

THE FAIREST IN THE LAND: *BLONDE* AND *BLACK WATER*, THE NONFICTION NOVELS OF JOYCE CAROL OATES

SHARON OARD WARNER

“In the majority of the [fairy] tales, to be a heroine in even a limited sense requires extreme youth and extreme physical beauty; it would not be sufficient to be merely beautiful, one must be ‘the greatest beauty in the kingdom’—‘the fairest in the land.’”

—Oates, “In Olden Times” 249

I begin by way of anecdote. In the early summer of 1962, during those last weeks in the life of Marilyn Monroe, I was ten years old and living in Dallas, Texas. My memories of that year are sketchy, but a singular moment has stayed with me. I was sitting inside a stifling car, waiting dutifully for my mother to emerge from a convenience store, in all likelihood a 7-Eleven. While my mother made her purchase, probably cigarettes, I cast about for a way to please her, no *save* her. Only the year before, she’d jumped from a moving car, and though she hadn’t managed to kill herself, the fall did result in a skull fracture and a coma. I had reason to be nervous each time we set out in the car.

Therefore, when she got back into the driver’s seat and turned the key in the ignition, I blurted out something so absurd and improbable that I flinch to admit it even today. “Don’t worry, Mommy,” I said, apropos of nothing.

“When I grow up, I’m going to be Miss America.” My voice was all conviction. Already, I was determined to transform myself into a beautiful princess, me—a plain child with no natural talents, a bespectacled bookworm of a girl. I was struck by the certainty that I could do this for her, that I *must* do this for her.

On August 4, Marilyn Monroe would die of a drug overdose, but on that early summer day in 1962, the sun must have been shining in Los Angeles, just as it was in Dallas. Not to say the world was altogether beautiful, but it was certainly bright. Mary Jo Kopechne had just finished college. Joyce Carol Oates and her new husband Raymond had found work in Detroit and were thrilled to be leaving Beaumont, Texas, behind. The future, we believed, might well be better than the past, and why not? We could fly to the moon! John F. Kennedy was our president.

Although *Blonde* and *Black Water* have much in common, one difference is readily apparent. In the jumble of books and papers currently crowding my desk, the short novel *Black Water* can be hidden by something as insubstantial as a pile of notes. A slim 154 pages in paperback, *Black Water*, is a petite book, small enough to slip in a purse. The largish font is easy to read, and the margins are generous. Even a slow reader—and I am downright poky—can manage it in one long gulp. Not so with *Blonde*. A weighty tome, the novel *Blonde* is apparent no matter the clutter. Size alone identifies it. In terms of heft, only my dictionary and thesaurus can compete.

As it happens, both novels began as shorter projects and grew beyond the confines Oates imagined for them. In the Joyce Carol Oates biography, *Invisible Writer*, Greg Johnson explains that the novel *Black Water* started as a story based on the accident at Chappaquiddick, the 1969 tragedy that took the life of Mary Jo Kopechne and ended the presidential aspirations of Senator Edward Kennedy. But the short story of the “minutes/moments before death by drowning” (382) became a novel, one designed to be read in the length of time it takes the heroine to die by suffocation. As Oates explained to Ramona Koval in a 2002 interview, Mary Jo Kopechne didn’t drown:

She was trapped in the car. She was trapped in such a way that there was an air pocket. She was not drowning. Ultimately, she probably suffocated....And this black water, as I imagine, this black water dripping down, but she was able to live for hours before the water actually suffocated her. (11)

Oates had long been fascinated by the events of Chappaquiddick, but she was impelled to start work on the book in the summer of 1991, around the time William Kennedy Smith was acquitted on rape charges and the great Thurgood Marshall passed away. For Oates, these events signaled the passing of an era.

