What We Talk About When We Talk About JonBenet

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Review of *My Sister, My Love* by Joyce Carol Oates. Publisher: Harper Collins. $25.95

Oscar Wilde delighted in dissing Dickens. "One must have a heart of stone," he wrote, "to read about the death of Little Nell without laughing." He would have felt the same way, we think, about the murder of JonBenet Ramsey.

And so, it seems, does Joyce Carol Oates. But she's after more than laughter in her breathtakingly ambitious new novel. An ingenious multi-layered response to the brutal assault, *My Sister, My Love* is a full-throated critique of the late Baby-boom culture of celebrity, social-climbing, psycho-speak, "cybercesspoolspace," and "heaven scent" spirituality. It's a prism through which she can look at -- and lampoon -- the death of the American literary imagination.

She has set herself quite a task. How do you satirize the over-the-top, self-satirizing, self-immunized state of American culture? Where for millions it is all about *US (Weekly)?* How do you outdo *Flavor of Love,* quite literally a spin-off of a spin-off of *The Surreal Life,* with its own spin-off, *I Love New York?* And how in the name of E.A. Pym, can a novelist "do" - or redo - JonBenet Ramsey?

To pull it off, Oates uses a volatile mix of genres: postmodernism, traditional narrative, coming-of-age, whodunit, and the real crime story. Like Edgar Allen Poe, she leaves clues - hundreds of them - hidden in plain sight. And then, skating away, she does a clean quadruple Lutz over-the-top of over-the-top.

The egregiously unreliable narrator of the story is Skyler Rampike, older brother of JonBenet's fictional *doppelganger,* Bliss Rampike. The scene has been moved to North Jersey and the little girl is a figure skater rather than a beauty queen-in-miniature. Bliss's mother is the lonely, religious, Betsey Rampike relocated from humble origins in Hagarstown, New York to the affluent suburb of Fair Hills. Her husband is the handsome and well-bred former Cornell fullback, Bix Rampike, a womanizer, bullshit artist, and fast-rising corporate executive in the bio-tech business.

After Skyler is badly injured in a gymnastics fall at age six, Betsey and Bix lose interest in him- and Skyler becomes alienated from his "normal" playmates. When his little sister, Edna Louise, is recognized as an ice skating prodigy soon after Skyler's fall, Betsey is divinely inspired to change the little girl's name to "Bliss". As she garners media attention, Bliss pays dividends: Betsey and Bix win acceptance in the waspy world of Fair Hills.

Because we know "the real story," we're not surprised when Bliss is found dead in the furnace room of the family house on January 29, 1997. The Rampikes divorce. Skyler is shipped to hospitals and boarding schools, where he encounters a bizarre array of classmates -- think *Dead Poets Society* meets *This is Our Youth*. Betsey professes her love for her "troubled son" on the talk show circuit and in self-help books. From Bix there are promises of a weekend trip to Manhattan and a Knicks' game.

Throbbing like the pain in Skyler's injured leg lie footnotes, at the bottom of nearly every page, in which the nineteen-year-old narrator comments on anything and everything, flings malapropisms and corrects himself. Designed to frustrate readers and bedevil critics, this "underbook" is Oates' riff on post-modernist self referential, inter-textual writing about writing.

Oates' intentions are signaled with a quotation that precedes the book. In "Aesthetics of Composition" (1846), we learn, E. A. Pym opined that "the death of a beautiful child is unquestionably the most poetical topic in the world." Problem: you've never heard of E. A. Pym. Solution: go to Google. You'll discover that Arthur Gordon Pym is a character in an Edgar Allan Poe "narrative" that dances on the border between fact and fiction. You might notice as well that Poe, who married a thirteen year old and was obsessed with incest, declared in an essay called "The Philosophy of Composition" that "the death of a beautiful woman is unquestionably the most poetical topic in the world." The "lips best suited" to the subject, he added, were those of "a bereaved lover." Insisting that literary works should be short, Poe suggested that writers "shudder at letting the public take a peep behind the scenes."

Four-hundred twenty-four pages later, in a "book within the book," with the oh-so-not-postmodern title, *First Love, Farewell: A Teen Memoir of Lost Love,* Skyler gets a girlfriend and Oates gets a little less coy:

"Think that I, Skyler Rampike, steeped in irony, *resentment,* and chronic *sand fraud* like a squid steeped in ink, can't...

put aside postmodernist strategies of 'storytelling' for the naive, raw, throbbing emotions of mere storytelling?....I think I can present the 'bittersweet' - 'poignant' - 'fated' story of Skyler's first love, that came to such an abrupt and melancholy end."

(Melancholy, Poe wrote, "is the most legitimate of all poetical tones.")

"The story of a life," the postmodernist John Barth has written, "is not a life, it is a story." Apparently, Oates agrees. But she seems to insist that at its best "mere storytelling" reveals "truths" about a life - and all life. That's why the "underbook" of My Sister, My Love is intentionally tedious, confusing, and self-indulgent, while the main narrative, "mere storytelling" though it may be, gets better and better.

In this, her thirty-fifth novel, Oates issues a devastating indictment of our imagination-free state of play. The novel is full of visual stunts and mind-games. We see Bliss's autograph as she wrote it pictorially; Sharpie redactions of phrases Skyler blacks out; changing fonts and backgrounds; and hand-written notes on Betsey Rampike's personal stationary. The children of the rich are afflicted with acronymous conditions, including G.C.S.S. (Gifted Child Syndrome Sufferer), P.D.D. (Premature Depression Disorder), and I.E.S.D. (Incipient Epilepsy Spectrum Disorder). They're sent to movies entitled Chucky I, Chucky II, Terminator I, Terminator II (all real), Robo-Boy Goes Ballistic, and Revenge of Robo-Boy (made up). And Bix, the Rabbit Angstrom of Fair Hills, drives cars named the Jeep Crusher XL and the Road Warrior.

But, importantly, Oates also takes the reader through life with no anesthetic. Surrounded by phonies and unable to protect his baby sister, Skyler is a twenty-first century Holden Caulfield. He is attacked, abused, falsely accused, medicated, abandoned, beat up, abandoned again, medicated more, and beat up again. When it can't get worse, he careens out of anonymity and into Tabloid Hell. And then, somehow, the lord of the underbook, self-conscious, and angry at God, unsteady with a bum leg (like Melville's Ahab) and a face like a gargoyle, steps up and gets a life, thanks in part to Pastor Bob, the reformed drug addict whose ministry, "The Ark," reaches out to the depressed and the dispossessed of New Brunswick.

My Sister, My Love is John Barth with heart. It is Bonfire of the Vanities for grown-ups and literature majors. Right down at its core, after clues, caricatures and critiques, it leaves you caring for the kid who never gets to that Knicks game.

As M. H. Abrams, the great literary critic, whose courses Bix would have ducked at Cornell, has said: "We are human, and nothing is more interesting to us than humanity. The appeal of literature is that it is so thoroughly a human thing - by, for, and about human beings. If you lose that focus, you obviate the source of the power and the permanence of literature." With this tour de force, My Sister, My Love, Joyce Carol Oates has helped us understand what it means to be human.

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