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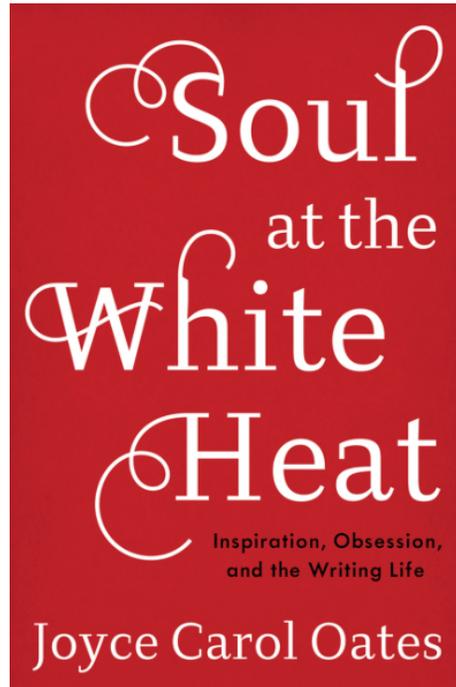
# Review of Joyce Carol Oates's *Soul at the White Heat*



Eric K. Anderson  
*LonesomeReader Blog*

Joyce Carol Oates is such a prolific writer that it may surprise some of her readers to discover that she is also a committed and voracious reader. It's easy to imagine the perennial question which Oates is asked "How do you write so much?" being quickly followed by "How do you read so much?" *Soul at the White Heat* is a sustained and fascinating collection of nonfiction chronicling not only her reflections as a writer, but her engagement with a wide range of books by authors—some of whom are "classics" and others "contemporaries." Every analysis or review Oates gives of a single book is scattered with mentions of that author's other publications as well as a wide variety of other writers and books which provide enlightening points of reference. The collection is filled primarily with book reviews, so the subtitle

“Inspiration, Obsession, and the Writing Life” clues the reader into how the compulsion to write is inextricably linked to the desire to read widely and rigorously. Because this collection comes from a writer of such productivity and stature, it can be read in two ways. The first is as an astute survey of writing from some of the greatest past and present practitioners of the craft. The second is as a supplement to



Oates’s own fiction, providing fascinating insights into how her perspective on other writing might relate to her past publications. However, underlying this entire anthology is the question of why writers feel inspired to write and what compels us to keep reading.

For some writers, Oates gives an informative overview of that author’s complete output. There is the “weird” writing of H.P. Lovecraft or the “bold and intriguing” detective fiction of Derek Raymond both of which lead Oates to make intriguing observations about the nature of genre. Another section gives a broad look at the life and work of famously prolific author Georges Simenon with a special consideration for the memoirist nature of one of his pivotal novels. In one of the most personal pieces Oates recounts a visit and interview she

conducted with Doris Lessing in 1972 where she considers Lessing's psychologically realist fiction alongside her audacious science fiction. Oates nobly raises the stature of some lesser known writers such as Lucia Berlin by drawing comparisons between her "zestfully written, seemingly artless" short stories and the firmly established writing of Charles Bukowski, Grace Paley, and Raymond Carver.

Oates has taught literature and writing for most of her life and in several pieces it's possible to gauge her academic nature to inspire and provoke more nuanced thinking. Such is the case in one of the opening essays where she meticulously dissects the "anatomy of a story." In "Two American Prose Masters" she makes a sharply analytical critique of how tense is used in a short story by John Updike and contrasts this with a heartrending story by Ralph Ellison. At other times she questions how style and form are related to subject matter. For instance, when considering Martin Amis's *The Zone of Interest* she asks if a postmodernist use of irony excludes emotion no matter how devastating or "mighty" the subject matter. In considering the "detached and ironic tone" of much of Margaret Drabble's fiction she prompts the reader to ask how this reflects contemporary English culture and feminism. As much as making judgements throughout these numerous essays and reviews, Oates draws readers to more attentively question how they read fiction.

