



## The Assignation: Stories

*Joyce Carol Oates*

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## **The Assigation: Stories** Joyce Carol Oates

"Vintage Oates . . . short, sharp shots . . . from the master of moody foreboding."-- "Kirkus Reviews." "If the phrase 'woman of letters' existed, she would be, foremost in this country, entitled to it."--John Updike.

## **The Assigation: Stories Details**

Date : Published August 1st 1996 by PerfectBound (first published 1988)

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Author : Joyce Carol Oates

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## Mike says

Ugh. I had a difficult time sustaining attention to many of these stories. It's literally taken me two months to finish this collection and I'm typically a fan of the short stories genre. From what little I've read of Oates and based on her reputation (three Pulitzer nominations!) I was very excited to spend more time with her writing. This book did not live up to my expectations.

The most interesting thing about this book was the 5x8 index card in the middle of the book with selected quotes from the original book owner as well as the NY Times original newspaper book review. I love finding notes and underlined quotes and scribbles in margins from other book readers. I wonder why their selected passage was worthy of additional reflection and recognition.

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## Elaine says

Very short stories (no more than five pages and one story is one sentence long ) from a writer who can grip the essence of emotion quickly and describe characters so well , we can feel their angst. Stories all surround the concept of needing love, not getting it, or getting it in perverse and unhealthy ways. In every story the characters were ambiguous in their thoughts and feelings,. Many stories left you hanging and trying to figure out how they might end. If you have never read anything from Joyce Carol Oates, this is a little book which will give you a glimpse of how she develops unusual and very real characters that are often not the subject of novels. They are just real people with real feelings and real moments in time that can change their lives.

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## Lindsey says

These are 44 short narratives, glimpses into people's lives during key moments. "Tick" is especially powerful in its examination of how one small incident, in this case the presence of a stubborn arachnid, can cause someone to alter their life's trajectory. In typical Oates' style, these mini stories examine fear, lust and death. A lot of them use stream of consciousness, and most of them work, but some left me confused and irritated. Stories that deserve a closer reading are Tick, Assingation, Sharpshooting, The Quarrel, Secret, The Bystander, Shelter, Party, Adultress, A Sentimental Encounter, Desire and The Others.

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## Caitlin says

I really found myself enjoying this collection of short stories by Joyce Carol Oates. If you are looking for a light book with relatable stories, then this one is for you. This collection contains many short stories that are good stories, but have potential to be turned into longer stories. I also recommend this book for anyone that enjoys people watching.

Oates did a great job at shortening lengthy stories into something much simpler. Looking back, I believe the longest story in the book was around 8-9 pages. This collection of short stories was a light read yet Oates made me want to keep the book in my hands until I finished it. As a creative writing student I really enjoy

reading in general. I am a full time college student so when I was assigned reading a short story collection I honestly dreaded it. However, this collection changed my mind on readings like these. Although I did enjoy the stories being short and very straight to the point, I feel as though some of the stories could've had a bit more added to them for it to be 'complete'.

This may seem weird to some, but this collection made me feel like I was reading a journal of a people watcher in a sense. Never in any of her stories did Oates flat out say that she was watching others, but that is just the vibe I got from reading the stories. She never gives straight forward personal feelings which is one of the main reasons I felt as though she was a people watcher. In "Heartland", Oates says, "She has driven one thousand miles into the heartland of the country to visit her parents, whom she hasn't seen in a very long time, and within an hour she wonders if she has made a mistake—there is an atmosphere of strain in the household and neither of her parents seem overjoyed to see her though they have gone through the customary ritual of embraces, kisses, protracted and reiterated greetings, such questions as 'how are you?' and such remarks as how good you look! As they smile at one another so hard it hurts." For some reason the opening paragraph of this story really stood out to me. When reading this story, I felt as though I was someone sitting somewhere and observing people. I love this fact because as awkward as it may seem to some, I enjoy people watching.

As mentioned before, I honestly loved this book and would 10/10 recommend it to others interested in short stories. Although I included few examples, the examples I did chose sum up the basis for all of the others. Oates does an excellent job of taking long drawn out situations and turning them into interesting and attention grabbing shorter stories.

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## **Russell Bittner says**

Let me begin by saying that this collection of *very short* short stories by Joyce Carol Oates is a difficult one to review. It's difficult not because Ms. Oates' writing is flawed—far from it—but difficult because the writing is *sui generis*, one of a kind.

