



## Joyce Carol Oates

### *A Widow's Story*

Joyce Carol Oates is the most prolific major American author of the last half-century and among the least autobiographical novelists, but the appearance of two books within four years, her *Journal* and *A Widow's Story*, gives us unprecedented insight into her life. These two texts are in many ways bookends. The publication of *The Journal of Joyce Carol Oates: 1973–1982* in 2007, when she was sixty-nine, reveals a young woman deeply in love with her husband and even more deeply in love with writing, her life's greatest passion. There are, to be sure, a few entries in the 509-page journal where she allows herself momentarily to imagine what life would be like without her beloved husband, but she cannot bring herself to consider this possibility. And why should she? Little on the horizon in the 1970s and 1980s seemed ominous. But when disaster struck, Oates responded in the way she knew best: by writing about it.

*A Widow's Story* is longer, more detailed, and more emotionally charged than any other memoir written by a widow or widower. It's also darker in tone, mood, and characterization than any other spousal loss memoir, presenting us with a stunning taxonomy of grief. The memoir offers us a radically different view of Oates: a portrait of a woman deranged by grief and fixated on suicide. The story abounds in surprises, contradictions, ironies, and paradoxes that have captivated the public's attention in a way that is unprecedented in Oates's career. *A Widow's Story* is not a

traditional memoir; only after its publication did she admit in several interviews that she based it on her journal. The journalistic form of *A Widow's Story* makes possible the use of the historical present, giving the story a dramatic intensity and spontaneity that might otherwise be impossible.

Oates's *Journal* and *A Widow's Story* offer us a unique opportunity to see the continuities and discontinuities between a major writer's early life and her "posthumous" life. Few authors have claimed a more radical split between their private and public lives than Oates. And few writers have created such an aura of invisibility in their private life while at the same time commanding so strong a public identity. This split, apparent in her early journal entries, has become more pronounced over the years. Oates asserts repeatedly that as a novelist she has no fixed identity; instead, she takes on the lives of her fictional characters. She thus regards herself, more seriously than not, as a multiple personality, a writer whose ability to imagine a myriad of male and female speakers creates a vast cast of characters. Yet despite the fact that she is a master of impersonation and compartmentalization, Oates is the same person who wrote *Journal* and *A Widow's Story*, books that have more in common than may first appear evident. Of the many intriguing characters Oates has imagined in scores of novels, none is more fascinating than the one she creates in *A Widow's Story*. Oates's self-portrait as a widow becomes even more complex when we compare it with the writer who emerges from the pages of the *Journal*.

Oates's *Journal* covers the years when she had already achieved early fame from her 1969 novel *them*, which won the National Book Award. The *Journal* is only a small fraction of the more than 4,000 single-spaced pages (as of 2007, and growing every day) housed in the Joyce Carol Oates Archive at Syracuse University, where she did her undergraduate work. Presumably, other volumes of her *Journal* will appear, constituting one of the most comprehensive records of any major writer.

### The Motives Behind Journal Writing

In the introduction, Oates points out the ironies and paradoxes of undertaking such a project. One of the reasons she keeps a journal is to preserve the past, though she rarely rereads her entries because it's "excruciating" to revisit the past. "I haven't the words to guess why" (xii), she confesses, a startling statement from someone who is seldom defeated by language. She then wonders, parenthetically—many of her most important statements are expressed in parentheses—whether the "uncensored" journal may reveal

too much about herself or, alternatively, reveal a self “with which I can’t any longer identify or, perversely, identify too strongly” (xiii). She makes no effort to conceal the risks of personal writing or her ambivalence about self-disclosure.

Oates offers other explanations for keeping a journal. “Is the keeping of a journal primarily a means of providing solace to the self, through a ‘speaking’ voice that is one’s own voice subtly transformed? A way of dispelling loneliness, a way of comfort?” (xiii). She concludes that homesickness, which involves both “mourning and memorialization,” is a powerful motive behind much literature. She recognizes a major paradox: “the more we are hurt, the more we are likely to take refuge in the imagination, and in creating a ‘text’ that has assimilated this hurt; perversely, if we choose to publish this text, the more likely we are to invite more hurt in the way of critical or public opprobrium” (xiii). She admits that writing a journal is the “very antithesis of writing for others.” She doesn’t entirely reject the idea, advanced by a “skeptic,” that the writer of a journal is creating a “journal-self, like a fictitious character,” but she insists that it would be impossible to maintain such a pose for several years. Like “our fingerprints and voice ‘prints,’ our journal-selves are distinctly our own” (xiv). The implication is that Oates’s *Journal* represents her inner self, the self with which she most strongly identifies, at least during the time when she wrote a particular entry. Her views, values, and perceptions are remarkably consistent throughout the ten-year period covered by her journal, suggesting the stability of her character and identity. Her decision to use her journal entries as the basis for *A Widow’s Story* highlights her desire to represent her inner, core self.

Throughout her journal, Oates is relentlessly self-analytical, questioning everything, including the process of self-interrogation. She makes a statement, then immediately qualifies it, exploring the ambiguities of both statement and counterstatement. She never mentions John Keats, but she would wholeheartedly concur with his belief in negative capability: “That is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason” (261). Committed to both her inner and outer lives, she nevertheless realizes that the private nature of journal writing encourages a subjectivity that may fail to capture the writer’s intense involvement with the world.

