

2018

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LonesomeReader Blog

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Citation Information

Anderson, Eric K. (2018) "Review of Joyce Carol Oates's *Hazards of Time Travel*," *Bearing Witness: Joyce Carol Oates Studies*: Vol. 4 , Article 7.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15867/331917.4.7>

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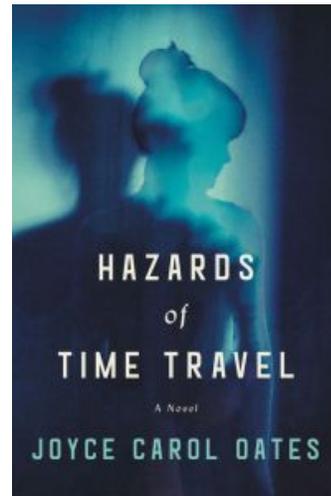
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It's a common trope in Young Adult novels to feature a teenage protagonist in a dystopian future who is penalized for fighting against an oppressive system. That's exactly the story Joyce Carol Oates writes in her new novel *Hazards of Time Travel* (2018). However, this is not a Young Adult novel. Oates is certainly familiar with the form and nature of YA fiction, having written several books in this genre. It would be natural to assume that she's utilizing her expertise in this form and is also departing from her typically realistic fiction to branch into feminist dystopian fiction—a newly prevalent form as described by Alexandra Alter in her *New York Times* article [“How Feminist Dystopian Fiction is](#)

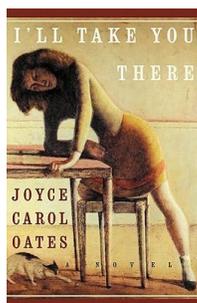
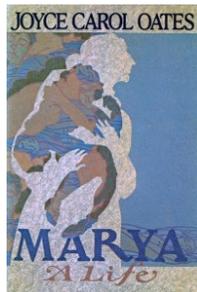
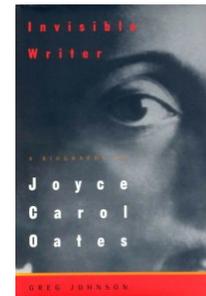


[Channeling Women's Anger and Anxiety.](#)" But the journey and outcome of Oates's highly unusual new novel are much more startling and darkly subversive than any tale that could be categorized as Young Adult. Instead, *Hazards of Time Travel* engages with ideas of behavioral psychology and Cold War politics to form an utterly unique commentary on society today. It also incorporates many autobiographical elements which make it one of Oates's most personal and reflective novels yet.

The year is NAS-23 in the 16th Federal District, Eastern-Atlantic States. To put this in perspective, this novel actually takes place only a few years in the future. History preceding the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks has been erased, and dates in the North American States (NAS) begin from this point. In this newly reconstituted country which has absorbed the territories of Mexico and Canada, free speech and private thoughts are tightly controlled by the government. People are segmented into official racial categories determined by skin color. Adriane Strohl is a curious and intelligent high school student who has been recognized as the class valedictorian, and she's invited to give a speech to the student body. She takes this opportunity to ask questions which the government doesn't like to be asked. As a consequence she's punished by being designated an EI (Exiled Individual) and transported through time to Zone Nine in the year 1959 where she's required to attend a university in Wisconsin "to train yourself in a socially useful profession." She is equipped only with a new name (Mary Ellen Enright) and a list of instructions which prohibit her from leaving the

area, developing intimate relationships, or speaking about the future. Adriane knows that any deviation will result in her being “Deleted”—an example of which is vividly and terrifyingly portrayed in an opening section. From this point, she sets out to navigate this tricky and unfamiliar landscape of the past.

According to Greg Johnson’s biography of Oates, *Invisible Writer* (1998), the author was also a valedictorian given the dubious honor of making a speech to the student body. Like Adriane, Oates was terrified about making this speech. It’s interesting how Oates’s own apparent fears and preoccupations



manifest throughout the entire novel. In effect, Adriane is transported back in time to live through Joyce Carol Oates’s own university years in a region analogous to Syracuse University and the University of Wisconsin-Madison where the author earned her undergraduate and graduate degrees. Like Oates, Adriane finds it necessary to earn her keep while she’s a student by working grueling hours in a part-time library job for a pitiful amount of money. Some of Oates’s fiction, most notably *Marya: A Life* (1986) and *I’ll Take You There* (2002), revolve around periods of adolescent experience which are very similar to Oates’s own. *Hazards of Time Travel* is a novel that seems to borrow more freely from her autobiographical experience. As such, I believe the author uses her own past as a metafictional device to

creatively explore issues concerning memory, guilt, free will, psychology, and history.

At university Adriane is plagued by feelings of loneliness, and she becomes fixated on an assistant professor of psychology named Ira Wolfman. Not only does she feel a romantic desire towards him, but he is also revealed to be an Exiled Individual from the future serving out a punishment. At one point, Wolfman calls into question the validity of their surroundings: “‘Exile’? ‘Teletransportation’? ‘Zone Nine’? None of this is real, Adriane. It’s a construct.” This introduces dilemmas poised somewhere between the metaphysical issues raised in the films *Blade Runner* and *The Matrix*. Are these characters only imagining that they’re from the future? If they’ve been exiled to the past are they really being monitored? Is their “rehabilitation” really a part of a larger design? Adding to these sinister questions are those raised by Adriane’s classes on B.F. Skinner and his morally dubious behaviorist experiments. The novel begins with the epigram from Skinner “A self is simply a device for representing a functionally unified system of responses.” Are Adriane’s choices and decisions ultimately the result of her environment and the government she lives under? How much agency does she have to enact change in her surroundings and determine her own future? These questions pile on top of each other over the course of the story and build into a fever of paranoia and uncertainty so that the novel’s conclusion (which would be considered positive in any other circumstance) feels incredibly sinister and horrific.

The many issues this novel raises over the course of the story powerfully coalesce to reflect anxieties and fears about the current political climate in America. It also allows Oates opportunities for more playful commentary about the direction our culture is taking. In *NAS-23* there are no Democrats or Republicans; there is just the Patriot Party. Voting is performed by placing a smiling emoji next to the candidate of choice. But Oates also pokes fun at some antiquated aspects of culture from the 1950s and 60s. Adriane observes how agonizing it is wearing hair curlers to bed. Paper feels horribly inadequate to her as a reading device. Adriane's unique point of view also casts new light on the Red Scare and threat of nuclear war which colored this time period. By considering a period of personal and political upheaval in United States history through this form of speculative fiction, Oates prompts us to question what are the real threats to the country as well as deeper anxieties about how our society is evolving. At one point Adriane states "time turns back upon itself. You believe that you are making progress, but it is an illusion. Yet, this is *progress* of a kind." Given our proximity in time to *NAS-23*, Oates appears to be postulating how we need to step back before leaping forward.