Melding Literature and Technology to Showcase and American Classic

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BY RANDY SOUTHER
As a reference technology librarian in Gleeson Library and Geschke Learning Resource Center, he maintains one of the University’s most accessed websites, and teaches students, faculty, and staff, the art of research amid the shelves and stacks, on the Internet, and through scores of databases.

After work hours, Randy Souther sheds the librarian role, assumes the identity of bibliophile and abets thousands of Joyce Carol Oates fans by updating the definitive website on one of America’s most prolific authors. Oates, a recent Pulitzer and National Book Award finalist, has acknowledged his work on her behalf. Here, Souther takes issue with the critics of a woman, who, since her debut in 1963, has been on a mission to rewrite American literature.

"Of all the idiocies on the contemporary American literary scene, surely none is more idiotic than the persistent rumor that the next American to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature will be Joyce Carol Oates.... Do people actually believe this? If they do, is it legitimate to call them serious people? To be sure, were writers to be recognized solely for their productivity, then certainly Oates would get all the prizes.... It seems not to have occurred to anyone that writing is like anything else: if it is done too hastily and too profusely, it almost inevitably is done badly."

—Jonathan Yardley, Washington Post Book World

Joyce Carol Oates is a prolific writer. There is no denying her productivity. She is the author or editor of more than 100 works of fiction, nonfiction, drama, poetry, and anthologies and collections. Her productivity lies at the heart of her career and at the heart of the anger directed her way. Every review, good or bad, and with few exceptions, begins with some mention of how many books she has published. There is a genuine fascination with these particular statistics. The positive reviews begin with: isn’t this impressive?; the negatives with: isn’t this obscene?

Extreme reaction similar to Yardley’s has followed Joyce Carol Oates for decades. He makes essentially two points. The first is that Oates is not deserving of the literary acclaim she receives. The second is that given the rate at which she publishes, she can’t possibly be a good writer. Of course every writer experiences bad reviews, but the anger and outrage that is continually directed at this author is unusual. I recall one review that was titled, “Stop Me Before I Write Again.”

In addition to their suspicion of Oates’s prolificness, the critics are unable to classify her work. Is she a naturalist? Or maybe a realist? One critic suggested that she wrote romances, like Nathaniel Hawthorne. But then came the metafictional novels, and the gothics, and the genre satires. John Barth said she writes “all over the aesthetical map.” Next came the question of whether she was a novelist who also wrote stories, or the other way around? There seems to be a general consensus that as a short story writer, she is among the best, yet Oates feels her novels are her primary work. Further clouding the issue are her poems, plays, essays, and literary criticism. There is a children’s picture book. And an opera libretto. A book on boxing and another on the painter George Bellows. Oh—and we must not forget the mystery thrillers she writes under the pseudonym Rosamond Smith.

Why is everyone so angry and eager to confine this writer? I believe her productivity is simply a manifestation of her creative genius. According to the psychologist Dean Keith Simonton, “those individuals with the highest total output will, on average, produce the most acclaimed contributions as well.” Historical figures in science and the arts that we today consider genius, were, across the board, highly prolific in their respective fields. They not only produced more successes than their contemporaries, but more failures, as well.

Joyce Carol Oates has spent a lifetime with a single-minded
dedication to the craft of writing. As a young child she drew stories before she could write and wrote stories and poems throughout her rural childhood in upstate New York. She won a scholarship to Syracuse University, where she wrote a novel per semester for an encouraging creative writing teacher. In 1959 she was co-winner of the Mademoiselle College Fiction Contest. After graduating valedictorian of her class, she began a master's program at the University of Wisconsin where she met and married Raymond Smith, meanwhile writing and publishing short stories and literary criticism. She gave up doctoral work at Rice University after discovering one of her stories listed as an honorable mention in the Best American Short Stories anthology, and decided to pursue writing full time. In 1962 she moved to Michigan where she taught English at the University of Detroit, and in 1967 moved across the river to teach at the University of Windsor.

Her first book, a short story collection, was published in 1963, and her first novel in 1964. Her second novel, A Garden of Earthly Delights, was nominated for the National Book Award, as was her third novel, Expensive People, her fourth, them, and her fifth, Wonderland. them, an intense multigenerational saga that culminated with the Detroit race riots, is one of her early masterpieces and won the award in 1970.

Around this time Oates began publishing books of poetry and literary criticism in addition to her short stories and novels—sometimes three books in one year. She came to be called prolific, and the inevitable backlash followed. She would not receive another National Book Award nomination for 20 years, and her critics became increasingly hostile. Through the '70s, Oates's fiction became increasingly varied and experimental in technique, structure, and narration. In 1978 she began teaching creative writing at Princeton University, where she remains today. The 1980s saw the publication of a series of complex Gothic novels based on the forms of 19th century popular genres, as well as a return to a realistic style and the upstate New York locale of her earliest fiction. At this time she also published a well-received book on boxing, and became acquainted with Mike Tyson, whose career she would chronicle over the years.

