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Wednesday, Sep 17, 2008

Breaking News

Posted on Sun, Sep. 07, 2008

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Author Joyce Carol Oates is always at her finest

Prolific writer will headline Kentucky Women Writers Conference

By Cheryl Truman
Herald-Leader Books Editor

Joyce Carol Oates comes to Lexington this week, and it's hard to say less than this: Grab everybody you know who reads or writes or thinks, and get to the Kentucky Women Writers Conference. You don't get to see genius every day.

Oates is the grand dame of American letters and a woman whose works number in the hundreds, who writes like you breathe, if your every exhalation wound up in hardcover or in The New York Review of Books.

Any discussion about Oates will sooner or later stumble on the P-word: *productivity*. Oates writes novels, short stories and reviews, she teaches and she has two literary pseudonyms (Rosamond Smith and Lauren Kelly). She has been published for more than 40 years, and the only major award that she has *not* received is the Nobel Prize for literature — and many say she's destined for that.

Still, Oates doesn't think she's getting enough done.

"I always feel guilty because I haven't done as much work as I want to in a day," she said by phone in a recent interview.

With dozens of books to her name, the trouble with assessing Oates lies not in quantifying her brilliance, which is real, but in absorbing the sheer mass of her work, which is more than Herculean.

And yet she makes time to travel to events such as the Kentucky Women Writers Conference, which starts Thursday in Lexington.

Why? Someone simply asked her to visit the conference, and she says she thought it "sounds like a very warm, interesting, inviting gathering."

That's part of the dichotomy of Oates. This very mellow woman puts her characters through garishly rough sledding, physically and emotionally. A review of Oates' most recent book, *My Sister, My Love* by the International Herald Tribune began: "Joyce Carol Oates isn't known for lightheartedness," which is like saying the sun isn't known for freezing. It's a nod to the glaringly obvious, and also a back-door suggestion that what readers really want is a moral landscape they recognize. Oates isn't in that business.

She's literary-fierce.

To sample Oates, start with the cool surfaces of *Them*, treat yourself to a little Oates-gone-Gothic with *Bellefleur*, then proceed to the gritty splendor of *The Gravedigger's Daughter*. *My Sister, My Love*, is a fictional take on the JonBenet e_SDHpRamsley case centered on the death of a little skater named Bliss Rampike.

Though *My Sister, My Love* might have been suggested by the Ramsey case, it's not strictly about the incident, any more than Oates' book *Blonde* was about becoming Marilyn Monroe; *Dark Water* dissected the mysteries of Chappaquiddick; or the young-adult novel *Freaky Green Eyes* was a faithful retelling of the O.J. Simpson case. Despite her skill with reimagining true crime, Oates does not write police procedurals — although anyone reading her 1999 New York Review of Books piece reviewing books on the Ramsey case might wonder whether she couldn't dash out a fine true-crime potboiler, so intimately did she absorb the bizarre minutiae surrounding the murder.

Beyond the murder, *My Sister, My Love* is about living the scarred life of a tabloid target, how a moment's notoriety clings for a lifetime — and about how even the alleged victims can buy into the morbid machine. In the book, Oates wields a topical bazooka, especially when Bliss's mother decides to cash in on her daughter's demise. Yet she's not hostile to her characters, insisting, "Satire doesn't exclude sympathy."

"Betsey is invited to explain to viewers how she's inaugurated Heaven Scent Products in 1998 as a way of 'helping to heal the festering wounds' of her personal tragedy. On display are a number of Heaven Scent products: Heaven Scent Cosmetic Kit — Heaven Scent Perfumes — Heaven Scent Bubble Bath — Heaven Scent Christmas Chocolates — Heaven Scent Accessories (scarves, belts, bracelets et al.) — Heaven Scent Betsey's Special Recipe Christmas Fruitcake. ... Next there's an admiring buzz in the studio as Betsey proudly displays a Heaven Scent Bliss Rampike Doll: a startlingly lifelike replica of Bliss Rampike in miniature, with vivid blue glass eyes that open and shut, a sweet rosebud mouth, ultra-realistic skin and fine blond shoulder-length hair, movable arms and legs, detachable doll-size ice skates for the tiny feet ... offered pre-Christmas for a base price of just \$99.99; with a complete wardrobe plus ice skates, for an additional \$49.99." — from *My Sister, My Love* (HarperCollins, \$25.95)

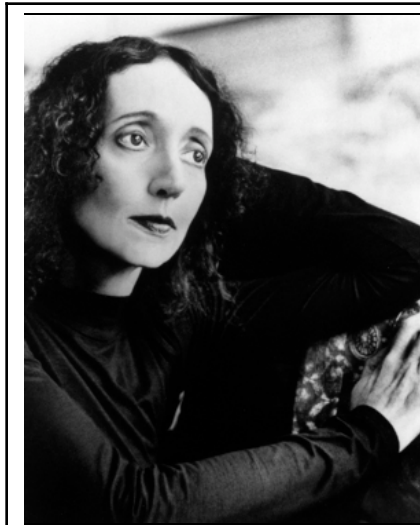
As one of the most original literary voices of our time, Oates tends to scare the dickens out of her readers. But she insists that she's far different in person. To put it in a pedestrian way that would never see the light of day in an Oates novel, she is *nice*.

"I'm actually a pretty easygoing person," Oates says, in part because she logged decades in the university classroom, teaching at the University of Detroit, the University of Windsor, in Canada, and now at Princeton.

When she makes appearances, Oates doesn't judge folks by their questions.

"If they're sincere," she says. "I'm always interested in answering them."

She tells prospective writers to read voluminously and omnivorously and write fearlessly. Oates doesn't often read reviews — a snarky critique of *My Sister, My Love* recently in The New York Times was never to her — because, she says, if you listen too hard to the crowd of critics, you



Joyce Carol Oates

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