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## Joyce Carol Oates

### Princeton's dark lady of fiction' comes shining

By [AMY ELLIS NUTT](#) | PHOTOS BY SAED HINDASH

Sitting in her bucolic backyard in Princeton, Joyce Carol Oates shimmers with a kind of delicate intensity. Wide-eyed and porcelain-skinned, she is a wisp of a woman; and though she is 71 years old, it is impossible to look at her and not think of Lewis Carroll's "dreamchild," Alice in Wonderland. The fairy-tale heroine has been a touchstone of Oates since childhood, when her grandmother, Blanche, gave her a brand-new edition of "Wonderland" and "Through the Looking-Glass" as a Christmas present. For the shy, intellectually precocious child in rural upstate New York, the books were nothing short of magical.

"I love both novels," she says. "They go between scenes of childlike adventure and scenes of nightmare. They skirt on the very edge of being terrifying. All these things are almost like nightmares but they're not completely horrific. And at the end of each novel, she wakes up."

For Oates, life and fiction are much the same — full of imagination and possibility, but with intimations of chaos and danger around every corner. In her writing, she plumbs some of the most terrifying precincts of contemporary life, from alcoholism and adultery to murder, masochism and social mayhem.

And she does so in various voices and across different genres, from the neo-gothic romance to the political thriller.

"Whereas someone like Philip Roth, say, writes constantly out of his own experience and closely patterns his novels on his own life, Joyce dreams her way into her fiction, almost as if she is in a waking trance," says author Edmund White, a friend of Oates'. "In fact she does imagine other lives so vividly that sometimes they leave her exhausted."

The author of close to 60 novels, eight volumes of poetry and more than 30 collections of short stories has often been described by critics as fatalistic — a pessimist with a penchant for violence. But in person, the "dark lady of fiction," who is "driven to write," is anything but.

Her home is filled with windows, sumptuous couches and colorful contemporary art, including ethereal glass boxes made by her good friend Gloria Vanderbilt. And despite the hours she spends at her desk, she also cooks and cleans. She says she often has to bribe herself to

write – dangling an hour or two of gardening as her reward – and gets her best ideas while vacuuming.

"She is so prolific, but she is always there for her friends," says Emily Mann, artistic director of the McCarter Theatre in Princeton. "She is a fantastic teacher. She is generous. She always seems calm and never obsessed with her work. And when you call her, she always picks up."

White, who like Oates teaches creative writing at Princeton, admits that his friend isn't generally known to her readers as a comic writer. "But in real life, she has an extraordinary, constant sly sense of humor."

Oates grew up in Lockport, N.Y., on a farm with a fruit orchard and chickens. She attended the same one-room schoolhouse as did her mother, and when her beloved paternal grandmother Blanche gave her a typewriter for her 14th birthday, the budding author was off and running.

Wherever she has lived, Oates had drawn on the geography around her to inform her writing. There are fictional alters for Lockport; and when she taught at the University of Detroit, her books often were shaped by urban landscapes. She has set stories at the Jersey Shore, the Pine Barrens and in various versions of Princeton.

"Nobody knows New Jersey," she says. "South Jersey is so different from the north. West Jersey, by the Delaware River, is so beautiful, and then East Jersey and the Shore. It's a small state, but it encompasses massive contradictions." So does Oates' life. Besides her own happy, pastoral childhood, she has a sister, Lynne, who is severely autistic. Violence and dysfunction are threaded through her family history. Her grandmother Blanche, like one of Oates' eponymously titled novels, was a gravedigger's daughter whose father assaulted his wife and eventually shot himself. When Blanche left home, she also married an abusive drinker and ended up raising Oates' father on her own. None of this, however, became known to the author until after her grandmother's death.

In the late 1950s, Oates attended Syracuse University on a \$250-a-year scholarship and graduated valedictorian of her class. Pursuing her master's degree in English at the University of Wisconsin, she met her first husband, Ray Smith. Eventually they made their way to New Jersey, where Smith continued his work as editor and publisher of the literary journal *Ontario Review*; and Oates has been a distinguished professor of creative writing at Princeton University.

In February 2008, however, Smith died suddenly of complications from pneumonia. It was an excruciating time for the author, who lost weight and found herself unable to write. She had recently completed a novel ("Little Bird of Heaven"), about a girl mourning the death of her father, but found the idea of starting something new "completely overwhelming."

Instead, she spent months editing the finished manuscript of "Little Bird of Heaven."

"It was like a lifeline," says Oates. "I revised every sentence." It was published last fall.

Oates recently finished "A Widow's Memoir," about the months after her husband's death, which she says is very different from Joan Didion's best-seller, "The Year of Magical Thinking."

"One can understand what pure grief is, but it's mixed in with such black humor and the absolute absurdity, the craziness," says Oates, such as the telephone company representative who was suspicious of her wanting to change the name on her account. "You have to show them a death certificate, and even then they don't believe it. I had to provide a death certificate so many times I felt like I was going to scream."

There was nothing elegiac about becoming a widow, Oates says, a state of being she describes as almost physically disorienting: "I started bumping into things, bruising myself." And then there were the "oddly rude" things people would say to her, such as the handyman who told her losing a husband was like being divorced, and that not living with someone could be a new start.

"I said, 'Excuse me, it's not the same sort of thing at all.' He was completely oblivious."

A year after Smith's death, at a friend's dinner party, Oates met Princeton neuroscientist Charles Gross. Unexpectedly, she fell in love, and in March 2009 they were married. Five months later, the two moved into a new home a few miles from downtown Princeton.

"There's a different quality to her life now," says Oates' good friend Mann. "She went through such hell. She was just in agony. Now there's a peace and joy in her again, and in a new way."

A new life has brought her new opportunities, too. Her husband is an avid hiker, and the first place he took Oates on a hike was Sourland Mountain in Hillsborough. A collection of fiction pieces called "Sourland" was not far behind. She read Gross' recently published book of essays, "A Hole in the Head," then wrote a short story bearing the same name, to be published in the Kenyon Review.

Always, however, Oates returns to Alice, as inspiration and role model. "I've memorized most of the books," she says. "I can shut my eyes and see literally the book that my grandmother gave me, and see the drawings, and some pages are smudged and torn." And though she shyly says, no, really, she couldn't recite any of it just now, she closes her eyes anyway, and just for a moment is transported back in time:

"T'was brillig, and the slithy toves/Did gyre and gimble in the wabe/All mimsy were the borogroves/And the mome raths outgrabe." Oates' good friend, the late author John Updike, once wrote that the "refusal to rest content, the willingness to risk excess on behalf of one's obsessions, is what distinguishes artists from entertainers, and what makes some artists adventurers on behalf of us all."

Oates continues the journey, she says, because she has to: "Life, without art to enhance it, is just too long."

**NOTES:** This article was published in the APRIL 2010 issue of Inside Jersey, a Star-Ledger Magazine.