# What I Lived For Short Guide

## What I Lived For by Joyce Carol Oates

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The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". 

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# Characters

Oates writes What I Lived For from the point of view of forty-two-year-old Corky Corcoran, a minor real estate tycoon with political ambitions and a lavish lifestyle that compensates for his roots in the Irish ghetto. If we are to see him as a hero for our time, we must be generous.

He is "[t]oo restless to stay in one place for very long," having the "[m]etabolism of a God-damn monkey." Unlike Thoreau, who marched to a quietly measured drum, Corky marches to a heavy-metal rock band. Oates captures the quality of Corky's life perfectly in titles of chapters, such as "'He's Here Now, But He's Leaving,'" "Corky Commits a Felony," "Corky, Hungover at Home," "Corky Breaks Down," and "Corky Gears Up."

Corky is a drunk, a sexual predator, a man who responds to his Irish Catholicism in a WASP America by obsessing about race and religion. He wonders if Jews believe in hell as he creates his own hellish torment. Beneath Corky's increasingly frenetic behavior and thought processes lurks the memory of his father, Tim Corcoran, murdered because he refused to pay kickbacks for his construction company and of his mother, Theresa, who dies institutionalized. In the course of his tortured weekend, Corky visits his Uncle Sean, learns through him that his father was not killed for hiring nonunion blacks, and sees in Sean the danger of his own alcoholism.

These family characters are never fully realized except in Corky's own mind.

When Oates uses them and various others of Corky's Irish relations and ancestors, she is chronicling not only Corky's vision but also the history of his cultural roots. Juxtaposed against the poor Irish are those in political power; for example, Ross Drummond, Corky's wealthy father-in-law who wants to use Corky to hire a hit man to kill his wife; Oscar Slattery, the man who paid his tuition to a Catholic high school and whose political corruption he has not recognized; and Vic Slattery, Oscar's son and Corky's friend from boyhood, who shares Oscar's corruption.

Throughout his weekend, Corky encounters or remembers dozens of women he has been involved with. Most important are Christina Kavanaugh, his current mistress who cannot lie to her crippled husband about their affair; Charlotte Drummond, his former wife who grovels toward him as they both search for her missing daughter who has stolen Corky's gun; Thalia, that daughter, who taunts her stepfather with desiring her, but shares Corky's sense of justice; and Marilee Plummer, Thalia's friend, who has committed suicide because she has become too embroiled in a lie she has been paid to tell. Like Corky, these are not characters to admire, but they are convincing characters who get sucked into a system that either destroys their integrity or destroys them because they cannot live comfortably without any semblance of a code of honor.

# Social Concerns/Themes

Joyce Carol Oates takes the title of this novel from a chapter tide in Henry "David Thoreau's Walden (1854), "Where I Lived, and What I Lived For." Lurking behind Thoreau's description of his simple life that made him fully awake to the sustaining power of nature is his protest against the materialism and exploitation of nineteenth-century America.

He was not just escaping to Walden Pond but also escaping from a society that built mills and railroads and canals that worked laborers long hours in unhealthy and dangerous conditions so that the upper classes could wear fashionable clothing and spend their leisure time in travel through a United States that was clearcutting its timber, pushing Indian populations into its least hospitable land, expanding its borders into Mexican territory, and continuing to allow the institution of slavery. Thoreau has been criticized, both in his own day and ours, for not becoming a more active social reformer, yet social reform was never his intent. What Thoreau lived for was personal integrity, and he believed that people must march to their own drummers as a way of finding that integrity.

Like Thoreau, Oates is concerned with what constitutes personal integrity in a society even more rife with moral and political corruption than was Thoreau's.

Her central character, Jerome (Corky) Corcoran, is hardlya Thoreauvian ascetic: He is promiscuous, alcoholic, hot-tempered, and naive about himself and the corruption surrounding him. He has, however, also lived according to a code of honor he adopted as a child when he refused to lie and falsely identify his father's murderers, whom he had not seen.

As she traces Corky's life through a Memorial Day weekend, Oates examines such issues as union and political corruption, sexual violence, racial, and ethnic prejudices, class divisions, and self-destruction. Oates depicts a twentieth-century America where those in power orchestrate murders of people who will not pay kickbacks, where white police shoot black children in the back, where politicians stir antipolice hatred for political gain, where children have no role models to provide a moral compass, where youths are violent or bulimic and adults are promiscuous and alcoholic, and where sex is more often angry than loving. This is a society with no heroes to memorialize; it is a battleground where the enemy is ourselves and our will to fight that enemy has been shattered.