Oates admits, without defensiveness, that journal writing encourages narcissism. All people, she asserts on May 13, 1977, are narcissists, including the journal writer. “But the journal-keeper, unlike other people, confronts his or her narcissism daily. And—it’s to be hoped—conquers it by

way of laughing at it" (194). Keeping a journal is not always pleasurable, but Oates's sense of order, obligation, and curiosity compels her to keep writing regularly even when she is tempted to skip an entry. Greg Johnson's observation in his biography *Invisible Writer* has proven uncannily prescient: "One key to Joyce's intense productivity had always been her ability to continue writing even in times of exhaustion, illness, or depression" (291). It would be hard to imagine a more prophetic statement in light of *A Widow's Story*.

Reading Oates's *Journal*, one is struck by the intelligence, fairness, and compassion of her judgments and perceptions. Her journal sometimes has a gnomic quality, as when she writes on February 28, 1980: "I oscillate between thinking I am crazy and thinking I am not crazy enough" (358). Nearly always a reliable narrator, she is less reliable when she refers repeatedly, without irony, to her "idleness," "laziness," and "unworthiness." She claims she is "inclined toward laziness" (99), "haunted by a sense of laziness or unworthiness" (171), struggling against a "profound feeling of unworthiness" (194), and "astounded" at her "laziness" (362). She contends her "true self is staggeringly indolent . . . for which I sometimes feel genuine shame, & sometimes amusement, bemusement" (454). Readers will shake their heads in disbelief, for only in terms of godlike perfection are these merciless self-accusations true. In *Conversations with Joyce Carol Oates*, she admits to her "laughably Balzacian ambition to get the whole world into a book" (5), but this has been a lifelong aim about which she has been deadly serious.

For whom does Oates write her *Journal*? She never directly confronts this question, but she implies she writes mainly for herself. She feels no obligation to maintain the *reader's* attention. "The value of this journal for me," she writes on July 26, 1978, "is that, strictly speaking, it makes no pretensions about being 'interesting'" (264). And yet Oates also writes for posterity, for readers who will be interested in her growth and development as a writer. She may not have known, when she first began keeping a diary, that it would one day be housed in a university library, but she certainly realized this at some point, probably sooner rather than later. It is unlikely Oates would spend so much time writing her journal if she didn't imagine eventual publication. In *Where I've Been, and Where I'm Going*, she takes a dim view of the possibility of achieving biographical truth, but she makes one important qualification: "Unless the subject is a fanatic diarist, the greater part of his or her inner life will be lost, not simply to the biographer but to the very subject" (231). Oates is herself a "fanatic" diarist whose daily and weekly entries provide an indispensable

account of her inner life. Writing a daily journal entry kept her anchored even during those crises when she found herself unmoored.

### Anorexia

Oates writes guardedly about anorexia, a conflict she has struggled with for much of her life, including during her widowhood. The first time she implies having an eating disorder occurs on September 18, 1976, when she gazes at recent photographs of herself appearing in *People* magazine: “I came to the conclusion that I am awfully thin . . . though when I look at myself in the mirror it doesn’t seem so, I seem merely normal” (145). On March 4, 1977, she refers to Simone Weil’s suicidal self-starvation. “She successfully *killed* her body. Which she would have interpreted as ‘triumphing’ over it and achieving union with ‘God.’ Having felt such temptations . . . having been visited by them . . . I understand what they are from the inside. And they are terrible. Terrible” (177).

In an entry written on April 5, 1979, Oates, who is five feet nine inches, recalls how in 1970–1971 she experienced the “early stages of what was probably anorexia . . . when I weighed 95–98 pounds for a while, and had no appetite: or, rather, what should have been an appetite for food went into an ‘appetite’ for other things,” adding, in a significant parenthesis, “(I say *for a while* but it was a considerable period of time. And I’m not free of the old psychological aspects of that experience . . . about which I can’t talk altogether freely)” (297–298). She then offers a psychologically astute interpretation of the “appeal” of anorexia: “A way of controlling and even mortifying the flesh; a way of ‘eluding’ people who pursue too closely; a way of channeling off energy in other directions. The mystic ‘certainty’ that fasting gives . . . a ‘certainty’ that isn’t always and inevitably wrongheaded.” In another entry penned on the same day, she suggests that anorexia is a “controlled and protracted form of suicide, literally. But figuratively & symbolically it means much more. No one wants to be dead—! But there is the appeal of Death. The romantic, wispy, murky, indefinable incalculable appeal . . . which seems to me now rather silly; but I remember *then*” (298).

Most clinicians would agree with Oates that underlying anorexia is the need for control, though they would also suggest the related need for perfectionism. Oates refers in a September 29, 1981, entry to her own perfectionism, though she doesn’t use this word. “I have wanted to be a model wife; and a model daughter; and a model professor; and a model

friend (this, in limited doses); and a model writer (in the sense that my writing doesn't drive me mad, or turn me away from others, or become the very means by which I am laid waste). I wanted all along to lead a model life by my own standards of fairly conventional morality" (*Journal* 436).