Invisible Writer quotes a journal entry Oates wrote on 7 July 1991: “It’s infuriating,” she complains, “when Ted Kennedy repeatedly refers to the incident as a ‘tragic accident’—it was an accident that, while drunk, he drove a car into the water but it was no accident that he allowed his passenger to drown” (383). Her outrage came accompanied by an equal measure of bewilderment. After all, Joyce Carol Oates was well aware of the long and

impressive record of Senator Edward Kennedy, of his steadfast support of the poor and underprivileged, of his multitude of good deeds. So, she wonders in her worksheet, "To what extent do we 'forgive' our friends for their crimes, simply because they are our friends?" (qtd. in Cologne-Brookes 256). In the tug of war between outrage and bewilderment, outrage won out. Most readers will be repulsed by The Senator, whom she depicts as crass and cowardly, as self-serving and self-absorbed as they come.

Five years after publishing *Black Water*—she wrote and published a number of other books in between—Joyce Carol Oates began work on *Blonde*. At 738 pages, *Blonde* is her longest novel to date. (The original manuscript was even longer, a full 1,400 pages!) Not that she planned it that way. As Oates originally conceived of the book, *Blonde* was to be a novella of 175 pages, something about the length of *Black Water*. She explained to Greg Johnson that she intended to write a story to "give life to a lost, lone girl" in a photograph, a seventeen-year-old named Norma Jeane Baker (144). At the outset, she planned to cover her character's childhood and adolescence and then to conclude the book when Norma Jeane adopts the studio name Marilyn Monroe. "The mode of storytelling would have been fairy-tale like," she explained, and "as poetic as I could make appropriate" (144).

Gavin Cologne-Brookes has suggested that a likely trigger for the book was the 1997 article Oates wrote on the death of Princess Diana. Titled "The Love She Searched For" and written for *Time*, the article describes the princess as "a virgin cynically used by the so-called 'royal family' of Britain" and contends that, "with the cruel logic of those fairy tales that don't end happily," Diana became "the intended sacrifice to the establishment" (216).

Across the pond in America, poor Marilyn Monroe didn't fare much better—not in fact and certainly not in fiction. Oates is absolutely unflinching in her depiction of Norma Jeane, who was transformed from winsome young woman into blonde bombshell, the fairest in the land. Gazing at that photograph of a seventeen-year-old innocent, Joyce Carol Oates began to write, and what she eventually produced is something Cologne-Brookes has astutely labeled a "quasi *autobiography* of Monroe" (237). This innovative—no, downright *inspired*—use of point of view, something Oates has termed "posthumous narration by the subject," allows the narrator, Norma Jeane Baker, to dream back over her life "at the very conclusion of that life, on the brink of extinction even as, in a fairy tale..." ("*Blonde Ambition*" 145). *Fairy tale, fairy tale, fairy tale*: do you hear the refrain?

"'Like a message might come at any time. Whether I understood or not.' That was always Norma Jeane's faith as a reader of books. You opened a book at random and leafed through the pages and began to read. Seeking an omen, a truth to change your life."

The method, opening a book at random, is not mine, but the search is familiar. For most of my life, I've been reading fiction—and always with the hope of finding a truth to change my life. It was true at ten, and it is still true at fifty. Until recently, I wouldn't have thought I had much in common with Marilyn Monroe, even the fictional version—assuming there was ever any other kind—but I have decided since reading *Blonde* that Norma Jeane and I are more alike than I would have imagined. We do, however, read differently. While she might have skipped over something labeled “Author's Note,” I wouldn't have. An author myself and dutiful to a fault, I read every word of the Note preceding Joyce Carol Oates' novel *Blonde*. And even more telling is this: as the novel wound down to its inexorable end, I returned to that opening page, rereading the first paragraph just to remind myself. “This wasn't her whole life?” I thought, a little incredulous. “For God's sake. How much more could one body possibly stand?” For those of you who might have skipped over the Author's Note, here is the first paragraph:

Blonde is a radically distilled “life” in the form of fiction, and, for all its length, synecdoche is the principle of appropriation. In place of numerous foster homes in which the child Norma Jeane lived, for instance, *Blonde* explores only one, and that fictitious; in place of numerous lovers, medical crises, abortions and suicide attempts and screen performances, *Blonde* explores only a selected, symbolic few.

