Joyce Carol Oates' Dark Love Story of Affection and Abuse

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FIRST LOVE
A Gothic Tale
By Joyce Carol Oates
Ecco; 96 pages; $18

REVIEWED BY RANDY SOUTHER

The 1990s have seen Joyce Carol Oates cultivating the novella form with exquisitely lyrical tales of young women variously confronting, succumbing to or transcending harrowing psychic and physical violence. “I Lock My Door Upon Myself” (1990), “The Rise of Life on Earth” (1991) and Pulitzer Prize finalist “Black Water” (1992) are among Oates’ best, most incisive works, though they have been overshadowed by her longer fiction. (“Black Water” is the exception — one must wonder whether it would have received such deserved attention had not its plot closely resembled the Kennedy-Kopechne tragedy at Chappaquiddick.)

With “First Love: A Gothic Tale,” Oates has written another sparkling, dark gem to set beside her earlier novellas, but coming only five months after a major short story collection and two months before a major novel, it may be overlooked as well. This would be an unfortunate fate for such a beautifully wrought story.

In it, 11-year-old Josie is drawn to her cousin, and later encounters him down by the river. Delia dismisses, with ironic prescience, Josie’s innocent questions about past “bad blood” between the families: “One day,” Mother says. Josie is drawn to her stern and mysterious cousin, and later encounters him down by the river. There she is seduced and ceremoniously molested in a baptism of blood and dirty river water.

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said ominously, yet with satisfaction, ‘you’ll know.’” In fact, Josie knows now all too well the kinds of events that lie behind unspoken family secrets.

Terrified by her cousin but mesmerized by him as well, she endures further molestations and eventually becomes a kind of acolyte, assisting him with his disturbed sacrificial ceremonies.

The story is told from the perspective of an adult Josie, but her narrative voice takes two distinct strains: one realistic and one gothic. The realistic voice narrates in the first person and tells most of the story; it is when Josie is enthralled by Jared Jr., however, that her gothic voice narrates in the second person, suggesting that she must distance herself from such shattering experiences to be able to speak of them.

Oates has written that “the imaginative construction of a ‘gothic’ novel involves the systematic transposition of realistic psychological and emotional experiences into ‘gothic’ elements.” So in her gothic voice, Josie frequently observes her cousin as an actual black snake, a creature both repulsive and seductive. Telling her mother, before the first molestation, that she is afraid of the “black snake” she saw down by the river, Josie must endure her mother’s ridicule: “To take yourself so seriously, at your age. . . . An eleven-year-old scarcely exists.”

In fact, it is Josie’s existence, her identity, her very soul that is at stake in this gothic tale. Exploring the Burkhardt library, Josie is bewildered by the images of Jesus Christ in myriad guises on the wall: “I looked from one Jesus Christ to the other, turning on my heel in . . . growing alarm, for which was the Son of God?” Josie is looking for the one authentic Jesus, but finds only others’ interpretations of him. In the same way, Josie allows her own self to be defined by others, first by her mother and then by Jared Jr., who shows her photographs of naked and tortured girls, photographs in which Josie truly believes she sees her own face.

During a final “test,” which would seal her degradation, Josie commits an act of betrayal and defiance (“Fear will save your life,” Jared Jr. ironically tells her), breaking her cousin’s spell and finding her authentic self.

Oates is not known for writing happy endings, and she does not provide one here, but it is surprising, in light of her reputed “dark vision,” how many of her works do have positive endings, how many of her insulted and injured characters, like Josie, transcend their wrenching experiences.

“Our past may weigh heavily upon us,” Oates writes in an afterword to her gothic masterpiece, “Bellefleur,” “but it cannot contain us, let alone shape our future.” Illustrated with Barry Moser’s elegant and nightmarish woodcuts, “First Love: A Gothic Tale” is a beautifully written and symbolically rich story that shouldn’t be missed.

San Francisco librarian Randy South­er maintains a Joyce Carol Oates Web site at http://storm.usfca.edu/southerr/jco.html