Many philosophers believe that human beings possess "some sort of moral core," M.R. Neukirchen, the protagonist of Joyce Carol Oates' gripping new novel, tells her father. Some of them, however, "argue that we have no 'core personalities' but exist only in contexts."

And contexts change. M.R. Neukirchen, we learn, is not the "real" name of this eminently successful forty-something. As a child, Jedina Kraeck (or was it Jewell?) was abused by her deranged mother, left for dead in a mud flat, raised in a foster home, and then adopted by Agatha and Konrad Neukirchen, a Quaker couple from Carthage, New York, whose daughter (Meredith Ruth) had recently died.

Intent on shielding herself from her past, "Merry" Neukirchen becomes a Thoroughbred workhorse, with a Harvard Ph.D., a string of prestigious publications, and an appointment as president of an Ivy League university in New Jersey.

**Novel has its flaws**

Ensconced in Charters House, the president's residence, M.R. is alone – and lonely. She can't keep herself from asking (as Oatesian heroines are wont to do) "Why am I here, and not rather – nowhere?" – or from having intense feelings of humiliation, terror, and revenge.

"Mudwoman" is not without flaws. The plots and subplots seem contrived at times. And, although Oates intends to blur the lines between reality and (M.R.'s) hallucinations, descriptions of the mores of university culture do not always rings true.

At its best, however, the novel is a compelling exploration, by turns grisly and grotesque, philosophical and psychological, of visceral sensations and repressed memories.

As 26 guests at a Charters House dinner converse over dinner about war, war atrocities and the ethical obligations of American universities, Oates writes, M.R. Neukirchen finds herself "at another table altogether," at which she steels her small body "against being jostled, her (plastic, scummy) water-glass upset, bits of ketchup-drenched meatloaf on her plate slyly snatched" by the foster child next to her, precipitating a "damn ruckus of pinches, slaps, shoves and profanities."

And Mrs. Skedd, her foster mother, bursts out, derisively: "Ms. Neukirchen! Who'n hell is Mudgirl kidding!"

**Living with remains**

When the Charters House discussion turns from "Operation Enduring Freedom" in Afghanistan to bellicosity, irrationality, the mentality of the crowd, and the view that a suicide bomber has lost his volition, M.R. listens, repelled. "For nothing seemed to her more horrible than….to be neither dead nor alive, only just existing. In the mudflat, just existing. Mud in eyes, nose. Mud in mouth so all speech is lost….tossed away like trash, living garbage."

"Mudwoman" leaves the issue of coming to terms with one's past, exorcising demons, and moving on as a work-in-progress. Konrad Neukirchen, a source of "inner light" wisdom in the novel, recommends "a life of service," but M.R., who has been there (and done that), recognizes that serving others, at the University or the Herkimer County Veterans Hospital, for all its virtues, puts you in a small boat "without a rudder, or an oar. Where the stream takes you, you are taken.

In the end, although she senses that dreams must not be suppressed, M.R. decides (somewhat contradictorily) that she can best resist and rise above her circumstances by internalizing a belief that "you don't have to understand why anything that has happened to you has happened nor do you even have to understand what it is that has happened. You only have to live with the remains."
And, most important of all, that she must make herself "readied" to ground her existence on the premise that it is difficult, and maybe even impossible, "to prevail when you are not, in the deepest and most intimate and forgiving of ways, loved."

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