Casual readers might assume the phrase “in the form of fiction” refers to narrative structure, the chronology of events of this distilled life, which Oates has neatly organized into the comforting familiarity of sections—for instance, *The Woman: 1949-1953; Marilyn 1953-58*—and chapter headings—“*The Ex-Athlete and the Blonde Actress: The Proposal*”; “*The American Goddess of Love on the Subway Grating New York City 1954*”—allowing us to thumb through, to open the book at random, as Norma Jeane is wont to do, Marilyn Monroe's life reduced to a neat, if somewhat weighty, package.

But what of the story itself? What does it signify to wrap the word “fiction” around the life of someone utterly familiar? If you read the chapter heading, “Happy Birthday Mr. President,” do you see the image? Of course you do. But if you want to see it more clearly, you have only to scan this passage:

...she found herself standing at the microphone dazed and vacuously smiling licking red-lipstick lips as if trying desperately to remember where she was, what this was, glassy-eyed, swaying in spike-heeled shoes, beginning at last after an embarrassingly long pause to sing in the weak, breathy, throaty-sexy MARILYN voice

HAP py birth day to YOU!
 Happy birth dayyyy to YOU
 H-Hap py bir th day mis ter

PRES I dent
Hap py BIRTH day TO YOU

Somehow these gasped syllables emerged despite the terrible dryness in her mouth and the roaring in her ears and the blinding swirling spotlights as she stood holding the microphone, now clutching desperately to keep from falling, and giving her no assistance was the emcee in his tux standing behind her clapping vigorously and wolf-grinning at her backside in the shimmering dress. (720)

If the image is already part of our consciousness, if we're waiting for it as we read, then can the book be considered fiction, and if so, how so?

In a short essay entitled "On Fiction in Fact," Oates discusses the opening to *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, wherein the narrator, Huck, refers to the preceding book, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, as "mostly a true book with some stretchers" (76). She goes on to say that this description "might reasonably be applied to the amorphous genres of 'nonfiction,' 'history,' and 'memoir' as well" (76). Many readers no longer trust the designation of "truth," she tells us, even when it's presented to them by "seemingly reputable writers and publishers." She wrote this passage sometime in 1998, many years before the current flack surrounding James Frey and his messy memoir, *A Million Little Pieces*. But it's the next line that really interests me. Here, Oates changes paragraphs and offers one fragmentary statement set off and enclosed by parentheses: "(Except when we read fiction or poetry, whose truth is understood to be metaphorical and not literal; subjective and not objective)" (76). What does she mean by metaphorical truth?

According to an article in the May 2004 issue of *Vanity Fair*, it was Jacqueline Kennedy who first described the Kennedy presidency as something akin to Camelot. Speaking to Theodore H. White a scant week after the assassination, she apologized for not being able to come up with "a lofty historical metaphor" (260). Instead, she said, she kept remembering a song from the popular musical, one the late President Kennedy loved. His favorite lines were the ones at the end of song: "Don't let it be forgot / That once there was a spot / For one brief shining moment that was known as Camelot."

The writer Charles Baxter has called the Kennedy assassination "*the* narratively dysfunctional event of our era." In a wonderful essay entitled "Dysfunctional Narratives: or 'Mistakes Were Made,'" Baxter observes that "one of the signs of a dysfunctional narrative is that we cannot leave it behind, and we cannot put it to rest, because it does not, finally, give us the explanation we need to enclose it" (7). Certainly, the evidence bears him out. Despite (or maybe because of) the Warren Commission and the scores of books, articles, and documentaries that have followed, the events of November 22, 1963 remain mysterious and muddled: "We go over the Kennedy assassination second by

second, frame by frame, but there is a truth to it that we cannot get at because we can't be sure who really did it or what the motivations were" (7).

If I write the phrase, "Zapruder footage," and you read it, then all you have to do is close your eyes and allow the images to scroll past. There they are: President Kennedy and Jacqueline in her pink pillbox hat, both of them sitting up straight and tall in the Lincoln convertible, offering the crowd that practiced wave, the one that looks like they are repeatedly wiping the surface of a foggy window. There they go, slipping round that inevitable corner—we hold our breath, waiting for what must happen—a moment in time that refuses to sink into the past but instead floats on the surface of our national consciousness.

