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Review of *Marya: A Life*

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[Editor's note: *Marya: A Life* was first published by Dutton in 1986. The novel was reissued in 2014 by Ecco, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers.]

It's a cliché that writers' first novels are their most autobiographical. However, for Oates it took some time before she artistically arranged intimately personal information into narrative form. *Marya: A Life* is Oates's 17th published novel, and although the content isn't necessarily directly from her life, she confesses in a preface for the Franklin Library first edition that it "will likely remain the most 'personal' of my novels" and that "it contains some autobiographical material." On the surface, the events of this coming-of-age novel do roughly mirror the line of Oates's life. A girl from a relatively economically-depressed area of rural upstate New York goes to college, develops an academic career teaching, and becomes a writer (although *Marya* eventually abandons writing). However, key aspects of *Marya*'s experiences and actions differ significantly from Oates's own life. Identifying the specific differences isn't important, but it's significant to note that the death of *Marya*'s father in a barroom brawl and her subsequently being pawned off to be raised by other relatives are tragic circumstances inspired by Oates's mother's life as described in Greg Johnson's 1998 biography of Oates, *Invisible Writer*. In the novel, this trauma leads to a lingering sense of rejection and sets *Marya* on a life-long quest to grow into and value herself. The novel is comprised of a series of significant periods from *Marya*'s life. These islands of experience are connected by *Marya*'s quest to establish her identity in the world apart from her emotionally undernourished upbringing.

As a girl in a small farming and mining community, *Marya* must rely on her instincts for survival. Her unstable mother is occasionally threatening or neglectful. The neighborhood boys play sadistic games which frequently involve taunting and abusing girls. Take, for instance, this observation about old car lots frequented by children: "These were no man's-lands, limbos of a sort, places

where language did not prevail and the only protection was flight, if you could run fast enough; or submission, if you couldn't." The space which these children inhabit is a special self-governed territory where strength rules. Intelligence and language are irrelevant. Marya learns it is best to suppress her emotions and voice. Her mother teaches her not to cry, and her cousin who sexually violates Marya orders her not to tell anyone. Childhood is composed of "a logic of secrets." For a time, this brutality leads Marya to the aforementioned state of submission and passivity out of necessity: "Marya knew how to go into stone." But Marya is not a willing victim and gradually learns how to orchestrate her revenge.

There are instances in Marya's adolescence where she fights back. At one point her cousin has a serious accident and the narrative is ambiguous about Marya's culpability. It teases on the brink of a confession like a guilty child trying to talk her way out of accepting any blame. Although the story isn't in Marya's voice, the reader witnesses her thought process as if she is trying to vindicate both herself and the anonymous reader. The girl's full rancour is only made known through Oates's characteristic italicized lines revealing her character's innermost thoughts: "*How do you like it now pig pig pig pig pig.*" In another scene involving a passionate, but highly-strung and pretentious teacher, Marya joins a gang of children harassing him to the point where he has a nervous breakdown. This is someone who Marya perceives as an ally at first. He's an educated man who recognizes Marya's innate intelligence and potential, but does not give her his full support nor sufficiently attend to her fragile adolescent ego. Hence her betrayal is swift and severely felt.

Marya's conscience catches up to her when she befriends a dying priest. She takes pride in becoming his assistant, transcribing his writing and taking dictation. The comfort she finds in religion and Father Shearing's "smiling solicitude" prompts Marya to want to "surrender everything in her of pride, rage, deep unhappiness . . . everything that was *Marya*, and consequently damned." Her self-hatred leads to masochistic desires. She fantasizes about periods of self-flagellation. However, with the Father's passing so does Marya's short burst of enthusiasm for theology and religious beliefs. The dedication to study and critical thinking sparks a desire for advanced learning. Hence Marya longs for college where she believes she can "give birth to herself." Like many teenagers, she desires to invent herself anew. Marya's defiant gesture for declaring her independence is to take all the hard lessons she learned in adolescence about the need for self-sufficiency and make herself into a driven intellectual.

Most sections of the novel deal with Marya's encounters with specific characters. When paired against these distinct personalities, Marya's sense of self is really challenged. She learns and develops because of her experiences with them, but she is not so much defined by them, as that they represent counterpoints

of what she is not. Encounters with a vivacious young college student named Imogene Skillman, an imposing professor mentor/lover named Maximilian Fein, a surly black janitor named Sylvester, an influential editor named Eric Nichols all present challenges that Marya surmounts to emerge with a new understanding of herself. Only when she is in solitude can she translate these experiences into writing and thus achieve a kind of transparency: “In isolation she quickly forgot her name, she quickly became invisible to herself.” The trajectory of Marya’s development in the narrative allows her the ability to explore the philosophical conundrums about identity which seem to be closest to her heart. Therefore, the importance of the self is subsumed in favour of ideas.

Perhaps more than in the details of this novel’s story, something essential about Oates’s life is revealed in the dedicated mission of writing which Marya takes up. Marya finds freedom in her writing to explore the chaotic terrain of her childhood: “She wanted to convert human pain into human words, she wanted to convert the memory of intense emotion in the past into intense emotion in the present, and to be herself unmoved.” Although she wants to memorialize the intensity of experience and pay tribute to the pains and pleasures of adolescence, she wishes her own personality to remain invisible. Marya reasons, “A writer’s authentic self, she thought, lay in his writing and not in his life; it was the landscape of the imagination that endured, that was really real.” Marya experiences the world in relation to the aforementioned strong personalities she encounters throughout the novel, but Marya’s essential self remains shifting and ephemeral. If it can be found anywhere, it’s in her writing. One can also easily imagine that Marya’s reflections about the writing life belong to Oates herself. Marya acknowledges at one point that “her great problem [is] not that she hadn’t anything to write about but that she had too much.” Oates’s famously prodigious output is a testament to the fact that, like Marya, she’s not short of ideas.

Marya: A Life traces a writer’s development and the consequences of losing one’s self in narrative. It explores the difficulty that a woman (especially one from a relatively impoverished and troubled background) has in establishing herself among a largely patriarchal academic community. Marya triumphs in making a life for herself through her intellectual prowess. However, she discovers that the emotional consequences of separating herself from her origins make it difficult to build a fully-centered sense of identity. The novel embodies the plight one feels at reaching a certain state in adulthood when it’s challenging to reconcile one’s past with one’s present state of being. Marya’s story shows that there are possibilities for closure if one has the courage to seek out the truth.