

Marya: A Life Short Guide

Marya: A Life by Joyce Carol Oates

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Characters

Marya: A Life is clearly Marya Knauer's story, and Oates creates in it a convincing view of the protective coldness that children of alcoholics poor or the victims of child abuse often adopt. The novel's structure allows Oates to emphasize significant people who have shaped Marya's life: Lee, a cousin who bullies and abuses her; Mr. Schwilk, the junior high school teacher whom students harass out of the classroom; Father Shearing, the priest who helps Marya understand faith; Emmett, Marya's first boyfriend who will never rise out of Shaheen Falls and would like to keep Marya there with him; Imogene, her college friend and rival; Maximilian Fein, the brilliant, married professor who becomes her lover; Gregory, her colleague with whom she must compete for a tenured position; Eric, her lover who in death teaches her to relinquish her protective shell; Vera, the aunt who has raised her and a new one who directs her at the end of the novel toward her mother. While the fictional characters are individualized in the context of Marya's life, they also represent significant teachers, clergy, lovers or friends in the reader's own life.



Social Concerns/Themes

One of Oates's most autobiographical novels, *Marya* traces the journey of the child Marya from her origins in the communities of Innisfail and Shaheen Falls in upstate New York to successful academic career, and a career as translator at the international level, and finally, back home as she decides to search for the alcoholic mother who abandoned her to a paternal aunt and uncle after her father was murdered. The structure enables Oates to address issues that have concerned her in much of her fiction: the defenselessness of a child, particularly a female child; the conformity and rebellion of the adolescent and the violence of adolescent behavior; the place of the brilliant, sensitive person in an ordinary world; the struggle with religious faith; and the politics of the academic world. While *Marya* pulls together many of Oates's themes, it also reflects attention to issues of feminism that she began to address in *Solstice* (1985). Oates uses that novel's vision of women locked in a relationship based on a power struggle in her portrait of Marya and her college friend Imogene.

But where *Solstice* ended on the cyclical nature of the power struggle, *Marya* ends on the need for women to accept their origins by coming to terms with their relationship — or lack of relationship — with their mothers.

Oates's refusal to ignore the violent nature of society continues in *Marya*.

The novel opens with the violent murder of Marya's father and places Marya in a number of personally violent encounters, most notably a near-rape where her hair, the symbol of her womanhood, is cut off by a group of drunken peers. The motif of violence culminates in an international conference on torture that Marya attends, the emphasis here suggesting not just the global nature of violence but also how much it is linked to sexual abuse of women.

Despite the emphasis on violence, *Marya*, like most of Oates's novels, is not nihilistic. Its belief in the value of life connects to Oates's feminist perspective, which does not harbor illusions that women's relationships are always supportive but does see the possibility of women finding value in themselves by acknowledging their origins. Neither a male nor a female relationship brings Marya out of her coldness, but her sense of her living, although not pregnant womb, connects her to the universal quality of birth and particularly to her mother. Marya's womb-life echoes the French feminist criticism of Helene Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva that focuses on the internal and biological, on a state of being that is pre-conscious and, therefore, uncontaminated by patriarchal language. Oates is too much of a realist merely to endorse abstract French feminism, so she has Marya abandon feminist theory and polemics in favor of her need to confront her relationship to her roots. By so doing, she suggests that while there may be value in trying to find a woman-identity apart from social and language definitions, there is also the need to acknowledge one's individual social definitions.



Techniques/Literary Precedents

Marya's eleven chapter episodic structure creates a female heroic journey involving departure, initiation, and return. Where the male heroic structure tends to propel the hero on a solitary journey with encounters that involve conquering obstacles, Marya's journey propels her into encounters that involve negotiating relationships. Her return home does not complete the journey as much as it begins the most significant part where she will negotiate her sense of self by coming to terms with her mother. Marya is a twentieth-century *Jane Eyre* who survives an abusive childhood, but where *Jane Eyre* (1847) comes to a neat closure involving the heroine's marriage, Marya ends without any outcome predicted in the search for the mother.

Many of the chapters of *Marya* were published as separate short stories, and they stand up well as complete stories.

This does not, however, detract from the sense of the wholeness of the novel.

Oates achieves this wholeness by repeating image patterns—stones or barriers that block relationships; cars, bicycles, roads, canals that define the territory of the journey; voice and dream patterns that keep recalling Marya's past; images of blighted nature, such as the image of Queen Anne's lace marred at its center by a black dot. These images keep the novel recursive and memory driven. Its first chapter is modern with its fragmented, disconnected voices, but the novel is also realistic and traditionally plotted whom they are estranged?

in its episodic structure. Related Titles 3. What stages of growth does With the publication of *Marya*, Oates returned to the rural landscape of her early fiction set in western New York.

Its beginning chapters connect to Oates's large output of stories about adolescents. Its chapter on Father Shearing connects to the theological issues Oates has addressed in many essays, particularly ones on Kafka and Flannery O'Connor in *New Heaven, New Earth* (1974), and on O'Connor and Simone Weil in *The Profane Art* (1983), in numerous short stories, and in *Son of the Morning* (1978). Its later chapters about Marya's academic life address issues Oates has looked at in her short stories and in her academic novel *Unholy Loves* (1979), and its chapter about Marya's college friends echoes the adult version of female friendships in *Solstice*.



Key Questions

The most autobiographical of Oates's books, *Marya* will bear comparison not just to her life, but also to the lives of successful women. It might generate discussion about the options open to women since the feminist movement of the 1970s and to issues raised by the feminist movement.

1. How is *Marya* a novel about mother-daughter relationships? Does it seem an accurate depiction of the legacy of alcohol abuse?
2. How does Oates deal with issues of child abandonment? How crucial is it for children to come to terms with their relationships with parents from *Marya* go through? How does the female coming-of-age story differ from similar male stories?
4. Why is *Marya* drawn to Father Shearing and his Catholicism? Why does she abandon the religious path?
5. Oates has never had children.

Does she capture the world of childhood accurately? How well does she understand teenagers?

6. How does this novel help you to understand power struggles within female relationships?
7. To what extent is this a novel about the difference between those who stay tied to home and community and those who leave? What type of person stays? What type leaves?
8. How do the various images of violence — for example, the shorn hair, the conference on torture — relate?

What is Oates saying about the nature of violence?

9. Is Oates's portrayal of the academic world convincing?
10. How do *Marya*'s encounters with teachers, clergy, lovers, friends compare to your own relationships with these significant people in your life?
11. Many of the chapters in *Marya* were published as short stories. Which ones seem able to stand on their own?

Do they make the book seem fragmented?



Copyright Information

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

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