Perhaps it's best to quote a little bit of Ms. Oates herself from her Afterword (pp. 193 – 195). "With two or three exceptions, the prose fictions of *The Assniation* are not short stories but 'miniature narratives' ... radical distillations of story." Indeed, one or two of her shorts are examples of what we now call 'micro-fiction.'

But apart from the length (or brevity) of these narratives, Ms. Oates uses other devices to arrest our attention on the page, among which is an outright omission of standard punctuation. In the hands of a lesser writer, this device could be deadly—or at the very least, annoying. But with Ms. Oates's narrative fiction, I found it to be quite effective. Although most of my reading of this short tome was accomplished either on a bus or on a subway as I went about my daily job, and although commutation in NYC is rarely blessed with library silence (for that matter, NYC libraries these rambunctious and distraction-filled days are rarely blessed with library silence), I never lacked concentration. In fact, I had the impression on numerous occasions that I'd stopped breathing from one paragraph-length sentence to the next.

The entire collection (which I found laid to rest on a stoop here in Brooklyn) is well worth reading. But if you want to run a little test drive before you jump in and buckle up, allow me to suggest both (or either of) "Superstitious" (pp. 129 – 133) and "A Sentimental Encounter" (pp. 134 – 138). You won't be disappointed.

When it comes to the art of short story-writing in the larger category of American Letters, I would like to

nominate Joyce Carol Oates queen, and T. C. Boyle king. I'm just not sure I'd like to see them sitting side by side on the same throne. (Not good for library silence.)

**RRB**

**14 October 2017**

**Brooklyn, NY**

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### **Jamie says**

Wow. After having read both "Blonde" (which I loved, but need to re-read now) and "I Am No One You Know," I was beginning to wonder what all the Oates-fuss was about. The latter I mention, the short stories (which are allegedly her forte), were good, but primarily nothing to write home to mom about. There were a few truly powerful standouts among those stories, but many that sizzled and never really broke through to greatness.

This collection, however, really displays Oates' masterful use of prose, her incredible ability to boil a drama down to its most basic elements, her skill at taking a single moment and elevating it to strangely broad-spanning emotional power and resonance, and analysis of character that requires only a page or so for the reader to feel as if they 'know' that character. Almost every story is a standout, and they vary so greatly in style, perspective, and emotional impact that it was such a breeze to read quickly. Very much a page-turner. Perhaps Oates' real stomping ground is in flash/really-short fiction, because this collection seemed to force her to truly stretch her chops and pack a punch. It was wonderful to watch. Personal favorites: *Slow*, *The Boy*, *Tick*, *The Assignation*, *The Train*, *Blue-Bearded Lover*, *Secret Observations on the Goat Girl*, *In Traction*, *Senorita*, *The Bystander*, *Romance*, *Only Son*, and many others. Superb collection.

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### **Larry Bassett says**

This book gives new meaning to the "short" story! Forty-four stories in one book, and a thin book at that. I like JCO and I like short stories. They fit my attention span, something that can be quite short. I like to read a whole story in one sitting and be ready to do it again next time.

Sometimes when I read JCO I don't try too hard to understand the story. It can be just the words. The stories in *The Assignation* are about relationships and interactions. (So – big deal – what else is life about?) Some are weirder than others. If you enjoy watching people, I think you are likely to enjoy this book. The stories are glimpses of people having a life.

Is it possible that JCO has 34 books of short stories? That's what it says at <http://www.listal.com/list/jco-biblio...> ! This one was published in 1988.

Evidently the rule in reviewing books of short stories is to mention one or more of your favorites. I was nearly halfway through the book and hadn't had that moment when I came to the realization that "this story" was going to be one of my favorites. Almost at that moment it came to me that *The Bystander* was going to be my first. At eight pages it is one of the longest. A fifty-one year old woman enters her local drugstore and interrupts an armed robbery.

The gunman was behind the cashier's counter and Jerry Knoth was just getting down, on his hands and knees, to lie on the floor, on his stomach, as the gunman had ordered him to do, and Mrs. Ingram called out loudly, "What are you doing? What is this?" - or something similar; she wouldn't remember, afterward, her exact words; only that they were quick, and loud, pushy angry words of a kind she'd never heard herself say before, in any public place. It was like she'd gone back decades to when the children were young, and the way you spoke to them half the time was scolding, disciplining, since half the time they were getting into trouble and that was the only way they could be made to listen, to take what you said seriously.