As a critic, Oates shows a great deal of empathy towards the artfulness employed by the vast array of writers she

discusses in this book. If negative points are made they are often balanced by something positive. However, she certainly doesn't shy away from pointing out severe failings in either authors or their books. Such is the case with H.P. Lovecraft who for all the wonder of his gothic imagination was “an anti-Semite . . . racist, and all-purpose Aryan bigot” and she observes how “For all his intelligence and aesthetic theorizing, Lovecraft was, like Poe, a remarkably uneven writer.” When reviewing the novel *The Beginner's Goodbye* by Anne Tyler and Tyler's parochial portrait of the diverse city of Baltimore she surmises that “the fiction is determinedly old-fashioned, 'traditional' and conservative; it takes no risks, and confirms the wisdom of risklessness.” In the case of Karen Joy Fowler whose novel *We Are Completely Beside Ourselves* Oates admires as “boldly exploratory” she nonetheless considers it a misjudgement to limit the novel's point of view to the first person. She circumvents even mentioning Fowler's novel for the first five pages of the review by embarking on a fascinating consideration of Darwin and animal rights.

Oates doesn't strictly limit herself to the realm of fiction in her criticism. She also reviews nonfiction and autobiography. These range from what might be the new definitive biography of Charles Dickens by Claire Tomalin to Margaret Atwood's overview of science fiction *In Other Worlds* (where Oates cites the notable absence of Doris Lessing) to Jeanette Winterson's memoir about her attempted suicide. When considering an “unauthorized” biography of Joan Didion titled *The Last Love Song*

by Tracy Daugherty, Oates considers the evolution of Didion's writing and how in her journalism she finds "a perfect conjunction of reportorial and memoirist urges." Sometimes Oates asks how real-life relationships between writers and artists influence their output. When surveying the published letters between Georgia O'Keeffe and Alfred Stieglitz she wonders if it weren't for Stieglitz's influence whether O'Keeffe would still have achieved her deserved legacy as an American icon of the art world. There is also an essay which contemplates the difficult later years of Mike Tyson in the book *Undisputed Truth* as well as a review of the film *The Fighter* where Oates draws upon her considerable knowledge of boxing to critique the way the film misses out on the athletic art form of the sport. It's easy to see why Oates was motivated to write about these last two examples because of the sustained interest in the sport she's shown throughout her career in both her fiction such as her most recent novel *A Book of American Martyrs* and her slim nonfiction book *On Boxing*.

There are many pieces in *Soul at the White Heat* which will intrigue the avid reader of Oates's oeuvre for how the subjects and writing styles she discusses relate to her own work. For example, Oates is highly sympathetic with Derek Raymond's "existential pilgrim as detective, the object of his inquiry nothing less than the meaning of life itself." This is both a mode of writing and character type she also used in her exemplary post-modernist detective novel *Mysteries of Winterthurn*. There is also a very considered review of Larry McMurtry's novel *The Last*

*Kind Words Saloon* where he realistically renders the now mythic figures of Wyatt Earp and Doc Holliday just as Oates sought to reimagine the girl behind the legend of Marilyn Monroe in her monumental novel *Blonde*. Oates admires the different slant on Dickinson's life Jerome Charyn takes in his novel *The Secret Life of Emily Dickinson* which is interesting to consider alongside Oates's extremely imaginative short story "EDickinsonRepliLuxe" where she gives the classic American poet a second life as a computerized mannequin. When writing about Lorrie Moore's distinctive short stories Oates pays particular attention to two stories which rewrite particular tales by Vladimir Nabokov and Henry James (writers whose stories Oates has also previously created her own versions of). Despite there being many parallels in themes between her own work and these other writers, Oates tactfully never references her own fiction.

*Soul at the White Heat* opens with four somewhat candid pieces about the writing process and her own "credo" as an artist. It's possible to see how she holds to her "several overlapping ideals" when looking back at both her fiction and the way she critiques other writer's books. In Oates's writing room she reflects how her younger self would feel "stunned" that she would produce so many books when "each hour's work feels so anxiously wrought and hard-won." From the confined space of the study this anthology ends by moving out into "real life" with a touching, vividly detailed essay about a visit Oates undertook to San Quentin prison where she admits her idealistic urge "To learn more about he world. To be less

sheltered. To be less naïve. To *know*.” Although this is not mentioned in the piece, Oates was subsequently inspired to help bring the stories of prisoners to the public consciousness by editing the extremely engaging anthology *Prison Noir*. For an author who writes so infrequently about her own life (recent memoirs *A Widow's Story* and *The Lost Landscape* being notable exceptions) it's engagingly refreshing to meet Oates's voice when unmediated by the guise of fiction. Here is someone so “inspired” and “obsessed” with the boundless excitement and vertiginous joy to be found in great literature that she is motivated to devote so much time to the activity of reading when she's not writing her own fiction. Perhaps this is the real answer to that oft-asked question of how Oates has produced over one hundred books of fiction. It's not about how it's done; it's about why she does it.