

# The Assassins: A Book of Hours Short Guide

## The Assassins: A Book of Hours by Joyce Carol Oates

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# Characters

Andrew Petrie, a character viewed in retrospect, was a charismatic overachiever whose personality and political philosophy inspired both awe and hatred. His image dominates the imaginations of the other three characters, the brothers Hugh and Stephen, and the widow Yvonne, all of whom are suffering from different forms of madness. Hugh is the most nervously active of the three, and literally drives himself mad by contemplating the social and moral implications of Andrew's death. Yvonne, obsessed with the personality of her late husband, sleeps in his study and plans to edit his papers for publication; she commits a kind of suttee, longing for a death that she accepts (if in fact it takes place) with a maddening and chilling calmness. Stephen, who is insane at the beginning of the novel, has achieved a kind of emotional stasis by appealing to religion for solace from the terror of life; in the end, he achieves a sanity of sorts only by rejecting, almost intuitively, all of his principles, as in the last chilling sentence of the novel: "I can accommodate myself to anything."

However, Oates presents the obsessions of the characters so graphically and so relentlessly that they become almost unbelievable; even if no assassination had taken place, one feels that an obsessive longing for death (of either the spirit or the body) would have overwhelmed Yvonne, Hugh, and Stephen eventually.



## Social Concerns

The Assassins deals directly with a central problem in American society: the acceptance of violence as an ordinary part of life. There are obvious allusions to the sudden and violent death of President John F. Kennedy, for the fictional Andrew Petrie was also a charismatic, energetic politician who was assassinated by unknown or mysterious assailants. The destruction of the individual Andrew mirrors the destruction of society; the survivors (the widow Yvonne and the brothers Hugh and Stephen) are so consumed with their own egos that they court various forms of self-destruction: Yvonne appears to seek out her own murderers, possibly causing her own murder as a result of her fantasy; Hugh becomes so obsessed with society's chaotic amorality that he attempts suicide, only to survive as a vegetable; Stephen, the only certifiably insane member of the family, turns to the easy solutions of religion, and brings the novel to a close with a headache that he suffers from his repudiation of God.

The death of Andrew Petrie focuses the reader's attention on the problem of survival for the egocentric individual in an indifferent society. In the end, as in Kafka's *The Trial* (1925), all of society is accused of the crime; all people are assassins, equally guilty of Andrew Petrie's death, equally liable for the consequences of their collective action.



## Techniques

Oates employs a retrospective approach, three views of the life of Andrew Petrie, who is already dead (from the shots of an assassin, perhaps even a suicide) before the novel actually begins. There are three parts to the novel, a separate section for each of the three principal characters: a crazed monologue by Andrew's brother Hugh, who goes insane, shoots himself and is reduced to a vegetative state in a hospital bed; a third-person account of the widow Yvonne, her harassment by Hugh, and supposed murder; and a third-person account of Stephen, the brother who has been released as a mental patient and who calmly pronounces the death of Andrew as God's will. All are dominated by the dead man, all that they do or think is a response to Andrew Petrie's death. The correspondence with the bereaved widow is also integrated into the text of the novel. Another technique involves the obvious allusion to the death of another politician, President John F. Kennedy. Thus through a series of flashbacks, a combined first- and third-person narration, and the interweaving of realistic detail, the personal lives of those close to Andrew Petrie are unfolded in dramatic, relentless detail. The novel is simply but carefully structured, with a minimum of characters and a tight temporal framework — just a few years after Andrew Petrie's death.



## Key Questions

In this novel, Oates explores the power of the American political system, so discussion could easily lead to comparisons to current issues about the use and abuse of political power and to the connection between political power and religious power.

1. Why does Oates title her novel *The Assassins*? Who are the assassins? Does assassination involve more than physical murder?
2. To what extent is assassination self-inflicted? How do Hugh, Yvonne, and Stephen destroy themselves?
3. Compare and contrast Hugh's, Yvonne's, and Stephen's versions of Andrew's death. How does Oates achieve a distinctive voice for each of these characters? Whose story is the truest? Can one be truer than another?
4. How do Hugh, Yvonne, and Stephen assess their own guilt? How do you assess it?
5. Who is mad in this novel? Who is sane? When does sanity overstep into madness?
6. What is the relationship between charisma and power?
7. What comparisons can you draw between Andrew Petrie and John F. Kennedy?

## Literary Precedents

The novel is realistic and naturalistic in the manner of Theodore Dreiser. The obsession with madness suggests Poe; the theme of murder and guilt invites comparison with Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* (1866). The opening sentence "I was born" recalls Dickens's *David Copperfield* (1849-1850); the focus on a dead man and his impact beyond the grave, both George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871-1872) and Trollope's *Barchester Towers* (1857). But the problem of unassigned guilt immediately recalls one of Oates's favorite works of literature, Franz Kafka's *The Trial*. Here the characters put themselves on trial, accuse themselves, and, in a sense, carry out their own executions. The fact of Andrew Petrie's death creates a literary context for the theme of personal responsibility, and conveys the haunting feeling that one can never really be cleansed of guilt, one can never really separate the evil from the good.



# Copyright Information

## Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress  
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Includes bibliographical references.

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.

Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.

1. Young adults—Books and reading. 2. Young adult literature—History and criticism. 3.

Young adult literature—Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography—Bio-bibliography.

[1. Literature—History and criticism. 2. Literature—Bio-bibliography]

I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952

Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048 ISBN 0-933833-32-6

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Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994