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Celestial Timepiece: Randy Souther Interviewed by Caroline Marquette and Tanya Tromble-Giraud

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Part 1

Would you introduce yourself?

I'm the Head of Reference and Research Services at the University of San Francisco's Gleeson Library, where I've worked for 25 years. Since 1995 I've run a website devoted to Joyce Carol Oates's work, and in 2014 I started a scholarly journal on her work.

How would you describe your involvement with Joyce Carol Oates's work?

My involvement with JCO's work is ultimately personal. My interest in her work has informed some of my professional librarian activities over the years (bibliography, website design, editing), but it is likely that I would have spent much less time in these areas had not my personal interest and admiration of her work led me to them.

Part 2

How did you first encounter Oates's work?

I first encountered JCO's work quite randomly. Though I had recently graduated college with an English literature degree, I had not focused on contemporary literature (or even American literature), studying deeply both the Brontës and (outside my major) Dostoevsky. I never encountered, as so many college students do, JCO's famous story "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" So I was not aware of any reputation JCO might or might not have, and did not know what to expect when I picked up her most recent novel in paperback at the bookstore where I was working in 1987. I recall being intrigued, but ultimately frustrated by *Marya: A Life* because beneath the plot I sensed a complexity that I was unprepared to decode. Instead of re-reading the book, I bought JCO's newest novel in hardcover, *You Must Remember This*. That was the book that really opened my eyes. The devastating poetry of the suicide-note prologue took my breath away. This was work as frightening and strange as Dostoevsky's, but JCO's books were being written and published now! It was clear I had a project ahead of me, though at the time I thought it was only a reading project.

What is your favorite Oates work?

I have many favorites, as the work is so voluminous and varied in style and genre. *Mysteries of Winterthurn* is a favorite of JCO's big novels, a fascinating conflation of incompatible genres: the (rational) detective story and the (irrational) Gothic. It doesn't hurt that the novel is likely JCO's most Dostoevsky-influenced book.

Of JCO's many short stories, two disparate favorites include the gruesome horror of "Martyrdom" and the joyful nostalgia of "Three Girls."

I also want to mention JCO's novel *Foxfire: Confessions of A Girl Gang* as a favorite. Taught (and censored) in schools, the subject of websites, tweets, tattoos, and two (!) feature-films,

Foxfire is a critically under-appreciated novel, but one that has clearly made a popular impression.

What Oates work would you recommend to new Oates readers?

What I would recommend would depend on the reader. For an ambitious reader, I'd recommend *Blonde*, widely regarded as JCO's masterwork. Oprah may have been right in choosing *We Were The Mulvaney's* for her book club. Well-regarded critically, with characteristic Oates themes, and very accessible, it makes a terrific introduction to Oates. The best brief introduction is surely JCO's most famous story, "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" After half a century, it may stand as the most frightening conversation in literature.

How do you explain your lasting interest in Oates's work? What is so attractive about her writing?

The emotional intensity and intellectual depth of her work, coupled with her astounding publication schedule make for truly exciting reading. That works like these are published so frequently is certainly one of the draws for me; I don't understand critics who complain about this – don't they like to read books, good books, sometimes breathtaking books? That there is apparently no end is appealing to me – not just that there will be a new book, but that each book keeps some secrets on first reading.

You have met Oates upon several occasions. What sticks in your mind from these encounters? Do you have any interesting anecdotes involving Oates?

I see JCO mostly at readings and book tours, and what strikes me regularly is her generosity. There are certain questions that people will ask her every time I've seen her, and she answers them as if it's the first time she's heard the questions. The first time I met JCO was at a book signing in 1990. She didn't know who I was, but she asked if I was a writer. I hesitated, and said "potentially." She considered me for a moment, and said something I've never forgotten: "You have that look about the eyes." That's a comment intended to encourage and inspire. I didn't really think she could see such things, but it always struck me as an incredibly generous comment to make to an aspiring writer. If you follow JCO on Twitter, you will likely see her at some point coming to the defense of another writer who is being attacked, and then she will be attacked for defending them. JCO has decades of experience resisting withering criticism, so she's quite willing to step in to try to call for reason; it doesn't usually work with social media, but her support is generous, given that she'll have to take the heat, too.

Henry Louis Gates, Jr. once declared: "[a] future archeologist equipped only with Oates's oeuvre could easily piece together the whole of postwar America." Do you agree with him that Oates is trying to fit/narrate the whole of postwar America into her books?

I think you could make the case that early in her career, JCO was consciously trying to explore swaths of American experience, whether different economic classes, professions, time-periods, or genres; since the mid-1980s the intention is likely less schematic. But certainly I can't think of another American writer who has written as widely or intelligently about the varied American experience.

Part 3

You have been responsible for the creation of multiple digital media endeavors related to Oates's work:

What is Celestial Timepiece?