Permeating all of the violence and corruption of What I Lived For is Oates's treatment of issues related to lying, which is not surprising when we see how central a place lying occupies in our world: presidents lie, government agencies lie, businesses lie, the media lies, even religious leaders lie. In the course of the novel, Oates exposes lies endemic to union and political life, lies about sexual assault, lies between sex partners, and lies between family and friends. At one point, a financial advisor to Corky says that Judaism is a religion of ethics, of responsibility of people to one another. Ironically, this

man may be lying to Corky about his financial motives. Oates never confirms the truth or nontruth about this; rather, she develops the novel around Corky's discovery that the code of ethics he has upheld despite his questionable lifestyle extends to few people. For Corky does not lie and, flawed as he is, he is the one who becomes the hero for our time.

Although even more than Thoreau's nineteenth century, Oates's twentiethcentury society has lost the early Judaic code of responsibility to others, it still manages to produce individuals who hold to some remnant of personal integrity.

# Techniques

Oates has an uncanny ability to get inside the heads of her characters even when she does not write from a first-person point of view. In What I Lived For, she writes in the third-person, always focused on Corky's perceptions. By using the present tense, vulgar and sexual vocabulary, fragmented sentences, unanswered questions, and minimal dialogue, she forces her readers to see the world as Corky sees it. Here is Corky on his gun that has been stolen: "He thinks of the German Luger, the heft of it in his hand . . . Except Corky'd have a hard time using a gun. On anyone. Even in self-defense." From here, Oates has Corky think about his Irish ancestors and the factory system where "they all worked twelvehour days. When they were lucky" and then meditate philosophically on the "[i]mmutable laws of the Universe" and on how if you stop moving "you're dead meat." In the next paragraph, Corky's wife comments on how the river they are near on this clear day is like "some kind of God . . . not as a person, but God as a presence." Oates's style propels this novel forward so quickly that it is easy to overlook the texture of a passage like this where she yokes Germany and its echoes of the Holocaust with Irish exploitation, with the American drive to be always moving even if toward nothing, with the notion of a Transcendental God, and with the question of whether one can find peace in such a universe. Oates's craft in this novel is unpleasant; it lacks aesthetic beauty, but it is unsettlingly convincing.

# Key Questions

With its graphic sexuality and blunt language, What I Lived For will be embarrassing for some people. Discussion will want to address the issue of whether Oates has been too sensational and too graphic or has achieved a literary aim beneath the novel's raw surface.

1. How does Oates's stream-of-consciousness technique allow you to sympathize or not sympathize with Corky?

How well does she capture the feelings of a man in the throes of alcoholism?

2. How does Corky carry on his father's legacy? Is it an honorable one?

3. Does the novel create a fair portrait of the Irish? Of a particular man of Irish heritage? Why does it include a narrative of Corky's Irish ancestors, Dermott, Joseph, and Gahern Corcoran?

4. What kind of attitude does Corky have towards women? Are there any women to admire in this novel?

5. Why is Corky so upset about Marilee's death? How does this connect to his sense of his past? To his belief in friendship?

6. Why does Oates have Corky talk so much about Judaism in the scene with Howard Greenbaum? How do the references here to the Holocaust connect to Thalia's bulimia?

7. Why does Oates use the shooting of a black boy by a white police officer as background to the novel?

8. Why does Red Pitts attack Corky in the men's room?

9. Why does Oates set this novel on Memorial Day weekend, 1992?

# Literary Precedents

Besides Walden, What I Lived For draws on James Joyce's Ulysses (1922) as indicated by a quotation from this novel that Oates chooses as a headnote: "He rests.

He has traveled." Corky's weekend, episodic journey recalls the day-long journey that Joyce sets in Dublin. Corky combines Joyce's Telemachus/Stephen Dedalus and Odysseus/Leopold Bloom as he wanders aimlessly in a restless spiritual malaise, ineffectual in most of his actions.

Unlike Joyce, Oates confines her streamof-consciousness technique to Corky, shaping her novel only around the episodes he participates in. But like Joyce, she carefully paces the novel and each of its episodes, underscoring the crescendo of Corky's behavior and his gradual loss of energy as he begins to see the corruption that has surrounded him.

# Related Titles

Oates frequently writes from a male perspective, but never so insistently as in What I Lived For as she records the thought processes of the sex-obsessed Corky Corcoran. Her fiction has always tended toward the violent, but it has also insisted that there is a transcendent quality to the anger that generates the violence because anger is better than complacency. In recent years, she has, however, moved so far into the psyche of the disturbed—as in her 1995 novel about a serial killer, Zombie—that she risks losing this more hopeful quality to her work.

Although What I Live For still manages to believe in transcendence, in some kernel of goodness, this is deeply buried in the voice of Corky Corcoran that we hear.

