



Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?

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The Work

Joyce Carol Oates's story collection *Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been? Selected Early Stories* contains many of the author's award-winning tales published between 1964 and 1977. This volume provides access to some of Oates's best works from editions no longer in print. In the afterword, Oates reminds her readers that "writers are time travelers" whose fictions reflect the identities of the writers and create art from imagination and experience.

The volume contains seven sections representing six of Oates's early compilations and two previously uncollected stories. The contents are organized chronologically, beginning with two stories from Oates's first collection, *By the North Gate* (1963). The remainder includes works from *Upon the Sweeping Flood* (1966), *The Wheel of Love* (1970), *Marriages and Infidelities* (1972), *The Goddess and Other Women* (1974), and *Night-Side* (1977). The uncollected stories "The Molesters" (1968) and "Silkie" (1972) complete the volume.

Oates's poetic prose style uses much sensory detail. Her characters endure the "hot smell" of the sun and "dream while awake." Oates's protagonists often experience anxiety and isolation—helpless pawns in a hostile world. The title story "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" is Oates's most frequently anthologized tale. It features an adolescent, Connie, who is seduced and threatened by a symbolic tempter, Arnold Friend. The hostile forces that Oates employs to portray conflicts are societal and natural. In "The Edge of the World," an eighteen-year-old faces death in an "unlucky" motorcycle race held in a junk yard—a rusty, metal cemetery symbolic of the young man's fate in a mechanical age.

Oates employs psychological realism within the framework of experimentation. The story "How I Contemplated the World from the Detroit House of Correction and Began My Life over Again" utilizes twelve disconnected narrative divisions to reveal the plight of a suburban teenager searching to find herself. In "Unmailed, Unwritten Letters" a narrator recounts in imagined epistles the conflicts she endures with her husband, her lover, her family and herself. The stories from *Marriages and Infidelities* contain Oates's reworking of classic tales by Anton Chekhov, Henry James, and James Joyce.

The stories often contain violent accounts of self-discovery or self-annihilation. Oates's characters endure conflicts with social forces that reflect humanity's evil, the corruption of political or religious systems, and the frailty of the human psyche. Fear is portrayed as an undercurrent of modern society, and the characters frequently confront death and violence.

Suggested Readings

Johnson, Greg. *Understanding Joyce Carol Oates*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1987.

Pearlman, Mickey, ed. *American Women Writing Fiction: Memory, Identity, Family, Space*. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1989.

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Winslow, Joan D. "The Stranger Within: Two Stories by Oates and Hawthorne." *Studies in Short Fiction* 17 (1980): 263-268.

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