2015

Review of Joyce Carol Oates's *Jack of Spades*

Eric K. Anderson
LonesomeReader Blog

Follow this and additional works at: <http://repository.usfca.edu/jcostudies>

Part of the [Literature in English, North America Commons](#)

Citation Information

Anderson, Eric K. (2015) "Review of Joyce Carol Oates's *Jack of Spades*," *Bearing Witness: Joyce Carol Oates Studies*: Vol. 2, Article 4.
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15867/331917.2.4>
Available at: <http://repository.usfca.edu/jcostudies/vol2/iss1/4>

For more information, please contact southern@usfca.edu.
[Creative Commons 4.0](#)

UNIVERSITY OF
SAN FRANCISCO
Gleeson Library |
Geschke Center

Review of Joyce Carol Oates's *Jack of Spades*

Eric K. Anderson
LonesomeReader Blog

Joyce Carol Oates has considered the issues of authorship and identity at length in both her fiction and nonfiction. For several years, Oates published novels of psychological suspense featuring twins using the pseudonym Rosamond Smith and, later, three thrillers using the pseudonym Lauren Kelly. In an essay titled

“Pseudonymous Selves” from her 1988 nonfiction collection *(Woman) Writer: Occasions and Opportunities*, Oates observed “It may be that, after a certain age, our instinct for anonymity is as powerful as that for identity; or, more precisely, for an erasure of the primary self in that another (hitherto undiscovered?) self may be released.” In *Jack of Spades*, Oates’s protagonist is a respected writer named Andrew J. Rush who has been dubbed the “gentlemen’s Stephen King” by the press. As a man in his fifties with an established literary reputation, Rush unleashes just such an undiscovered self by creating the pseudonym “Jack of Spades.” Using this name, he has published several lurid thrillers that no one would associate with his more highbrow public self. As with all

pseudonyms, the secret is difficult to maintain, and when Rush’s hidden persona is under the threat of being revealed, his life goes awry.

One day Rush receives several author copies of Jack of Spades novels which one of his daughters happens to notice. She takes them up and is revolted by what she labels “misogyny” in the books’ subject matter. Another daughter is terrified after reading a version of one of the most traumatic events of her life closely recreated in a Jack of Spades novel. Amidst Rush’s fear of his secret identity being revealed he receives a summons to court. An aggrieved older

woman named C.W. Haider accuses Rush of stealing passages from her unpublished manuscripts for his own novels. Although Haider is dismissed in court as a quack, Rush cannot stop thinking about her and secretly enters her property to discover some shocking evidence. Meanwhile, there are signs Rush's drinking habit is growing out of control. His more impulsive, hedonistic persona Jack of Spades blurs with his daylight self as Spades's intrusive "voice" breaks into Rush's thoughts. This wreaks havoc in his ordered existence, and events spiral out of control. The novel plays out like a combination of Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart," and an inverted version of Stephen King's *Misery*.

This is a novel which is very much about writing, but not in the self-conscious way in which many literary novels explore the writing process. Rush produces well-regarded mystery novels which he is passionate about. He states, "After my devotion to my craft, my zeal and willingness to work, I have fewer doubts, for the simple truth is that I love to write, and am restless when I am not able to work at my desk at least ten hours a day." He describes the ordered methodical process through which he produces his books. Although his work is decidedly genre fiction, the description of his craft bares striking similarities to how Oates has discussed her own writing practices in various interviews. At one point, Rush summarizes one of his novels called *Murder at Midnight* as being about "formerly conjoined twins, each believing the other had died after their surgical separation." This could have easily been the plot of a Rosamond Smith novel. It feels as if Oates is playfully weaving aspects of her own writing life into the character of Rush who is otherwise very different from her.

There are some beautiful descriptions in this novel about the solitary nature of a writer's life. Oates movingly captures the way in which time becomes relative when embarking on such lonesome labor: "It is remarkable how much time there is, in an empty house. Time spreads out to fill a large vacuum-space." Unlike the patiently written novels he publishes under his own name, Rush claims to write the Jack of Spades novels in a frenzy late at night in his basement and does little revising. He also houses his collection of the many editions of Jack of Spades novels in this subterranean space which becomes a metaphor for everything about his character which he's afraid to share with his wife, family and the public. This secret but central part of his identity becomes the heart which beats beneath the floorboards and whose escalating sound threatens to disrupt the calm order of his life. For Rush "If there is one thing that frightens me, and infuriates me, it is losing control." When Haider intrudes upon his disciplined writing life with her accusations he finds that he's unable to produce new work as Rush. Haider is not only a threat to his authorship, but to his ego and masculinity.

Rush prides himself on being a good citizen and a celebrated author. He expresses a touching insecurity about not being as well admired or widely read as

Stephen King. His male ego feels slightly bruised when he discovers that his accuser C.W. Haider has also made claims against other celebrated writers and isn't uniquely obsessed with him: "*Andrew J. Rush is not special to her—after all?*" Rush displays a very macho competitive desire to be better known than any other authors of stature. He tries to sabotage King by impersonating him: communicating to Haider by signing King's name (changing the spelling of his first name to Steven). Haider herself comes to embody the kind of talented female writer whose work could never be accepted into this ring of male authors because, as Rush observes, "She'd hoped to break into a male-dominated field of popular American mystery-horror writing as few women have been able to do, and certainly not a woman writer who displayed the ego of a male writer." Rush's secret desire to dominate and destroy Haider shows his latent misogyny which refuses to allow a female writer's voice to be heard. This is more strongly expressed in his attitude towards his wife, which grows increasingly unstable and threatening as his drinking increases.

A bookishly pleasurable aspect of the novel is the reverence with which Rush treats special signed and first editions of novels. Discovering rare editions of such works as *Frankenstein*, *The Lair of the White Worm*, *The Turn of the Screw*, *In a Glass Darkly*, *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, *Imp of the Perverse* and *The Dance of Death* in the personal library of his nemesis C.W. Haider, Rush greedily gathers them up to squirrel away in his own secret basement. Any devoted reader will identify with the heady excitement of finding such treasures. But Rush also arrogantly believes that he has a natural claim over Haider to such classic writing by male authors because it's a tradition which he feels this female writer has no right to be a part of. In the style of Poe, vengeance takes the form of a black cat who Rush dubs "Satan" and who stalks him in order to remind him of his transgressions.

Jack of Spades is a fast-paced read filled with high drama and the expertly-rendered delineation of a writer's descent into madness. Oates has a compelling way of exploring the disaster and derangement that can ensue if darker subterranean aspects of consciousness are allowed free reign. This is a playful novel which works as a psychological thriller as well as a critique of the genre and the publishing industry which produces it. It's also a brilliantly enjoyable tribute to the greatest writers of this popular form of the novel.