Don DeLillo has written a novel about that moment called *Libra*, and in an essay entitled "The Power of History," he offers his thoughts on exploring the Kennedy assassination and other historical events through the lens of fiction:

The novelist does not want to tell you things you already know about the great, the brave, the powerless, and the cruel. Fiction slips into the skin of historical figures. It gives them sweaty palms and head colds and urine stained underwear and lines to speak in private and the terror of restless nights. This is how consciousness is extended and human truth is seen anew. (6)

Although Oates has maintained that "the Kennedy-connection is not one I really want to do" (qtd. in Cologne-Brookes 178), *Blonde* and *Black Water* are notable for their unflinching and unflattering portrayals of The Senator and the President. The President is boorish, and The Senator crass and cowardly. In writing about Oates's novel, *Because It Is Bitter, Because It Is My Heart*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. described Oates's social commentary thusly: "Her basic technique is really quite simple: Find just where it hurts and then press, *hard*" (28). Gates is referring to Oates's depiction of race and class tensions in 1950s and '60s America, but his comment applies equally well to Oates's treatment of America's royal family. And if we cringe when we read these portrayals of the Kennedys? Well, Oates might tell us it's a good pain, the kind that could rouse us from a decades-long sleep. For instance, in this passage describing a rendezvous between Marilyn and the President, no one is likely to mistake the President for King Arthur:

His handsome manly body was covered in a fine glinting-brown fuzz that thickened on his torso and legs; it looked almost as though he wore a vest. Pages of the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* were scattered across the king-sized bed and, precariously balanced against an upended pillow, was an opened bottle of Black & White scotch whiskey. Seeing the Blonde Actress make her entrance, a vision of creamy hues and radiant fuchsia smile, the President swallowed hard and beckoned her to him, even as he held the receiver to his ear. His limp penis stirred too in an acknowledgment of her beauty among its tangle of bristly hairs like a large affable slug that would grow larger. (705)

It is fair to say that Joyce Carol Oates has in mind another fairy tale altogether.

I recently read an essay by bell hooks in which she says that “fairy tales were the refuge of my troubled childhood” (178), and so it was for me as well. We women writers are suckers for fairy tales. Joyce Carol Oates has said that her first and favorite books were *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*. She received the books as a Christmas gift from her grandmother and read them so often that she memorized whole sections.

At ten, I was addicted to fairy tales. I sat through my classes with thick volumes of Grimm’s or Anderson’s hidden inside the opened covers of my geography book, my history book, my math book. I devoured every volume of fairy tales in the school library and then extended my search to the public library, walking to the nearest branch and carrying home stacks of musty volumes, every fairy tale available in Dallas, Texas, in 1963.

Likely I was reading “The Snow Queen” or something similar when the principal came over the loud speaker and announced to my sixth grade class that President Kennedy had been assassinated a few miles away. I remember groggily returning to “reality,” blinking, trying to picture handsome President Kennedy in grimy downtown Dallas. First, I had to imagine that much, and it was difficult. I didn’t have the Zapruder footage to help me, and sitting in my classroom, I found it impossible to conceive of Camelot *coming* to Dallas, much less Camelot *dying* there. Such is the nature of the dysfunctional narrative. It doesn’t give us the explanation that we need to enclose it.

Recently, I asked my stepmother why she seldom bought or read novels anymore; she shrugged and said something along the lines of “I prefer to read things that I know are true.” At the time, I didn’t really have a response, though as a fiction writer and reader, I wanted to object. I wish now that I had said something as simple as “there are different kinds of truth.”

For instance, there’s the truth of the scene I referred to earlier. Marilyn Monroe did indeed sing “Happy Birthday” to the President. We’ve all seen that celluloid moment, her wobbly, tremulous presentation. Should we want to confirm it for ourselves, we could certainly do so in any number of ways. Thus, Joyce Carol Oates’s description of it does ring literally true, though certain details were surely invented; among these, perhaps, were the ones that give it a metaphorical truth. Let me quote the passage that immediately precedes the one above:

