t any artist.”

“In our last conversation, I’d asked about the secret you referred to in your journal,” I said.

“Oh, *that* secret,” she said. “Well, that’s more of a real secret. There is something, yeah. That’s more specific to me personally.” She glanced quickly at her watch.

I asked if her secret was similar to the one revealed by a young teacher in her short story “Mutilated Woman,” from 1980. The teacher confides to her mentor that she doubts her “existence as a human being.” She isn’t even sure if she is female: “I’m not at that point, I’m somewhere far below. My mind drifts about on the level of protoplasm. Maybe algae.” She doesn’t want anyone to know that the “existence I find myself in isn’t quite the correct one: I wonder if anyone shares it? But of course if anyone did, he might not confess, he might not want to confess.”

"Well," Oates said, pausing. "Not literally. That's interesting, though, that I was writing about this. There's probably a lot of thematic unity to the things that I write, which I don't necessarily remember."

I told Oates that I worried I was going to reproduce the frustration that many readers feel upon finishing "The Figure in the Carpet." "If it's a secret that is so important to your work and I don't know what it is—"

"It's not important to my work," she said. "No—it's just sort of a character thing in my life."

In her journal, though, she had written, "My writing is, strangely, both an escape from this secret and a means by which it is incorporated into a continuous imaginative & productive activity." I didn't believe she was lying to me; it was more that she didn't seem to be thinking, as if she were accessing one small part of herself and letting the rest do something better. ("Her secret is she isn't here," she had written in her journal, referring to a protagonist whom she'd called a version of herself. "Yes then but where? Well not here. And not there either. But where, where?")

Oates managed to be both dismissive and very pleasant, as if she had decided long ago to be a certain kind of conventionally sociable person, and she would not let herself stray from her standards. But even the idea of having agreed to an interview was embarrassing, she told me, as if she had assented to the proposition that she's interesting, when she's not. She thought of interviews as canoe rides, in which two people have paddles and they are trying to cross a river. "I feel a social obligation to say something, so that it doesn't tip over," she explained. "What I say is not *not* real—but it's nothing I would have said otherwise. I mean, if you were not here, I'd be writing. I'd be thinking of how to move the story along, to give some life to it."

I mentioned that Halpern, her main editor for the past twenty-five years and a close friend for fifty, had said that "if Joyce didn't write, she wouldn't exist." It sounded metaphysical to me, I said, and I wondered what she took it to

mean.

"Well, none of my friends really *know* me," she said. "You know, Dan has to say something. And I think that's the thing—you have to have some comment. And I probably have told you that I don't have any strong feelings—I'm neutral. But it's expected that you have an opinion."

I asked if there was any emotional valence to that observation: that she was neutral.

"Nothing," she said. "I don't have any feeling at all. Why would I have any feeling?"

One of her cats, Lilith, began excitedly rubbing herself against the strap of my purse. Oates's tone softened. "They really like you because they feel that they have to kind of win you over," she said. "She's never done anything remotely like that. Oh, Lilith, what's happening to you?" The other cat, a Maine coon, had perched itself behind my chair. "She's saying, 'Please pet my tummy,' " Oates said, speaking in a sweet lullaby voice. " 'Please pet my tummy, or I won't exist.' "

Oates reads as rigorously as she writes, both the news and literature—she has described reading as "the greatest pleasure of civilization." She began using Twitter in 2012, at the suggestion of her publisher, and quickly seemed to master the new genre, offering hot takes as well as pictures of her cats, flowers in her garden, or a bulbous blister on her toe. Many tweets (such as when she questioned why media representations of ISIS didn't contain more that was "celebratory & joyous," or posted images of possible U.F.O.s) prompted online mockery, but she didn't mind. The persona was perhaps no more real than the ladylike role she inhabited at parties. "It really is like vapor," she said. "On the other hand, they say nice things, too, and that's kind of like vapor."

When I went out for dinner with her, Emily Mann, and Mann's husband, Gary Mailman, I was surprised that the conversation consisted of so much that she had already addressed in tweets. We went through headlines in the *Times*, almost systematically. There was very little personal content, though the conversation must have been tainted by my presence. The only time Oates talked about herself was to express regret about how much time she had been wasting lately.

"Minutes!" Mailman joked. "We're talking about minutes—wasted."

She was teaching two classes (one at Princeton, another at Rutgers); had just finished a new novel, called "Butcher," which will be published this spring; and had already sent a draft of her next novel to her agent. "Sometimes I can't get out of bed," she said. "I'm thinking about something—and then I'm doing this and I'm doing that, and I'm not working. I'm thinking about working."

"But that is working," Mann said.

"But most of the time I'm wasting time," Oates said. "And so all I can figure is that other people waste more time. That's all." To make up for lost time earlier in the day, she said, she'd probably stay up until 1:30 A.M. writing.

"You're depressed about wasting time, and you just happened to write a novel about it yesterday!" Mailman joked again.

"No, but I don't," she said, mournfully. "It takes a long time."

I was torn between feeling that there was something glorious about her commitment, at the age of eighty-five, to her work and something slightly frightening about it—the idea of going all those decades without really changing the terms by which one lives. In her journal, Oates described the "lovely strangulating grip of a novel" as a way to offset "feelings of mortality," a kind of "addictive calm . . . one never has to ask what to do, what to think."

We tend to outlive certain coping mechanisms, but hers was so successful that she had never needed to replace it. After the publication of her first book, when asked about her writing, Oates had told the Detroit *News*, "It's like talking about your face. How do you describe your own face?" She had spent the past sixty years writing around the problem. The work had piled up, giving form to aspects of her identity that she couldn't otherwise see, but the process didn't seem to have really changed her. In her journal, she once wrote, "Gradually, very gradually, I 'learn' who I am (or what) by noting what I have done. Over a period of many years. I see that I have performed certain actions . . . that I have been defined by others in terms of those actions. . . . Hence I *am* safely defined as the person who did those things. (Nonsense, isn't it? Absolutely.)" In another passage, she wrote, "I am Joyce Carol Oates, and this, this, and this are happening to me; innumerable things *have* happened to me; so if I observe carefully . . . I will come to some idea of who I am, after all."

She was still faithful to the project, trying new forms and genres; her next novel will be her first whodunnit murder mystery. "The persona is infinitely flexible because it has no center, no reality," she had written in her journal. "This is because, I think, she does not take anything as other than fictional. She invented herself, in order to give me a free hand."

In an e-mail, I asked whom she was referring to when she wrote "me." She didn't respond. ♦

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