Perhaps one of the reasons Oates judges herself so harshly in *A Widow's Story* is because she wants to be a model widow, a goal that no one can achieve, not even a perfectionist. There are only a few references to eating (or not eating) in *A Widow's Story*, but they suggest that Oates had little appetite for food—or for life. "So long as I have one meal a day with people—at an actual table—with the social protocol of courses—the logic of 'eating' make perfect sense," she writes to Richard Ford and Kristina Ford on February 22, 2008; "alone, with no spouse, with no wish to sit at the familiar table, it seems faintly repellent. . . . My favorite time now is sleeping—but it doesn't last long enough" (116). At the end of the month, she visits her physician and describes her anxiety over being weighed. She refuses to watch the scale as he adjusts the little weight. Consulting his notes in her folder, the physician observes that she has lost eight pounds since her last visit a year earlier.

Literary historians have explored in detail the pervasiveness of eating disorders in fictional female characters and their female authors. In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar note the many thematic parallels between Catherine Earnshaw's speeches in *Wuthering Heights* and Sylvia Plath's poetry. Gilbert and Gubar point out how masochistic or suicidal behavior, especially among adolescent girls and young women, is symptomatic of powerlessness, an interpretation with which Oates would almost certainly agree.

### Raymond Smith

Based on the extensive evidence of her journal—and there is no contradictory evidence anywhere—Oates's marriage to Raymond Smith was close to idyllic for both wife and husband. The dozens of references to her husband portray the marriage as warm, close, trusting, and respectful—in short, an excellent match for both of them. In a November 15, 1974, entry, she writes about the balance between "private, personal fulfillment (marriage, friendship, work at the University) and 'public' life, the commitment to writing," adding that the "artist must find an environment, a pattern of living, that will protect his or her energies: the art must be cultivated, must be given priority" (*Journal* 31). Oates never worried about finding

the right balance between love and work, and there is little evidence that her husband resented her fierce commitment to writing. She often quotes approvingly Flaubert's insistence that "you must live like a bourgeois so that you save all your violence for your art." No artist has taken these words more to heart than Oates—and few serious writers have surpassed her legendary productivity.

Domestic harmony is what Oates wanted, and domestic harmony is what she received throughout her forty-eight-year marriage to Smith. On her sixteenth wedding anniversary, January 23, 1977, she notes that she and her husband "are so close that I suspect neither of us can guess how utterly dependent we are upon each other" (*Journal* 166). Not being married, she adds, is unfathomable. Thinking like a writer, she knows she cannot adequately convey marital happiness in literature because fiction demands conflict. In one of her most candid descriptions of married life, she observes on August 2, 1978, that because there is "nothing dramatic" about "marital happiness," it rarely finds its way into literature. "One takes a happy relationship for granted. There is no need, really, to comment on it. Like the air we breathe: only when it's contaminated do we notice it" (266–267).

Raymond Smith was eight years older than Oates and, like her, an academic. He sensed early in their marriage her prodigious talent and spartan self-discipline, and he prided himself on helping to nurture that talent by taking care of most of the domestic chores. In many ways he resembled Virginia Woolf's husband, Leonard Woolf, also a distinguished editor and publisher. But whereas Woolf was dependent both financially and psychologically on her husband, Oates's salary as a Princeton professor and best-selling novelist makes her financially dependent on no one.

Raymond Smith was also a writer, at least during the beginning of his career, authoring a scholarly monograph in 1977 on the highly prolific eighteenth-century British satirist Charles Churchill. Smith's decision to give up academic writing and a promising university career to devote himself to editing the *Ontario Review* may have been not only because of his loss of interest in scholarly writing, as Oates implies, but also because of his effort to forge a career that would complement rather than compete with her genius. Reading Smith's book on Churchill, one recognizes that it is thoughtful and persuasive, a solid contribution to academic scholarship, but not one that heralds the arrival of a major new literary critic, as Oates's books demonstrate.

Oates enjoyed a deeply fulfilling, nearly conflict-free marriage, but she knew the limits of marital understanding. On May 30, 1976, she writes

about personality as a mask, observing, “Might it be a fact that not even my husband knows me since in his particular presence I *am* . . . that which his presence evokes?” (117). She never wonders whether there are aspects of her husband’s life and personality that remain hidden from her—a question she raises, unsettlingly, in *A Widow’s Story*.

### Depression and Suicide

Oates’s *Journal* shows that her interest in death and dying began early in her career. Part of this interest focused on suicide and its link to depression. On November 17, 1974, she mentions finding a letter Anne Sexton mailed to her a year earlier. Sexton’s suicide in 1974 distressed Oates, particularly because she had not taken seriously certain remarks in Sexton’s letter that were “very, very sad, in a helpless way” (34). On February 11, 1975, she fears reading Sexton’s *The Awful Rowing Toward God*, which she is reviewing for the *New York Times*. “I am afraid to read the poems because I am afraid of missing her too much and more than that (to be honest) I am afraid of the death in the poetry, the death-knowledge” (68). It is one of the few times anywhere in Oates’s writings that she fears being infected by a poem or story’s dark meaning. She empathizes with Sexton’s and Woolf’s struggles with suicide and praises their efforts to remain alive.

