

# Bellefleur Short Guide

## Bellefleur by Joyce Carol Oates

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# Contents

<a href="#">Bellefleur Short Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">Social Concerns/Themes.....</a>	<a href="#">4</a>
<a href="#">Techniques.....</a>	<a href="#">5</a>
<a href="#">Key Questions.....</a>	<a href="#">6</a>
<a href="#">Literary Precedents.....</a>	<a href="#">7</a>
<a href="#">Related Titles.....</a>	<a href="#">8</a>
<a href="#">Copyright Information.....</a>	<a href="#">9</a>



## Characters

As in Oates's more naturalistic novels, the characters in *Bellefleur* are a tissue of obsessions and emotions: the mad grandfather Hiram Bellefleur, who has his skin turned into a drum after his death; the hedonistic Gideon who pursues selfish masculine pleasures while his wife Leah indulges her thirst for power by attempting to regain the lost Bellefleur lands; their psychic daughter Germaine; the recluse Jedediah; the convict and mass-murderer Jean-Pierre Bellefleur; the hulking brute Esau; the runaway genius Bromwell. Oates's canvas is wide, and it is difficult for the reader to focus on any one character. Inevitably they dissolve into stereotypes, save for Gideon, who maintains a flawed humanity through all of his fantastic experiences, and Jedediah, whose retreat from the rest of the passionate Bellefleurs is patently understandable to the reader. Caught in the flow of historical events, unable to use their vast power and resources effectively, the Bellefleur clan self-destructs and has to be renewed by the recluse Jedediah, who is called upon to marry his cousin Germaine and avenge the murder of his family. His twenty years as a hermit have succeeded only in purging him of his belief in God, and leaving him without a moral imperative to carry out the tasks of love (marriage to Germaine) and death (vengeance on the murderers of his kin).



## Social Concerns/Themes

The themes and social concerns are those of the traditional Oates novel: power, its use and abuse; familial relationships; the condition of women; the relationship of destiny to place, in this instance a castle in the wilds of the Adirondack mountains in upper New York State; the eccentricities of the human kind; love versus sex; human concern versus selfishness; society versus the obsessed ego of the individual. Oates is also using the Gothic mode to write a hymn to her native state, romanticizing its history, and exploring the glories and the terrors of both its landscape and its history.



## Techniques

*Bellefleur*, along with *A Bloodsmoor Romance* (1982) and *Mysteries of Winterthurn* (1986), mark a distinct trend in Oates's fiction, which she has since abandoned: the huge, Gothic romance with naturalistic elements. While in her more naturalistic novels, the events are almost unbelievably violent, they are almost comically improbable in *Bellefleur*: a spider that nestles on the bare back of his beautiful mistress, a girl that is born after the male parts of her twin are cut away, a slavish dwarf that is found in the *Bellefleur* woods, a man that disappears in a room and is never heard or seen again, a vampire that comes from Sweden to claim a bride. The narrator is omniscient, but subtly sympathetic. The lake and the setting of *Bellefleur* castle, in the wilds of the Adirondack Mountains, are suitably frightening and Gothic, but the fictional lives of the *Bellefleurs* are played out against the background of real events, including the death of the abolitionist John Brown. The novel is distinctly evocative of the haunting beauty of upper New York state, and of the history of the nineteenth-century land barons who settled there and became a law unto themselves. It is a novel of violent, restless men and beautiful, moody women: heroes, villains, femme fatales — stereotypes that function within a playful allegorical framework. The novel also reveals the typical flaws of Gothic Oates — it is excessively long (almost 600 pages), the prose is always florid and sometimes careless, the themes are sometimes presented repetitiously, and structure occasionally sags.



## Key Questions

Readers of *Bellefleur* will need to suspend their disbelief and accept the supernatural, Gothic elements of the text. The novel is dense with subplots, so discussion might begin with some attention simply to what happens in the book.

1. The novel traces the history of the Bellefleur family in upstate New York.

To what extent is this a successful family? To what extent is it doomed?

Doomed by what? By whom?

2. *Bellefleur* is a novel of revenge.

How important is the revenge theme in literature? In life? Can revenge expiate a wrong?

3. Jedediah comes down from his fanatical retreat on the mountain to marry Germaine and continue the family line. Will this help to save or will it merely continue the family?

4. When Gideon crashes his plane into Bellefleur castle, he re-enacts the original murder. Why is this necessary?

5. How does Oates use history to ground her nonrealistic novel in the realistic?

6. How well does Oates capture the setting of the Adirondack Mountains?

7. Oates's technique uses simultaneous, nonlinear time. How does this relate to Bromwell Bellefleur's treatise on time?

8. *Bellefleur* has many thematic strands involving fanaticism, revenge, heredity, passion, insanity, metaphysics. Does the novel collapse under its own complexity or become more intriguing because of it?

9. Why does Oates use so many supernatural elements — shapeshifters, devil cats, ghosts, and so on. Do these have relevance in the real world?

## Literary Precedents

The hybrid nature of *Bellefleur* makes it difficult to place its origins. Like most of Oates's work, it contains a vast network of allusions to world literature. In fact, it resembles the great novels of the nineteenth century, the chronicles of families and nations by Dickens, Tolstoy, Balzac, and George Eliot. It is of course in the tradition of the Gothic novel, but with particular reference to Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897); in *Bellefleur* *Dracula* appears as the Swedish count Ragnar Norst. Oates also blurs the line between fact and fiction by quoting from one of Ben Franklin's narratives and supplying details from contemporary accounts of the abolitionist John Brown. The local color of New York State is underlined by references to the tales of Washington Irving, and the Edenic theme, so prevalent in Oates, by references to *Paradise Lost* (Milton, 1667). There are also clever allusions to specific poets, e.g., Leah's spider, Love, which recalls the "Spider love" of John Donne's poem "Twickenham Garden," which in turn evokes the Edenic theme.

## Related Titles

Bellefleur is part of a trilogy of Gothic romances: Bellefleur (1980), A Bloodsmoor Romance (1983), and Mysteries of Winterthurn (1986). A Bloodsmoor Romance, set in nineteenth-century New England, is the most self-indulgent of the three. A tedious, elderly female narrates, in fits and starts, the chronicle of the five Zinn sisters, the first of whom, Deirdre, is abducted in a balloon at the beginning of the novel. The style is verbose, disjointed, and parenthetical, liberally sprinkled with quotations from bad nineteenth-century verse and prose documents of equally dismal style. It supposedly deals with the lot of the nineteenth-century woman, but in such a fantastic and allusive way that it appears as if Oates were taking a holiday from serious fiction. In the third novel, Mysteries of Winterthurn (like Bellefleur, set in upper New York state), Oates explores the Gothic sense of terror by analyzing three unsuccessful cases of the nineteenth-century detective Xavier Kilgarven.

Kilgarven is overcome by a sense of the diabolic in each of the three cases, and is also obsessed by his ill-fated love for his cousin Perdita. Many nineteenth-century personages are gratuitously mentioned in the narrative, and nineteenth-century stylistic conventions are both employed and satirized, somewhat more successfully than in A Bloodsmoor Romance. Bellefleur is the best of Oates's three Gothics, but her interest in this genre seems to have run its course.





# Copyright Information

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