This incredible female was the grand finale of the birthday salute and well worth waiting for. Even the President, who’d dozed off during some of the salutes, including heartfelt gospels sung a cappella by a mixed Negro chorus from Alabama, was roused to attention. In the presidential box above the stage there lounged the handsome youthful President in black tie, feet up on the rail, an enormous cigar (Cuban, the very best) between his teeth. And

what milk white chunky teeth. He was staring down at MARILYN MONROE this spectacle in mammalian body and glittery “nude” dress.... (720)

Is it just me, the inveterate fairy-tale reader, or do you hear it, too, the echoing voice, “the better to eat you with, my dear”? I think it can’t be accidental—that setting off of the words, “and what milk white chunky teeth,” or the description of the emcee (the fictional equivalent of Peter Lawford, I think) who you may recall is “wolf-grinning” at Marilyn’s backside.

Poor Norma Jeane. She is, in some perverse and paradoxical way, the only “true” innocent in the crowd, and the wolves are out in force. They’re dressed up of course, so they don’t really look like wolves. Even the huntsman might not recognize them, but he is patient. He’ll have his chance only a year hence in grimy Dallas, Texas, staring down the scope of the rifle as the President rounds that inevitable corner.

“All ‘good’ heroines accept their fate passively, unquestioningly. To express even normal distress at being viciously mistreated would be in violation of the narrow strictures of fairy tale goodness”

—“In Olden Times” 251

In her contribution to the book *Mirror, Mirror on the Wall: Women Writers Explore Their Favorite Fairy Tales*, Joyce Carol Oates offers an overview of classic fairy tales and then turns her attention to the ways in which contemporary women writers have “reclaimed these tales for their own imaginative and frequently subversive purposes” (256). She offers examples, ranging from Anne Sexton to Angela Carter, from Rachel Ingalls to Jane Smiley. Of her own use of fairy tales, she is silent, modestly leaving that discussion to others.

While allusions to specific fairy tales are myriad in *Blonde*—“The Beggar Maid,” “Rumpelstiltskin,” “Red Riding Hood,” “Sleeping Beauty,” and “Beauty and the Beast” to name only a few—a myriad of additional references are simply to fairy tales in general or to the characteristic elements of these tales. Kingdoms, castles, spells, curses, witches, and wishes are mentioned again and again, in dialogue as well as exposition. While these references are meaningful, as I’ve tried to indicate in my earlier discussion, I’m most engaged by Oates’s use of fairy tale imagery in *Black Water*, where her allusions are woven so tightly into the plot that the threads must be teased apart gently. Once separated, the story reveals itself to be based on fact and on *fable*, and it’s all the richer for being made of both.

In an interview with Koval, Joyce Carol Oates explained that she “wanted to tell the story of somebody who was a victim,” and that she used her students at Princeton as models, particularly when it came to their idealism. It’s idealism that leads Kelly Kelleher to “fall under the sway of this Democratic

liberal, which was what Ted Kennedy was also" (11). But it isn't political idealism alone. It's also the kind of conditioning Sylvia Plath complains of in her journals:

After being conditioned as a child to the lovely never, never land of magic, of fairy queens, and virginal maidens, of little princes and their rosebushes...to go from this world of "grown-up" reality...feel the sex-organs develop and call loud to the flesh; to become aware of school, exams...bread and butter, marriage, sex, compatibility, war, economics, death, and self. What a pathetic blighting of the beauty and reality of childhood. Not to be sentimental, as I sound, but why the hell are we conditioned into the smooth strawberry-and-cream Mother-Goose-world, Alice-in-Wonderland fable, only to be broken on the wheel as we grow older... (qtd. in Bernheimer vii-viii)

It's important to note that Kelly Kelleher isn't the most beautiful girl at the party that night. For instance, her friend Buffy is far lovelier. Even so, on this particular evening, it's Kelly who is singled out: "Though there were numerous others among Buffy's guests who would have liked to speak with The Senator, The Senator insisted upon focusing his attention on Kelly Kelleher; as if, as in the most improbable of fairy tales, the man had made this impromptu trip to Grayling Island expressly to see *her*" (138-9). More than anyone, Kelly herself is surprised to be "the one he'd chosen" (44). Like Cinderella, she is thrilled to have her night at the ball. Also like Cinderella, she suspects her good fortune will be fleeting.