Oates came close to suffering from depression in 1971. As she relates in an entry written on December 2, 1974, two of her friends had recently died, and she was being stalked by a Detroit resident referred to as “A. K.,” who demanded that she write a positive review of his novel. When she refused, he became angry and threatened to kill himself. During this time, she was “at the very nadir of my psychological life, the closest to depression I have ever been, damaged by the deaths back home (one in July, and we left for England about six weeks later . . .) which I had no idea how to deal with, how to mourn, and then the astonishing trouble with A. K.” (48). A physician prescribed barbiturates for her when she couldn’t sleep. “Enormous dosage, so powerful I could barely wake for hours the following day, and did he care?” (49). She took the sleeping pills for months and one day flushed them down the toilet, thanks to “an instinct for survival—tremendous relief afterward, feeling I had escaped something dangerous. Hence my knowledge of, sympathy for, those who are addicted . . . but my ultimate disapproval . . . for this sort of thing is truly suicidal, as those of us who’ve been there can testify” (49). Like Woolf, Oates speaks disparagingly of physicians, especially male physicians



who treat female patients. She also speaks deprecatingly of medication, describing in *The Tattooed Girl* pharmacological poisoning as a “kind of genocide afflicted upon free souls by the rest of shocked mankind” (118).

### Psychoanalysis, Psychiatry, and Psychotherapy

Oates has long been suspicious of psychoanalysis, psychiatry, and psychotherapy. Her scathing portrayal of mental health professionals has remained consistent throughout her fiction. “I can’t begin to imagine going to a psychotherapist,” she remarks in a *Playboy* interview published in *Conversations 1970–2006*. “You’re going to another person who has some dogmatic ideas and his or her own agenda. Why go to somebody else, anyway? Theoretically they’re listening, but in fact they’re not, they’re looking at the clock, thinking, How can I bend this person to my own theories? Go for a long walk or go jogging, take a retreat and meditate and think. Or read Walt Whitman” (160).

Oates’s fictional universe is vast enough to find exceptions to nearly every generalization, but I’m not aware of any stories where she considers the value of medication for someone suffering from a serious mood disorder like clinical depression or manic-depressive (bipolar) disease or a thought disorder like schizophrenia. Kay Redfield Jamison presents a powerful counterargument that psychiatrists who do not prescribe drugs like lithium for patients suffering from manic-depressive disease may be guilty of malpractice. Oates is part of a long tradition of writers, which includes novelists as different from each other as Ken Kesey and Vladimir Nabokov, for whom psychotherapy and psychopharmacology are unmitigated evils. We see much more positive views of both psychotherapy and medication in Gilbert’s *Wrongful Death*, Godwin’s *Evenings at Five*, and Jamison’s *Nothing Was the Same*.

Oates’s experience with depression taught her that the “psyche can’t be manipulated, dreams should not be altered, consciousness itself not altered any more than is necessary” (*Journal* 50). She reaches the same conclusion in *A Widow’s Story*, where she rejects psychopharmacological drugs that alter her consciousness and instead embraces her therapy of choice, writing, to help her emerge from deep depression and suicidal ideation.

In her journal, Oates begins to formulate her own psychological theory of depression. “There’s no doubt in my mind that depression is suppressed anger,” she declares on July 31, 1976. “Perhaps there is no such thing as ‘depression’ at all. One feels profoundly and deeply wounded,

threatened, paralyzed . . . simply because the natural emotion, anger, has been blocked” (133). She reaches this conclusion partly as a result of receiving a letter that depressed her at first and then made her angry. Her dark emotions lift when she responds, firmly and politely, to the letter writer. “This is the therapeutic value of expressing oneself either in person or by way of writing. It cannot be over-estimated” (133).

### The Writing Cure

It is not the talking cure that Oates affirms but the writing cure—though she would never imply that writing is a cure for the inevitable wounds incurred in life. At best, writing is a way to live with one’s wounds, physical and psychological; a way to prevent the wounds from festering. Writing has been the driving force in Oates’s life, the activity around which she structures her day and which she dreams about at night. Writing remains the center of her life, and she feels idle when she does not write. “I find that my mind moves on to the work I’ve done, the writing I’ve done, and that everything else is peripheral,” she observes on July 22, 1977. “The phenomenal world and its great temptations, its beauties, its privileges, the endless drama of human relationships . . . appear to fade, or at any rate to lose their authority, set beside art” (202). The “irresistible force” in her life, she admits on January 6, 1980, is her “eagerness to work” (349).

### Oates/Smith

Perhaps Oates’s most striking revelation in her journal is her belief in a radical split between her public and private selves, her “Joyce Carol Oates” and “Joyce Carol Smith” identities. Most writers will concede that they have a public and private self, but what is unusual about Oates—or Oates/Smith—is her insistence that these selves are radically different and discontinuous. She claims that the distance between art and life is absolute, as she makes clear on January 8, 1976. “The artist’s essential nature—whether easy-going or difficult—should not have much to do with the art itself. ‘Joyce Carol Smith’: the process of living with as much pleasure as possible. ‘Joyce Carol Oates’: the process that exists in and through and because of the books. No reason that ‘Joyce Smith’ should feel obligated to ‘Joyce Carol Oates’ in any way—to be ‘intellectual’ or ‘mysterious’ or ‘artistic.’ One’s life is one’s own business” (94).

What does Oates/Smith gain by splitting art and life, her public and private selves? To begin with, the split allows her to subordinate life to art and gain productivity. She knows that art depends upon conflict. To create art, “one must deal with conflict; to create serious art one must deal with serious subjects; drama arises out of tragic actions and misunderstandings, not out of serendipity.” By contrast, one tries to avoid conflict in one’s personal life. It “doesn’t necessarily follow,” she avers, that one “believes that unrest is the basic law of the universe” (98). The writer Joyce Carol Oates searches for conflict to power her stories; the person Joyce Carol Smith is content to avoid conflict in her private life. From this point of view, the less conflict one experiences in life, the more conflict one transmutes into art.

