As "The Sacrifice," Joyce Carol Oates' remarkable novel begins, Sybilla Frye, a 15-year-old girl has been found in the basement of a deserted New Jersey factory, bound, gagged, brutally beaten, smeared with feces, with an epithet ("Nigra Bitch Ku Klux Klann") written on her stomach.

Sybilla claims she has been raped by five or six White police officers. She refuses, however, to cooperate with Ines Iglesias, the biracial detective assigned to the case. Iglesias notices that Sybilla pretends to be unconscious, that the epithet was written upside down, and that Ednetta Frye, Sybilla's mother, will not allow emergency room doctors to conduct X-rays and blood tests to gauge the extent of the injuries.

Not all a lie

Inspired in part by the Tawana Brawley case, in which an African-American teenager was found in a similar condition and "supported" by the Rev. Al Sharpton, Oates' novel enters the consciousness of her characters (Ednetta Frye, Anis Schutt, Sybilla's stepfather, Ines Iglesias, the Rev. Marus Mudrick, and his fraternal twin, Byron, the lawyer who "defends" Sybilla) to illuminate the (willing and unintentional) "sacrifices" that remain pervasive in inner cities wracked by racial discrimination and discord.

Sybilla's story "is a lie," Iglesias tells herself – and us. "Yet, no story is entirely a lie. That Sybilla was badly hurt, her life threatened, "that's real, isn't it? Yes. That is real."

"The Sacrifice" captures the complexity of its characters and the wide spectrum of attitudes they hold.

Desperate for recognition, Ada Furst, the substitute teacher who discovered Sybilla in the factory cellar, wants to see her photograph in the newspaper.

Ada visits the Fryes with a gift for Sybilla, a paperback of Maya Angelou's "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings," only to have Ednetta frown, mutter "Thanks," and shut the door.

Brutal rage explained

Ines Iglesias feels "a thrill of sheer visceral revulsion" for people who live like the Fryes, "who could not help themselves to live in any other way."

Ednetta tries to resist Marus Mudrick's plan for Sybilla to go public with her accusations "for the sake of Black liberation." But when she looks into his eyes, senses his approval, "his manly affection," Ednetta has a submissive sensation akin to her feeling in church, when she knows she will ruin her stockings if she kneels on the floor but finds herself there, "bawling to Jesus" to enter her heart.

Courting controversy, Oates tries to explain Anis Schutt's brutal rage.

When Anis was 12, the police ordered one of his friends to pick up a telephone cable, hanging from a pole in the water. When Oscar steps on it, he is electrocuted instantly, "hardly enough time for him to scream."

And during the race riots in New Jersey in the 1960s, the police killed Anis' brother, Lysander, who had...
wandered into the street. Since that time, “every hour of every day” the Angel of Wrath orders Anis to kill a White cop: “You ain’t gon die a righteous death if you fail in this.”

No tidy ending

Written for readers conversant with the “cases” of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, and Tawana Brawley, and claims and counterclaims of police brutality, “The Sacrifice” does not reveal what “really” happened to Sybilla Frye.

And, in a novel that has been suffused with sympathy as well as toughness, Oates concludes with a confrontation on a dead-end street, at the edge of the river, where someone will die, “straining against a badly rusted fence like an animal,” amid remnants of newspaper and Styrofoam litter caught in a chain link fence, while anticipating “the weight of a booted foot” in the back of the neck.

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