The first time I read *Black Water*, I made a note in the margin on page 125: "I can't help wondering whether this really happened." I was struck by the image of The Senator, "*limping one shoe on one shoe off fleeing on foot back along the marshland road to the highway....*" In a novel based on fact, the reader is often puzzled by the particulars. Did Senator Kennedy leave a shoe behind when he fled on foot from the scene? My curiosity was such that I checked a couple of sources.

Senatorial Privilege: The Chappaquiddick Cover-Up is probably the most comprehensive source of information on the actual event, and it includes a detailed account of the contents of the car. No shoe is mentioned. However, as it happens, the book also documents Senator Kennedy's attire on the morning after the accident, noting that he was "smartly turned out in light blue pants, white polo shirt and canvas deck shoes" (12). I can certainly imagine Joyce Carol Oates perusing this book and making a note of the shoes, the sort of relevant detail that can sometimes pay off, and in this case, it certainly does.

Part One of *Black Water* ends with a vivid and disturbing description of The Senator exiting the overturned and submerged car, using Kelly Kelleher's body as a "lever" to force his way out the door:

...she was clutching at his trousered leg, his foot, his foot in its crepe-soled canvas shoe heavy and crushing upon her striking the side of her head, her left

temple so now she did cry out in pain and hurt grabbing at his leg frantically, her fingernails tearing, then at his ankle, his foot, his shoe, the crepe-soled canvas shoe that came off in her hand so she was left behind crying, begging, "Don't leave me!—help me! Wait!" (64-65)

In her essay from *Mirror, Mirror*, Oates notes that contemporary women writers use fairy tales to offer a "feminist perspective" (256), and nowhere is there a better example of such revisionist work than in her novel, *Black Water*. In Part Two, the narrative loops backward and forward in time, retracing the events of the evening as in a delirious death dream, replaying the final thoughts in the final moments of the life of Kelly Kelleher. As the details begin to accumulate, Oates returns again and again to the young woman in the submerged and overturned car: Kelly struggling to locate an air pocket; Kelly waiting for help to arrive, never doubting that her prince will return to save her; Kelly chiding herself when her faith falters, and ironically asking "what prize did her silly fingers clutch, her broken nails she'd taken the time to polish the night before, using Buffy's polish, what was it for God's sake—a shoe?" (76).

In the Grimm's version of "Cinderella," the King and Queen host balls on three consecutive nights, and on each evening, the fairest maiden arrives mysteriously, dressed in something nearly as dazzling as Marilyn Monroe's "Happy Birthday" dress but perhaps not quite so revealing. Cinderella dances the evening away with the Prince, but slips away before he can pop the question. So it is on the third night that the Prince plans a trick, coating the stairway with pitch so that Cinderella can't escape. She does manage to evade him, of course, but she leaves her shoe behind, and thus the Prince has the means to discover her.

Whereas Cinderella discards her ash-covered attire for a lovely ball gown, The Senator arrives at the party in his formal Washington attire and changes out of a suit and into something more comfortable, "a short-sleeved navy blue polo shirt open at the collar," "pale seersucker trousers," and "beige canvas crepe-soled sporty shoes, L. L. Bean" (82). Later, these same clothes will be covered "in filthy black muck," that calls to mind the ash-covered frock of Cinderella. He will be "fleeing on foot *one shoe on, one shoe off*, disheveled as a drunk" (145). That vision of the fleeing, limping Senator is repeated at intervals, and all the while, trapped in the car(riage) beneath the water, Kelly clutches The Senator's/Prince's wet shoe and waits for his return.

In those last hours of her life, whenever she loses heart, Kelly conjures an alternative future, one in which she will live to tell the story, "the miracle of miracles" where she is saved. Safe and sound, she will relate the details to her friends—the unchosen girls at the party. Her desperation will be a matter of embarrassment then. She'll be embarrassed by the way she clutched at his trousers, the way she wrested the shoe from his foot. Even as she is dying, Kelly is distressed at the thought that "her girlfriends would laugh, Buffy would shriek with laughter, wiping her eyes,—his *shoe!*" (125). Here, Buffy

brings to mind that Disney version of *Cinderella* with its bevy of cackling stepsisters, shrieking: "You-go to the ball?" Incredulous.

