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Joyce Carol Oates: a teacher, academic and one of the most prodigious novelists of all time

She tells Katy Guest why her biggest fear is developing a headache

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Joyce Carol Oates was born in Lockport, New York in 1938, grew up in the countryside and attended the same one-room school as her mother had. She excelled academically, and at 19 won a short story competition run by the magazine Mademoiselle. She graduated as a valedictorian in 1960, took an MA and went on to teach at the University of Detroit, publishing her first novel, With Shuddering Fall, when she was 26. Since then she has published close to a hundred books including novels, short stories and poetry. She has been three times nominated for the Pulitzer Prize but has continually escaped winning major awards. She currently lives in New Jersey, where she is a Professor of Humanities and Creative Writing at Princeton University.

Joyce Carol Oates says that her favourite character from her new novel is Herschel. He is the brother of her female lead: taciturn, illiterate, almost pre-lingual. "In real life I'd probably be afraid of him," she says. "But as a character in a novel... he's primitive, insightful. Then he kind of disappears."

You don't expect successful novelists to play favourites among their books, but Oates seems happy to talk about hers. Blonde is one of her favourite novels, she says; Herschel is a character she finds herself writing again and again. But then perhaps other authors, with their few precious babies, have the energy to love them all equally. An author who has approaching a hundred is, let's face it, probably going to end up neglecting a few.

Oates's latest book, The Gravedigger's Daughter (Fourth Estate, £18.99), is her 35th novel. That's if you don't count the dozen or so she has written under the pseudonyms Rosamond Smith and Lauren Kelly, or the eight novellas, the 30 collections of short stories, eight plays and various poetry, essays and children's books. Unnervingly, she seems to remember every detail of every book, and tells the stories as if she were describing a real life event that happened before you were born. She seems almost surprised when you chip in.

Since she started writing, aged 14, on a typewriter that was a gift from her beloved grandmother, Oates has achieved a reputation for quality, quantity and controversy. Her novel them won the National Book Award in 1970; she has since won a raft of prizes, become an Oprah's Book Club favourite as well as a leading academic at Princeton and seems to be perennially nominated for the Pulitzer Prize.

One reviewer, in the Independent on Sunday, wrote: "Every single Oates novel I've read has added to my conviction that she is a genius." Another, in the Telegraph, called her writing "consistently brilliant, abundantly gifted with acuity, penetration, sympathy and humour," then grumbled: "The only complaint that may be made against her work is that there is rather a lot of it. Can she... be persuaded to write less prolifically?" To Truman Capote, she was "the most loathsome creature in America – a joke monster who ought to be beheaded in a public auditorium." Her friend, John Updike, has described all this as "some of the harshest scoldings ever administered to a major talent."

When we meet, in a quiet backstage room at the Edinburgh International Book Festival ("my husband and I would like to see some contemporary art..." she asks me. "Do you think we will find some in Edinboro?"), she is obviously above these criticisms. With a knowing twinkle that suggests she has long since gotten over it, she shrugs, "Well, critics have to be critical of something. If they weren't critical of that they'd have to be critical of something else."

By "that", she means her legendary output. Updike has said that he and Oates are "blue collar writers" – and she agrees with the description. "Yeah, John and I are both from the same kind of background. We work every day. That's true."

It is only after our interview that I realise how subtly Oates has managed not to name-drop throughout. She confirms that she corresponds with "John" and that one of her better friends is the "not so well known" artist Gloria Vanderbilt. She is "friendly with Norman [Mailer] but I don't see him very often". Now, she tells me about a "very well known and very successful American actor" friend, whom she will not name, but whose workload obviously impresses her. "People shouldn't think that writing is a romantic profession," she says. "Acting is the same." I wonder if that is why she feels such an affinity with Norma Jeane Baker. Monroe's critics all complained that she played herself – she couldn't act – Oates writes repeatedly in *Blonde*. Rather, the novel has Marilyn/ Norma Jeane working and reworking each scene until she becomes her role.

Writing, like acting, she says, is a job. Her biggest worry is not about the critics, or the controversy, but about continuing to work. The novel she has just finished, she says, was "such a burden. I would worry if I was strong enough to do it. I would think, 'What if I just gave up and I got sick?' And if I wake up with a certain kind of headache I struggle all day long and I can hardly work." Later, she returns to the subject. "I think everyone has one major weakness that he or she is afraid of. And mine is that I won't be well... I didn't mean to keep talking about that," she adds, quickly. "But writing is not romantic."

If Oates is aloof from her detractors, she is equally calm about those who aim to praise her. I read to her a quote from the back of her novel *Black Girl White Girl*, the 2006 hardback edition. It is credited to *The Sunday Times*, and calls her "One of the female frontrunners for the title of Great American Novelist." Does the gratuitous addition of the word "female" not rankle at all? Again, her eyes take on that superior, slightly bored twinkle as she insists: "Oh, yeah, yeah. I think it's proper to be annoyed if you are a woman every time you read something like that. It's just a natural reaction. If you're the actual person they're writing about you tend to feel that it's praise, you know. Basically a nice thing. People have often told me that I write like a man – and I know he means well by that."

Nor, she says, is the title of Great American Novelist one she aspires to. "I don't think that way at all. I don't have any friends who think that way. It's an older generation: Norman Mailer felt that way. But he's about 85." Instead, she says, there are now so many ways of writing the American Novel that the title is meaningless. "Toni Morrison's a great novelist but nobody would say she's the Great American Novelist because she doesn't write about the kind of things that, say, Philip Roth writes about. Philip Roth could never be the Great American Novelist because he writes about Jews, mainly in New Jersey. He's not writing about New York or the Midwest or anything. And I'm sure Philip Roth himself would say that." Oates, by contrast, writes about everything. Perhaps she has the best claim to the title after all.

Another criticism levelled at Oates – and as she happily admits, there are many – concerns the theme of violence against women which often reappears in her novels. "I'm very sympathetic with victims," she once said, in response to one such criticism of her work – notably *Zombie* (1995) and *Rape: A Love Story* (2005). "They tend to be often women and girls." I ask her whether women writers don't sometimes seem better, even keener, at grasping the detail of sheer, physical, human horribleness. "Well yes, and details of other things too, like clothing and nature," she says. "I like to describe – the ideal reproducing. And I think the photographer doesn't necessarily make the distinction between the beautiful image and the ugly image."

Her latest novel, while not as graphic as *Rape: A Love Story*, is no exception. The gravedigger's daughter of the title is Rebecca Schwart – and while she changes her name and her identity through the novel to become more and more an all-American girl, and while she is abused by one man after another, it is her father who defines her. Oates began writing the novel when a biography of her unearthed a family history she had known nothing about. The gravedigger's daughter was her grandmother – the one who first gave her a typewriter and encouraged her to write.

"It's interesting," she discovered. "None of us really thinks about our parents or grandparents as being people. When you think about your own mother being your own age, you realise that you come in at a certain point but their lives before that have been interesting. And I'm always interested in the life of an older family member because our ancestors' lives were much harder than ours. I think our lives are easy compared to the past."

This is, she says, "a good curiosity". She talks again about Herschel, and why men like him should keep appearing in her novels. "I think writers often find that we write about people we are intimidated by," she muses. "Many writers are sad, bookish people who are comfortable writing. But as a writer you have access to people. It's your job as a mediator to respect those people – not to ridicule them." Forget prizes and adoration from the critics, Joyce Carol Oates knows why she writes. "A novel should extend sympathy," she says. "That is what a writer should try to do."

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