

2017

Review of Joyce Carol Oates's *A Book of American Martyrs*

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. (2017) "Review of Joyce Carol Oates's *A Book of American Martyrs*," *Bearing Witness: Joyce Carol Oates Studies*: Vol. 4, Article 2.

DOI: 10.15867/331917.4.2

Available at: <http://repository.usfca.edu/jcostudies/vol4/iss1/2>

For more information, please contact southern@usfca.edu.
Creative Commons 4.0



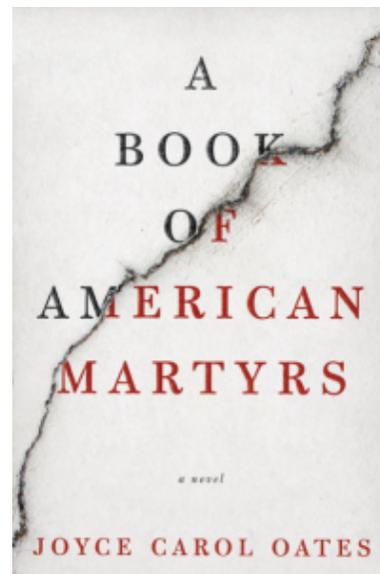
UNIVERSITY OF
SAN FRANCISCO

Gleeson Library |
Geschke Center

Review of Joyce Carol Oates's *A Book Of American Martyrs*

Eric K. Anderson
LonesomeReader Blog

Joyce Carol Oates's writing has always surveyed the social landscape of American culture, but recently her novels have become more sharply defined by the most significant political debates in the country. These include her novel *The Falls* which fictionalizes the infamous Love Canal environmental tragedy; *My Sister, My Love* which fictionalizes the media sensation of JonBenét Ramsey's story; *Carthage* which explores the overcrowded penitentiary system; and *The Sacrifice* which fictionalizes the case of Tawana Brawley who was allegedly the victim of racist police brutality.



These dramatic stories consider how class, politics, religion, law, and the media shape the pressing ideological conflicts within American society. *A Book of American Martyrs* (2017) directly addresses the highly controversial subject of abortion. It begins with the execution of abortion doctor Gus Voorhees and his volunteer driver by zealous pro-life protestor Luther Dunphy who is affiliated with the Army of God, a Christian terrorist organization. The novel recounts this incident from a variety of perspectives—the lives of the victims and the shooter as well as the way it affects their families in the decades that follow. In doing so, Oates artfully presents a nuanced account of the tragic consequences of bad logic and extreme opinions.

The title is a play on the 16th century text *Book of Martyrs* by John Foxe which was an influential polemic recounting the sufferings of Protestants under the Catholic Church in England and Scotland. Oates similarly shows subjective points of view on the sacrifices and perceived injustices suffered by the protagonists by presenting italicized first-person accounts from a variety of peripheral characters. These testimonies build to a chorus of opinions surrounding the case, and transform mere individuals who died because of their beliefs into icons of a particular cause. Despite repeated threats made against his life, Gus Voorhees bravely persevered working in women's clinics in areas of the country that actively protested against abortion. Luther Dunphy realized he was giving up his life by executing the abortion doctor he considered a murderer so that “in some quarters, among avid Christians, Dunphy was revered as a kind

of hero, a 'soldier of Jesus' and a 'martyr.'" In this way, subsequent to their fates, both men transformed from mortals to symbols within the public consciousness.

In the first half of the novel Oates shows how both these men are more complicated than the ideas that they come to embody. Luther and his wife Edna Mae's youngest daughter Daphne is born with a debilitating mental handicap. She dies in a car crash which may or may not have been an accident; the question which Luther can't seem to ask himself is whether it would have been better to abort this daughter before her birth if they were aware of her severe handicap. Rather than pursue the intricacies of his problems he becomes more pious and secretly satisfies his sexual cravings in clandestine meetings with women in motels. Here is the grating hypocrisy of the zealous: Luther condemns women who get abortions while not taking responsibility for having sex with anonymous women. It reveals an innate sexism within arguments about abortion. Alternatively, Gus seeks to assist women from Christian backgrounds that are fervently opposed to abortion. But, in one case, he finds himself publicly accused of coercing a woman to abort her baby after she begged him for assistance. The question of choice is considered from many different angles through the various strands of both men's lives.

The novel also shows other forms of martyrdom in figures such as Voorhees's driver Timothy who is also shot down. Later in the novel his daughter angrily declares "*It was VOORHEES that was the martyr. On the anti-abortion websites it was stated that Timothy*

Barron's death was COLLATERAL DAMAGE and in a war COLLATERAL DAMAGE is to be regretted but not to be avoided." Although Timothy was merely a bystander in this conflict and his loss interjects another level of moral complexity, ironically his death fades more quickly in the minds of the public. In a sense, the widows of both Gus and Luther sacrifice themselves to the memories of their husbands. Edna Mae becomes addicted to pain killers and strengthens her resolve as a pro-life Christian participating in a macabre spectacle where aborted fetuses are recovered from abortion clinics and buried. Conversely, Gus's widow Jenna withdraws entirely from her children to devote herself to legal work even at the expense of her wellbeing: "the more ravaged Jenna appeared, the more of a martyr." In both cases the family unit is obliterated as a result of grief and the continuing ideological battle.

The eldest daughters of both families inherit the fallout from the conflict their parents were embroiled in. The second half of the novel is primarily concerned with following their journeys as young adults. Luther's daughter Dawn is sympathetically portrayed as a victim of physical and sexual assault at her school. Her sturdy physique and endurance for pain prompt her to fight back and transform herself into a promising welterweight boxer with the name D.D. Dunphy the Hammer of Jesus. As a deeply solitary individual, she persists in her faith despite being rejected by Edna Mae. Some of the most tender and heartfelt scenes in the novel are when Dawn shyly tries to connect with women she admires, possibly out

of a latent homosexuality. Gus's daughter Naomi enjoys the privilege of education and more financial security, but her upbringing is no more emotionally secure than Dawn's. She scrambles to create a personal archive memorializing Gus's life and only achieves a meaningful family connection in her estranged grandmother Madelena Kein, a professor of philosophy, and a complex challenging figure Karl Kinch. It's possible for the reader to reconsider the entire narrative as being the product of Naomi's research after we learn that she aspires to become a documentary filmmaker.

Despite the way individuals flounder and are felled amidst the deeply divisive ideological battle at the center of this novel, the enduring impression of this finely detailed story is hopeful. The new generation may have been wronged and abandoned by the proceeding one, but these brave daughters hunger for insight and connections across the divide nonetheless. They find it difficult to work through the prejudice they've inherited and their challenging development is laced with grief so that even the sound of a walking stick on a hike can conjure the pain of everything that was lost with their fathers. However, they possess an innate curiosity and resilience which Oates is particularly skillful at portraying in young female characters. *A Book of American Martyrs* doesn't seek to answer the question of how extremism can be overcome, but memorialize how individuals can evolve to see past the views of their limited perspective to that of another.