Celestial Timepiece: A Joyce Carol Oates Patchwork is intended to be a resource for students, scholars, and fans of Joyce Carol Oates's work. Begun as a simple bibliography in August of 1995, the site has since grown tremendously, offering, perhaps, a surface reflection of JCO's own deep literary project. A goal is to provide a free exchange of information, and to encourage discussion and scholarship among JCO's admirers around the world.

Where does the name come from?

JCO had written a poem called "Celestial Timepiece," but the website actually took its name from a passage in her Gothic masterpiece, *Bellefleur*:

Celestial Timepiece was the largest quilt, but Matilde was sewing it for herself—it wasn't to be sold: up close it resembled a crazy quilt because it was asymmetrical, with squares that contrasted not only in color and design but in texture as well.

"Feel this square, now feel this one," Matilde said softly, taking Germaine's hand, "and now this one—do you see? Close your eyes." Coarse wool, fine wool, satins, laces, burlap, cotton, silk, brocade, hemp, tiny pleats. Germaine shut her eyes tight and touched the squares, seeing them with her fingertips, reading them. Do you understand? Matilde asked.

Noel complained that Celestial Timepiece made his eye jump. You had to stand far back to see its design, and even then it was too complicated—it gave him a headache. "Why don't you just sew some nice little satin comforter," he said. "Something small, something pretty."

"I do what I am doing," Matilde said curtly.

In *Bellefleur*, Matilde's quilt was perhaps a metaphor for JCO's own grand literary project; it seemed to apply as well to a website documenting that project, and which, in the late 1990s at least, consisted of pages of wildly varied colors and design.

What prompted you to create it?

The World Wide Web was an area of intense interest in academic libraries in 1995, and I wanted to learn to code HTML so that I could make a website (these were called "home pages" back then). The original title of my website was "Celestial Timepiece: A Joyce Carol

Oates Home Page”). If I’m being completely honest, I would have created a fine David Bowie website at the time, but I found that someone had done so already. It occurred to me that a bibliography of recent JCO works and criticism might form the core of a website, and might be useful as well (an authoritative bibliography was available in print, but covered publications only to 1985). From there, the website grew incrementally and evolved over time.

What is Tone Clusters?

Tone Clusters is an email discussion group associated with *Celestial Timepiece* that was most active in the late 1990s to early 2000s. There is little activity on it today, as the online landscape has moved on to social media and other methods of communication, but it was a very active and interesting discussion group that included many of the major JCO scholars around the world (many of them participating anonymously). The group took its name from JCO’s one-act play of the same title.

What is Crossing the Border?

Crossing the Border was a blog associated with *Celestial Timepiece* that was used to present relevant JCO news that might not warrant a permanent place on the main website. It was also meant to allow me a forum to present a more opinionated voice separate from *Celestial Timepiece* which presented information in a neutral way. The name is from JCO’s short story collection of the same title, and suggests a crossing of the editorial line between fact and opinion. Starting in 2015, Crossing the Border was merged with the main website, and is now fully integrated with *Celestial Timepiece*, which will be the sole information site for the foreseeable future, with some satellite social media accounts (Facebook, Twitter etc.) mainly for marketing purposes.

What is Bearing Witness?

Bearing Witness: Joyce Carol Oates Studies is a project I’ve wanted to do for many years. It is a peer-reviewed scholarly journal focused on the work of Joyce Carol Oates. There has never been a journal with this focus, and I felt it was something needed in the JCO world. There was a time in the early years of *Celestial Timepiece* when I would ask students and scholars to post their papers (published or not) on the website – kind of an early open access repository in today’s terminology. It wasn’t a hugely successful effort, but the idea of open access scholarship is becoming mainstream now, and *Bearing Witness*, with the infrastructure of the University of San Francisco’s Gleeson Library, and the support of a terrific editorial board of JCO scholars, is likely to be the one piece of my whole decades-long JCO project that will make a permanent mark on the landscape. *Celestial Timepiece*, like all websites, will fade away eventually, but I expect the work in *Bearing Witness* will be around as long as libraries still exist.

“Bearing Witness” is a term that JCO has used throughout her career to explain a responsibility she feels in her work to give voice to those who cannot speak for themselves.

Has Oates been involved with any of these projects? If so, in what way?

JCO has been involved with *Celestial Timepiece* indirectly, sending my way information or photos that might be interesting on the website, but her most profound contribution was giving me permission to post anything I wished of hers on the website. I can't begin to calculate all the ways *Celestial Timepiece* would be less interesting, and less useful had she not been so characteristically quick with her generosity.

Celestial Timepiece, especially, creates a visible and widely accessible platform upon which to showcase Oates's literary legacy. What kind of legacy do you think it is?

JCO's literary legacy is still being written, quite literally. It must be truly intimidating for any critic or journalist to seriously approach her body of work if only because it is vast and still largely uncharted. I have sympathy for book reviewers (even the sarcastic ones) because I know they feel guilt and frustration at the seeming impossibility of knowing JCO's body of work. I hope that *Celestial Timepiece* can act as an early map, showing some borders and landmarks, and paths already cleared, and that it might encourage otherwise nervous or skeptical explorers that the journey will reveal hidden riches in secret places.