"All 'good' heroines accept their fate passively, unquestioningly" ("In Olden Times" 251), Joyce Carol Oates explains, and this acceptance comes from conditioning. Kelly's mother has taught her daughter that "no man will tolerate being made a fool of by any woman" (*Black Water* 99), so in the moments before her fate is sealed, before the car flies off the road, Kelly hesitates to tell the Senator that he's lost, that he's had too much to drink, that he's driving too fast. All these things she knows, but none of these things can she bring herself to say. "To express even normal distress at being viciously mistreated would be in violation of the narrow strictures of fairy tale goodness" ("In Olden Times" 251), Oates goes on to say. Having been chosen, Kelly sees herself as without volition. After The Senator kisses her, she feels a "wave of anxiety, guilt—I've made you want me, now I can't refuse you" (115). And so she puts her life into his hands, savoring the adventure. Once it turns tragic, she leaves her life in his hands, loses her life, all the while expecting him to save her. Instead, he saves himself—losing his shoe in the process—and flees the scene. The good heroine waits and chides herself for her lack of faith, until the very last instant, when she must begin swallowing the black water "in quick little mouthfuls, reasoning that if she swallowed it quickly enough she would simply be drinking it, she would be all right" (151).

But of course she isn't all right, which is precisely the point, after all. In writing about all those other revisionist fairy tales, Oates notes that "the contemporary fairy tale in its revised, reimagined form has evolved into an art form that subverts original models; from the woman's (victim's) perspective, the romance of fairy tales is an illusion, to be countered by wit, audacity, skepticism, cynicism, an eloquently rendered rage" ("In Olden Times" 269). That eloquently rendered rage is on every page of *Black Water*. The message is there for them, those idealistic young women at Princeton. While it's too late for Marilyn Monroe and Mary Jo Kopechne, there's still time for "all the Kellies," those anonymous young women to whom *Black Water* is dedicated. They can open the book at any time and, leafing through the pages, begin to read. Seeking an omen, a message, they *can* change their lives.

UNIVERSITY OF NEW MEXICO

WORKS CITED

- Baxter, Charles. "The Dysfunctional Narrative or: 'Mistakes Were Made.'" *Burning Down the House: Essays on Fiction*. Minneapolis: Graywolf, 1988. 3-25.
- Bernheimer, Kate, ed. *Mirror, Mirror on the Wall: Women Writers Explore Their Favorite Fairy Tales*. New York: Anchor, 1998.

- Cologne-Brookes, Gavin. *Dark Eyes on America: The Novels of Joyce Carol Oates*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 2005.
- DeLillo, Don. "The Power of History." *The New York Times Magazine*. 7 Sept. 1997: 60-63.
- Damore, Leo. *Senatorial Privilege: The Chappaquiddick Cover-Up*. Washington, D.C.: Regnery, 1988.
- Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. "Murder She Wrote." *The Nation*. 2 July 1990: 27.
- Johnson, Greg. *Invisible Writer: A Biography of Joyce Carol Oates*. New York: Plume, 1998.
- . "Blonde Ambition: An Interview with Joyce Carol Oates." *The Faith of a Writer: Life, Craft, Art*. Joyce Carol Oates. New York: Ecco P, 2003. 143-51.
- Koval, Ramona. "Interview with Joyce Carol Oates." 20 Oct. 2002. <<http://www.abc.net.au/rn/arts/bwriting/stories/s703582.htm>>.
- Oates, Joyce Carol. *Black Water*. New York: Plume, 1992.
- . *Blonde*. New York: Ecco P, 2000.
- . "In Olden Times, When Wishing Was Having: Classic and Contemporary Fairy Tales." *Mirror, Mirror on the Wall: Women Writers Explore Their Favorite Fairy Tales*. Ed. Kate Bernheimer. New York: Anchor, 1998. 247-72.
- . "On Fiction in Fact." *Where I've Been and Where I'm Going*. New York: Plume, 1999. 76-79.
- Smith, Sally Bedell. "Private Camelot." *Vanity Fair*. May 2004: 260-75.