Oates has often spoken about the importance of pacing scenes in fiction, and in her description from Corky's point of view of numerous sex acts, she tries to capture the rhythm of these acts just as she tried to pace the boxing scenes in You Must Remember This (1987; see separate entry) and the basketball scenes in Because It Is Bitter, and Because It Is My Heart (1990; see separate entry). The novel's treatment of ethnic and racial tensions recalls Because It Is Bitter, and Because It Is My Heart and its portrait of Thalia, who keeps a coded diary, recalls the more fully developed portrait of Enid in You Must Remember This. But with its stress on the political power system, What I Lived For is most similar to The Assassins (1975; see separate entry) and to Black Water (1992), which both allude to the political power of the Irish Kennedy clan.

Set in Oates's fictional Port Oriskany, New York, the university town where the college section of Marya: A Life (1986; see separate entry) takes place, You Must Remember This captures the atmosphere of the 1950s when the middle classes could live well and when they could blind themselves to the violence lying just beneath the surface of their society. The novel draws on Oates's interest in boxing as metaphor for this controlled violence as she traces the relationship between the adolescent Enid Maria Stevick and her father's illegitimate half-brother Felix, a boxer. It asks us to remember that beneath the tranquil American 1950s there was sexual turmoil, embodied in Enid's adolescent affair with Felix and her parents' asexual marriage; the fanaticism of McCarthyism and its role in the Rosenbergs's execution; and the bomb, the ultimate weapon that can annihilate the Earth despite the naive act of building bomb shelters. The link between the physicality of adolescence and the physical part of boxing enables Oates to make her point that physical experiences are the most profound experiences of our lives, even as we try to transcend them in our attempts to be spiritual beings. As she links the male experience of boxing with the female experience of abortion, she dramatizes her vision of the transcendent power of violence.

The rebellion of Enid and Felix against the complacency of the 1950s is risky.

They try to control life's experiences as the boxer tries to control violence in the ring or the artist tries to give shape to experience in the art object. But life finally controls Enid and Felix, and they are both deeply scarred by Enid's eventual abortion. For Oates,

though, such experiences need not destroy; rather, they represent the life-force that allows people to enter, survive, and bring some order to the uncontrollable physical bouts of life.

That Oates believes it is possible to transcend the physical through the physical is evident in the last scene where Enid's parents, Lyle and Hannah Stevick, make love after eighteen years of abstinence, self-imposed because of the Catholic church's stand on birth control. Copulating in their backyard bomb shelter, Hannah does not respond physically, yet still she declares her love, and Lyle, sexually fulfilled, remembers young love. Through this groping act Oates suggests that we can continue to live if we remember and continue to seek moments that sustain at the same time that they do not mask the violent nature of life.

Felix and Enid represent two of Oates's major interests: the boxer who survives life by trying to control it in a metaphoric boxing ring and the adolescent who rebels and will survive and profit from her rebellion only if she remembers it and acknowledges why it was necessary. Oates's father took her to boxing matches when she was a child, and she draws on her knowledge of and research into boxing for her portrait of Felix. Felix has come to boxing out of a background that has marginalized him as the only child of a divorced Catholic's second marriage. He has responded to his anger and loneliness by becoming oppositional and combative, eventually finding in boxing a world that reflects his view of society and of the male behavior that he values. For Felix, the boxing ring is the place where he is in control, where he is evenly matched against an opponent and where "you deserve all that happens to you even death—nothing is accidental." Oates convincingly outlines the surface of Felix as a hard-living, harddrinking man, but she also captures the psychology of a man who turns to incest as a way of finding a family he has been denied.

You Must Remember This opens with Felix's niece Enid swallowing forty-seven aspirin tablets. In the space of three pages, we enter the mind of this fivefoot-three-inch, eighty-nine-pound adolescent. We know that she is smart, that she has been deeply affected by a Catholicism that has not offered her comfort or a belief system, and that she seeks control over her body because she has no control over Felix with whom she had been playing sexual games that have not yet been consummated. Enid is the mirror image of Felix: She is the female who lives on the edge, the risk taker who is also deeply vulnerable. Although Felix is the novel's central character, Oates is never better than when she portrays bright, talented, rebellious female adolescents like Enid.

Enid emerges from a family where talent and intelligence are hereditary but unnurtured and where the prevailing philosophy holds that the less said about the darker side of life the better. Her father, Lyle Stevick, is a second-hand furniture store owner who reads intellectual literature and is accused of being a communist. Spending his spare time building a bomb shelter, Lyle leads a life of quiet desperation. Enid's mother, Hannah, represses unpleasantness so fully that she seems unaware of her own desperation. Rather than confronting Enid about a coded notebook Enid has been keeping, she burns it, as if burning it will erase its contents and Enid's hidden sexual life. Other members of the Stevick family are consistent with the mind set Oates sees in the 1950s.

They include Enid's sisters, Geraldine, who is married and pregnant, and Lizzie, who is probably the mistress of her voice teacher; her brother Warren, a wounded Korean veteran who protests the bomb; and Lyle's brother Dominic, a priest who represents the belief that everything will be okay if you follow Catholic rules.

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