The art/life split permits Oates to distance herself from painful criticism of her writings. “Someone once told me that I was the ‘most hated’ of contemporary writers,” she admits ruefully on April 1, 1976. “I can’t believe this. I don’t even know very many people.” She concludes the entry by stating that the “resentment that others feel toward me is an exaggeration, surely” (100). If she cannot change her image as the most hated of contemporary writers, the most prodigious writer of the century, she can at least project this image onto her public self, leaving her private self immune from such criticism. “Oates” becomes the split-off part of the self, the fiercely ambitious writer who has an existence apart from the quiet, unassuming Mrs. Smith.

The Oates/Smith split enables the writer to imagine points of view vastly different from her own while maintaining a stable identity. “I can be anyone, I can say anything, I can believe literally anything,” she writes on March 26, 1976, which gives her an almost godlike freedom. The writer encompasses the world, limited not by her personal life or identity but only by her capacious imagination.

Additionally, the art/life split allows Oates to separate herself from statements she has made in published writings or interviews that she now wishes to qualify or repudiate. She declares on May 30, 1976, that she no longer believes in the remarks she made years earlier in an interview titled “The Dark Lady of American Letters.” Rereading the interview, she is now struck by the “hypothetical” nature of her Joyce Carol Oates identity. Dissociating herself from her writerly persona means that she doesn’t need to accept credit for her literary successes or blame for her failures.

Oates also achieves a degree of safety from the art/life split that would otherwise be impossible. “The self is protected by the persona, but the persona also protects other people from the self,” she records in a

September 24, 1977, entry. She then makes a statement that remains true until the publication of *A Widow's Story* thirty-four years later: "This journal comes as close as I care to go in terms of laying 'bare' my heart" (214).

Oates never comments on the irony that in her journal her two selves are inextricably fused, perhaps for the first time. Joyce Carol Oates the writer and Joyce Carol Smith the person were both necessary for each other's existence and well-being. Neither could live or write without the other. Her "normal" life as Joyce Carol Smith makes possible her wildly imaginative life as Joyce Carol Oates. She passes effortlessly from one world to another. "Does a normal, ordered, tidy life compensate an interior life of the bizarre, the flamboyantly imaginative?" she asks on December 5, 1976. "Perhaps, perhaps. Who can tell. We inhabit a world of ostensibly closed surfaces which, nevertheless, can slide open at any moment, like panels in a wall. We can't anticipate the sliding-open, the revelation, but we can have faith in it" (*Journal* 150).

Oates cannot imagine that a new and frightening world will slide open thirty-two years later, when her husband dies. How can one imagine this when one is young? It is easy to forget while reading her journal that for the most part she is still a young person. While writing her journal, Oates knows that her four main values in life remain intact, as she records on May 28, 1978: "Love. Friendship. Art. Work" (*Journal* 253). Most of her statements in her journal reflect the optimism and hopefulness of a person whose world remains whole, as when she says on August 6, 1977, musing on Anne Sexton's suicide, "But why die, why take one's self so seriously?" She then adds, in a statement fraught with irony, "Some of us are too normal, too healthy, to comprehend—that is, to *really* comprehend, for as a novelist I haven't any difficulty—the despair that drags one to death" (206–207). She was not yet forty when she penned this entry, and she could not yet imagine feeling the despair that drags one to death. Decades later, she could imagine it, and when she did, she compelled Joyce Carol Oates the memoirist to write about Joyce Carol Smith the person.

### *A Widow's Story*

Oates opens *A Widow's Story* with an incident titled "The Message" that sardonically foreshadows the nightmarish mood of the next year of her life. Rushing to her car, which she has parked "haphazardly" on a narrow street near the Princeton Medical Center, where she is visiting her stricken husband, she sees what looks like a parking ticket beneath her

windshield wiper. At once her heart “clenches in dismay, guilty apprehension—a ticket?” (3). It turns out to be both better and worse—not a traffic summons but a note scribbled on an ordinary piece of paper: “LEARN TO PARK STUPPID BITCH” (4). She then switches from first-person narration, the dominant voice in the story, her “Joyce Carol Smith” voice, to third-person, her “Joyce Carol Oates” voice, and compares her story of the widow-to-be to a Kafka parable “*in which the most profound and devastating truth of the individual’s life is revealed to him by a passer-by in the street*” (4).

### “This Can’t Be Happening”

Oates may not be an expert at parking an automobile in a crisis—who is?—but she is an expert writer, and part 1 of *A Widow’s Story* describes in abundant detail her husband’s sudden illness and death. She wakes up on February 11, 2008, to discover him hunched over the *New York Times*. He admits feeling “strange” when she asks him apprehensively if something is wrong. He tells her this in a “matter-of-fact voice,” but she knows he is not his usual self. A “cautious, caring, and hyper-vigilant spouse” (13), she insists calmly but forcefully that they go immediately to the ER and, despite his objections, she drives him there, where he is soon diagnosed as having pneumonia. She feels relief: “Pneumonia! The mystery is solved. The solution is a good one. Pneumonia is both commonplace and treatable—isn’t it?” (20).

