



## The Rise of Life on Earth

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THE RISE OF LIFE ON EARTH is itself a sort of Genesis, a poignant, poetic account of how wounded child Kathleen Hennessy becomes a woman scarred for life. Oates begins by revealing to the reader Kathleen and her sister, beaten and brutalized by their father, who rages against the girls' absent mother. Kathleen's sister won't stop crying, and Kathleen, afraid that the wails will invite more abuse, rails against her sister as their father has, silencing her by killing her, by hitting her once too hard.

Kathleen's consciousness of her crime is as nebulous as the scene is concrete. In order to survive, she invents her own reality, the surreal world of the child who grows up convinced of her worthlessness, seeking love from men who only know how to hate.

Shifted from one foster home to another, where makeshift families mock her heavy body and trample her broken spirit, Kathleen learns that love is something she doesn't deserve. She studies to be a nurse's aide and takes pride in the perfection with which she executes every task, including preparing the bodies of the dead.

A young doctor seduces Kathleen, uses her though he refuses to be seen with her and cannot even remember her name. Mistaking abuse for love, Kathleen thrives on the doctor's attention, and thrills when she finds herself pregnant.

But the physician, of course, ignores her, and Kathleen takes control. In an ending that is significant for its lack of drama, for its inevitable, necessary pain, the protagonist's universe is complete. Oates juxtaposes life and death, love and abuse, in descriptions as delicately wrought as air, as the act of steady breathing. The author's message is the reader's inheritance: Abuse reproduces itself, perpetuating shame that, if not healed by love, will result in physical or spiritual death.

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