The 1990s brought her fifth National Book Award nomination for the novel Because It Is Bitter, And Because It Is My Heart, and the novella Black Water was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. This decade also found Oates with a renewed interest in writing for the theater. At the turn of the century, Oates published one of the most ambitious, and longest, works of her career: Blonde, an experimental novel detailing the interior life of Norma Jean Baker, or Marilyn Monroe. Critical response, as usual, was polarized. Some thought it an embarrassment; others, a masterpiece. Two reviewers went so far as to compare it with Moby Dick, and the book became Oates's sixth National Book Award nominee.

BANGOR, Me. Aug. 22 (Bloomberg) — Stephen King announced today that he had acquired Joyce Carol Oates in a deal that will allow him to increase production by as much as 125 percent, boosting his output by at least one novel a month. The new author, who will do business as Stephen, Joyce, King, Carol, and Oates, will be one of the most violent and critically acclaimed novelists working today. Though Mr. King sells more books than Ms. Oates, analysts say the acquisition of the respected writer will help him make inroads into new markets, like college literature classes. 'It’s a win-win situation,' Mr. King said in an exclusive interview with The New York Daily Newsday.
When people think of prolific writers today, they’re likely to think of people such as Stephen King and Danielle Steel—in other words, genre writers. Writers of horror novels and romance novels and mystery novels and science fiction and fantasy novels. And they’re also likely to believe that such novels, while entertaining, certainly aren’t serious literature. And because genre writing has become to some degree associated with prolificness, the reverse, I believe, has also been assumed. That the prolific novelist must be writing genre fiction, or simply bad fiction—which to some are the same thing. I have no doubt that this association is working against Joyce Carol Oates in some critical quarters. And in addition, that she publishes genre fiction under a pseudonym; that she is just as likely to have stories in Ellery Queen’s Mystery Magazine as in the literary quarterlies; that she appears in The Year’s Best Fantasy and Horror nearly as often as in The Best American Short Stories; that she writes with admiration of the work of H.P. Lovecraft; and has received a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Horror Writers Association of America—doesn’t this all suggest that she can’t be a serious writer?

Stephen King began as a genre writer, but is increasingly taken seriously in the literary community. It seems that a genre writer may be able to “raise” himself over time, but it is bad form for a literary writer to “lower” herself to genre writing. Our own USF library has more literary criticism on Stephen King than it has fiction by him. No conspiracy there, just the historical evidence of the evolving reputation of a writer. Some critics will never accept Oates’s opinion that “there are no inferior genres, only inferior practitioners.”

While Oates is not a popular writer by bestseller standards, she is increasingly finding audiences outside the literary mainstream, and not just with her essays into genre writing. Her classic short story, “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” was made into Smooth Talk, a memorable film (if you exclude the ending) starring Laura Dern. Oates’s novel Foxfire: Confessions of a Girl Gang, is taught in high schools and colleges, and seems to have become a cult favorite of adolescent girls and young women if the references on the Internet are any indication. This popularity can be attributed in no small part to the celebrity of Angelina Jolie, whose starring role in the unfaithful film version has led a steady stream of fans to the book. Oates’s massive experiment in telling the life of Marilyn Monroe, Blonde, is the basis for a CBS miniseries. And Oates finally had a true bestseller when five years after it was published, We Were the Mulvaneys was chosen for the Oprah Book Club.

“A future archaeologist equipped only with [Oates’s] oeuvre could easily piece together the whole of post-war America.”
—Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

“If the phrase ‘woman of letters’ existed, she would be, foremost in this country, entitled to it.”
—John Updike

In case you were wondering, over the last four decades Joyce Carol Oates has published 41 novels and novellas, 26 short story collections, eight poetry collections, four drama collections, nine books of essays, literary criticism and other non-fiction, and edited or co-edited 15 anthologies. When she’s not writing herself, she teaches creative writing at Princeton University, and with her husband, co-edits the Ontario Review and runs the Ontario Review Press.

Maybe all this activity is frivolous. But I have to agree with Dean Keith Simonton: when posterity looks at prolific writers, it sees names like Dickens, and Balzac, and James. If critics like Jonathan Yardley can’t reconcile the seeming contradictions of an important writer like Joyce Carol Oates, perhaps they would be better served by taking a more expansive view of what literature is. Oates’s work is large, and contains multitudes.

Anyway, it might save a lot of hair tearing when the Nobel Prize finally does come.