Oates returns home. A few hours later, as she is about to drive to the hospital, she receives an urgent phone call informing her that her husband’s heartbeat has accelerated and cannot be stabilized: “*in the event that his heart stops do you want extraordinary measures to be used to keep him alive?*” (21). Stunned, as anyone would be, she cannot understand the question. “*Yes anything you can do! Save him! I will be right there—for this is the first unmistakable sign of horror, helplessness—impending doom*” (21). She then finds herself lying on the kitchen hardwood floor, astonished she has just fainted. “Six o’clock in the evening of February 11, 2008. The Siege—not yet identified, not yet named, nor even suspected—has begun” (22).

What follows is a harrowing story filled with concrete details and piercing emotions. Medical tests determine that Raymond Smith’s right lung has been infected by *E. coli*, and he is immediately given an IV antibiotic. During the next five days, specialists monitor his condition, and for a time he appears to feel better. Oates quotes several of her e-mails to

friends and acquaintances to document his progress. Ominously, a “secondary infection” of “mysterious origin” appears in his left lung—“nothing to worry about” (50), she is told. But worry she does, and for good reason. A telephone call awakens her at 12:38 a.m. on February 18 with the alarming news that her husband is now in critical condition. “*This can’t be happening*” (55), she says to herself. By the time she arrives at the hospital, he is dead.

### Self-Blame and Guilt

Everyone would be horrified to be in Oates’s situation, but not everyone would be as overwhelmed by self-blame and guilt as she is. No one can fault her behavior—her insistence on driving her husband to the ER, her daily visits to him, her efforts to cheer him up when he is awake and to anticipate his every need, her willingness to speak with his physicians about his condition. Nevertheless, she criticizes herself for everything, beginning with her parking. She blames herself for angering the chattering hospital aide whom she has hired to help her husband. She blames herself for being asleep when he died. She blames herself for driving him to the Princeton Medical Center rather than to New York City or Philadelphia, where, her friends tell her, the hospitals are better. She blames herself for not executing perfectly the flurry of “death-duties” that arise from a spouse’s death. She blames herself when her grocery bags overturn in her car, spilling everything on the floor. And she blames herself for not being with him when he died. “*I have come too late. I too abandoned him*” (187).

Nor is this all. Oates blames herself for being too scared to read her husband’s unpublished novel, *Black Mass*, which he abandoned forty years earlier. “*You are terrified of reading Ray’s novel because you are terrified of discovering something in it that will upset you*” (242). She blames herself for surviving her husband. “The widow feels in her heart, she should not be *still alive*” (278). She blames herself when she forgets to bring in her cat and he freezes to death. And she blames herself when she rereads one of her prize-winning short stories, “In the Region of Ice,” later made into an Academy Award-winning film, based on a former student who had shot and killed his rabbi in a temple and then turned the gun on himself: “I am stricken with sympathy, sorrow, guilt. *I could have done more. I could have done—something*” (348).

How do we feel about the relentless torrent of blame, guilt, self-condemnation, and failure that dominates *A Widow’s Story*? Surely Oates

knows, on some level, that she cannot be reproached for the disastrous events that unfold in the story. Nothing she did or did not do could have prevented her husband's death. Only those who believe a person can be omniscient and omnipotent will judge her guilty of being "stupid, selfish, neglectful" (72), as she judges herself after forgetting to bring her husband a large Valentine card signed by their friends. In her desire to document all her emotions during the first year of widowhood, she exposes the darkest side of Joyce Carol Smith's life, the nightmarish side that believes, as the officer in Kafka's "In the Penal Colony" discovers, when he jumps onto a torture-and-execution machine, "guilt is never to be doubted." There are moments when Oates tries to universalize her experience, as when she learns that "a widow is one who *makes mistakes*" (72), but she always assumes more than a reasonable degree of responsibility for events beyond her control. "*It is wrong to have outlived Ray,*" she repeats to herself, a mantra symptomatic of her posthumous life. Dark emotions flood the memoir, and we watch in dismay as the brutal current nearly sweeps the widow away.

### Suicide

Oates's self-blame is the most shocking revelation in *A Widow's Story*, followed closely by her obsession with suicide. Thoughts of suicide recur throughout *A Widow's Story*; indeed, apart from the irrational hope that her husband will miraculously return to life, the longing for death is her most powerful and recurrent fantasy. There are dozens of references to suicide, particularly during the months immediately following his death. She wishes she had died with him to escape from the grief and loneliness of widowhood. She thinks about nineteenth-century Indian widows who immolated themselves on their husbands' funeral pyres in the Hindu practice of suttee. She tells us that neither she nor her husband had wished to outlive the other, though she is quick to point out his horror of suicide and rejection of it as a romantic option. She doesn't regard suicide as a realistic possibility, but that doesn't make the fantasy less tempting to her.

There are many reasons people attempt or commit suicide, and it is important to understand the reasons behind Oates's fantasy. She does not believe in the possibility of life after death, and she never imagines reuniting with her deceased husband in another realm. She feels anger, even rage, toward the man who has "abandoned" her, but she knows he didn't want to die. She doesn't regard suicide as a way of revenging herself on the dead,

as Sylvia Plath suggests in her poem “Daddy,” where the speaker attempts to get “back at” her father for dying. One of the main predictors of suicide is hopelessness, but Oates is never so despairing that she believes life is not worth living. She is aware of the devastating consequences of suicide, its dark legacy, or illegacy, for family and friends, and for this reason alone she is careful not to advocate suicide as a realistic option for the bereft.

Nevertheless, Oates sees suicide as a way to escape from intolerable suffering, and she cannot stop thinking about it. She recalls her father saying, with “masculine bravado,” when he was middle-aged: “*If I ever get bad as—[referring to an elderly chronically ill and complaining relative]—put me out of my misery!*” (67). Some people might be frightened by the thought of suicide, but she regards it as a consolation. “For suicide promises *A good night’s sleep—with no interruptions! And no next-day*” (94). The yearning for death is such a potent fantasy that she decides any action a widow takes, no matter how naive, foolish, or futile, is a positive alternative to suicide. On two separate occasions she quotes Nietzsche’s wry aphorism: “The thought of suicide can get one through many a long night” (117, 212). Two other Nietzschean statements, the first from *Human, All Too Human*, which she had quoted in *The Profane Art*, and the second from *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, run “like electric shocks” through her mind in *A Widow’s Story*: “*If you stare too long into an abyss, the abyss will gaze back into you,*” and “*Many die too late, and some die too early. Yet strange soundeth the precept: Die at the right time*” (212–213). Both statements prove relevant to her situation. The more she gazes into the abyss, the more it stares back at her; and, like Nietzsche, who died ten years too late, she believes her life should have ended with her husband’s death.

Along with existential guilt, another source of Oates’s suicidal feeling is the masochistic need to punish herself. *A Widow’s Story* abounds in masochistic fantasies, which appear to have *preceded* her husband’s death rather than developed as a response to it. She hints at this when she suggests how “masochism masks fear, horror, terror—how frequently in the past I had consoled myself that, should *something happen to Ray*, I would not want to outlive him” (67). She then wonders how common this fantasy is. “It’s a consolation to wives-not-yet widows. It’s a way of stating *I love him so much, I am one who loves so very much*” (67).

The problem with this “consolation,” however, is that masochism generally arises from the fear that one has *not* loved (or been loved) enough—in this case, loved neither one’s spouse nor oneself enough. It makes more sense to believe that a person who is overwhelmed by self-blame and guilt after her husband’s death and who fantasizes about suicide



day and night is worried not about having loved too much but about having loved too little. This is what clinicians call pathological or “complicated” grief, the “intensification of grief to the level where the person is overwhelmed, resorts to maladaptive behavior, or remains interminably in the state of grief without progression of the mourning process towards completion” (Horowitz et al. 1157). Yet if Oates’s need to punish herself preceded her husband’s death, she is not willing to explore this question. Readers of *A Widow’s Story* are thus left in a quandary about what to believe. The strong and convincing love that lasted throughout her forty-eight-year marriage is hard to reconcile with the severity of the masochistic fantasies that push her toward suicide.

Are Oates’s masochistic fantasies related to the impulse toward perfectionism that we see in her *Journal*, where she acknowledges the need to be a model wife and to lead a model life? She is amazed in her *Journal* that she seems to have succeeded in these goals, or at least not to have failed in them, but then she reminds herself that “so much of life lies ahead to be lived, and to be explored” (*Journal* 436). By all accounts, Oates had an excellent marriage, but no marriage is conflict free. Her relentless hyper-self-criticism, held in check during her husband’s life, appears to have been released by his death, producing lacerating self-blame.

In her journal, Oates is seldom judgmental of those writers who have committed suicide, and in *A Widow’s Story* her sympathy toward them is only heightened. She remarks on the number of undergraduate students in her fiction workshops who turn in stories about suicide based on their relatives’ or friends’ attempted or completed suicides. She never reveals to her students anything personal about herself. “My intention as a teacher is to refine my own personality out of existence, or nearly—my own ‘self’ is never a factor in my teaching, still less my career; I like to think that most of my students haven’t read my writing” (174). There are two ironies here, only one of which is intentional. After her husband’s death, Oates prides herself on teaching her undergraduate fiction workshop as if nothing in her life has changed. After one class, however, two students from the preceding semester visit her to offer their condolences. “When they leave, I shut my office door. I am shaking, I am so deeply moved. But mostly shocked. Thinking *They must have known all along today. They must all know*” (174). The other irony, on which she never comments, is that her students will be even more shocked when they read *A Widow’s Story*, for the teacher/student relationship will be forever changed.

Oates is aware of the ways in which gender shapes how men and women regard themselves, but she doesn’t explore how gender plays a

decisive role in suicide. Three times as many women as men attempt suicide, but three times as many men complete suicide, mainly because men choose more violent and therefore more successful methods to kill themselves. Women tend to overdose on drugs or, as in the case of Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, asphyxiate themselves, while men use guns. Oates imagines overdosing, “hoarding” her prescription painkillers so that, in an emergency, she can “put myself out of my misery” (211). One of the reasons she looks forward to lectures, readings, and book signings out of town is that she would never harm herself away from home. Despite her large pill cache, she admits she doesn’t have a concrete suicide plan, which she knows would heighten the risk of danger. She elaborates on the various ways of committing suicide, including accumulating pills, shooting oneself in the brain, and inhaling carbon monoxide, but then she concludes that there is no foolproof method. She shatters the taboo of silence surrounding suicide by spending many pages writing about her death wish, but she then tries to distance herself from her ruminations by making two disclaimers: “*Of course I don’t mean it! I mean very little of what I say. Of course, I am a fantasist . . . You can’t possibly take me seriously*” (233).

Oates may be a fantasist, but that doesn’t mean we fail to take her words seriously. Her prose becomes hypnotic when she writes about how methodically she counts her pills. The fantasy and ever-present reality of suicide are as strong in *A Widow’s Story* as they are in the novels and poems of Virginia Woolf, Ernest Hemingway, Sylvia Plath, and Anne Sexton. Sexton speaks of the wish to die, Oates reminds us, as “*the almost unnamable lust*” (344), and, if anything, the lust is named more fully in *A Widow’s Story*. Nor is Oates averse to sharing her suicidal ideation with friends, even if it means worrying them about her state of mind. Later, after commenting on the “strange lethargy” that prevents her from answering condolence letters from friends like Philip Roth, she ponders the futility of language and mentions the suicide note scrolling in her head much of the time. She never shares the suicide note with the reader, perhaps fearful that it will sound melodramatic.

### The Basilisk

Oates describes the thought of suicide as a comfort, consolation, and longing, something devoutly to be wished, yet she personifies suicide as a repulsive-looking basilisk that stares at her abysmally, compelling her horrified counterstare. Whether we interpret the basilisk as the Christian Satan,

the Nietzschean abyss, or the Freudian superego, it represents the hideous reality of suicide. To those who argue that the alluring descriptions in *A Widow's Story* glorify suicide and thus may pose a danger to certain readers already at risk—the well-documented contagion theory of suicide—Oates might counterargue that the opposite is true, for she tells us repeatedly, if not always convincingly, that suicide is a temptation that must be resisted.

### “The Most Seductive of Literary Genres”

Three-quarters of the way through *A Widow's Story*, Oates, still immersed in grief and despairing of recovery, reports a friend's suggestion to see a therapist or grief counselor or join a self-help group for people who have lost a spouse. Given her lifelong mistrust of all forms of psychotherapy and psychopharmacology, it is not surprising that the recommendation evokes Oates's anger and mistrust. She offers a different objection, however, from the ones she generally expresses in her journal and fictional writings. Living in the “age of memoir,” she cannot trust mental health professionals to maintain confidentiality. Oates has in mind Anne Sexton's psychiatrist, Martin Orne, who, with the permission of the poet's daughter Linda Gray Sexton, gave to biographer Diane Wood Middlebrook three hundred hours of audiotapes of Anne Sexton's therapy sessions. Oates then elaborates on the meaning of living in an era of full disclosure. “The memoirist excoriates him-/herself, as in a parody of public penitence, assuming then that the excoriation, exposure, humiliation of others is justified” (300). She characterizes the memoir as the “most seductive” and “most dangerous” of genres, because it claims to be a “repository of truths” when, in fact, the truth of a widow's grief is too vast to be perceived in a single gaze—or captured in a single book.

Coincidentally or not, Oates referred often to memoirs in the years immediately preceding *A Widow's Story*. In *Uncensored*, she divides the contemporary memoir into two types, the “coming-of-age memoir,” which reads like an “‘authentic’ version of the autobiographical novel,” and the “memoir of crisis,” which “focuses upon a single season or dramatic event in the memoirist's life” (109). She cites William Styron's *Darkness Visible* as an example of a memoir of crisis. Both types of memoir, she adds, can be rewarding or disappointing, “depending upon that elusive factor we call ‘style’—‘voice.’” Oates admits that a “mediocre memoir may be easier to compose than a mediocre novel since, presumably, one need not invent much, but memoirs of distinction surely rank with novels of distinction,

for no literary genre is by definition inferior to any other” (109–110). She could not possibly imagine that six years after she made these observations in *Uncensored* she would write her own distinguished memoir of crisis.

Oates reports in *A Widow's Story* that three friends and a fourth person gave her contradictory and unsolicited advice about writing a memoir. One friend urged her to write a memoir about her husband's death; a second friend warned her not to write, at least not yet; a third friend angered her by declaring, “with evident seriousness,” that she probably had already written one or two novels about her deceased husband; and a fourth person, a Princeton University acquaintance, exclaimed, with “an air of hearty reproach—‘Writing up a storm, eh, Joyce?’” (300), a comment that infuriates her.

This moment in *A Widow's Story* is fraught with irony, not all of which is intentional. Appalled by unnamed sensationalistic memoirs, Oates writes a self-revealing story that is more self-excoriating than any other spousal loss memoir. Her characterization of herself as a woman deranged by grief, filled with guilt and shame, longing for death, and scarcely able to remain in control in public will shock those familiar with the way she presents herself in her *Journal*, scholarly books, and interviews. Oates has no patience for those who imagine her soon writing about the death of her husband—indeed, she is exasperated by how others assume she is sturdy enough to begin writing. Yet she publishes her 417-page story exactly three years after her husband's death, a length of time that most other memoirists would consider miraculously short.

### Memoir or Journal?

*A Widow's Story* is subtitled *A Memoir*, but Oates never tells us that what we are reading is, in fact, based on her journal. Only in interviews given after the publication of *A Widow's Story* does she explain how the book came into existence. In an online interview with Louise McCready on February 16, 2011, the week in which *A Widow's Story* was released, Oates observes that the memoir was “assembled rather than ‘written,’ as it is composed of journal entries from Feb. 11, 2008 onward.” “Its form,” she notes, except for several chapters that are clearly set in the past, “is that of a quilt or a mosaic.” Unable to write fiction in the summer of 2009, she “turned to the journal notes and assembled a sort of memoir out of them; but it wasn't until late in this process that I came to realize that the effort of creating the memoir was a kind of ‘pilgrimage’—its destina-