Maybe it is more about where I am rather than the story. For one story later is the very next favorite, *Party*, which I also find amazingly amusing. Judith is dying of cancer while her friends and colleagues gather at a party to small talk and snipe and gossip about her. It doesn't sound funny, does it? I guess you have to appreciate the cynicism and the irreverence of JCO like I do.

Judith Lambert was dying at last. She had come home from the Medical Center for the fifth and final time in how many months? - eighteen? - since her cancer was first diagnosed. But the Institute party was scheduled for that night, the handwritten invitations sent out weeks ago, so they were at the party, Judith's many friends and a number of her colleagues from the Bedminster Choir College, where Judith had taught voice for fifteen years, how sad they were saying, how tragic, she is such a young woman, - forty-seven and looks ten years younger despite the chemotherapy - gathered about the long candlelit table where plates of hors d'oeuvres were set amidst coolly fragrant spring flowers, daffodils, jonquils, hyacinth, taking up Swedish meatballs on toothpicks, jumbo shrimp dipped in Mexicali hot sauce (Take care, the director's wife warns, - that sauce is hot), how lovely everything looks tonight, and this wine, this is superb wine, German, is it? and how delicious the stuffed mushrooms, did you make those yourself, Isabel?

IMHO, LOL! Just superb - both the food and the conversation! I just love looking down on high society and JCO excels.

Most haunting story: *Secret Observations on the Goat-Girl*:

At the edge of my father's property, in an abandoned corncrib, there lives a strange creature - a goat-child - a girl - my age - with no name that we know - and no mother or father or companions. She has a long narrow head and immense slanted eyes, albino-pale, and an expression that seems to be perpetually startled.

...

Her nose, like her ears, is goatish: snubbed and flat and with wide nostrils. But her eyes are human eyes. Thickly lashed and beautiful.

...

One day I slipped away from the house to bring her a piece of my birthday cake (angel food with pink frosting and a sprinkling of silver "stars") - I left it wrapped in a napkin near the corncrib but as far as I knew she never approached it: she is very shy by daylight.

...

Years pass and the goat-girl continues to live in the old corncrib at the edge of our property. No one speaks of her - no one wonders at the fact that she has grown very little since she came to live with us.

I'm sorry, it is not possible to only have only a few favorites out of forty-four choices. You will have to read some Joyce Carol Oates short stories yourself and decide what you think. She has written hundreds. The hard part is deciding which of her 34+ books of short stories you are going to pick up. Myself, I don't think you can make a bad choice.

*The Assignment* got better as I got into a JCO mood. How do you find out if you are in The Mood? Randomly pick out one short story and read it. If you like it, you're in The Mood and you should read a few more stories immediately! I was in The Mood enough for this book to get four stars. Probably wouldn't take much more to get five from me.

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## **Holly says**

It's hard to rate an entire collection of stories because, inevitably, I liked some more than others. And actually there were a whole bunch that I really didn't care for -- characters that I couldn't relate to, literary gimmicks I can't stand, like using just an initial for a name (Ex: "N. did thus and such.") Just pick a name or use pronouns! And there was a lot of stream of consciousness narrative... with varying success.

But then there are stories that I really like, such as "Tick," which blew me away when I read it in college, and which holds up pretty well. And stories I was reading for the first time, like "Secret Observations on the Goat-Girl" and the title story, which blew me away this time. I partly wish that the author's afterword had been a prologue, because it explained that most of these are "miniature narratives" whose structure and themes are purposely different from traditional short stories. If I had understood that I might have gotten less frustrated by several of the pieces.

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## **Kelly Hager says**

This is a collection of short stories (crazy short, really; there are 44 in this collection, and the book isn't even 200 pages). I'm generally not a huge fan of short stores; I prefer novels and the thicker the novel, the better.

But this book was different. Instead of reading like a set of short stories, it seemed more like reading a collection of chapters.

I enjoyed reading them, but wished that some of them had been a little more fleshed out. I would read novels of any of these stories, actually. They were all fantastic concepts.

One interesting thing---almost no one in the stories had names. Some had initials and a few had actual names, but for the most part it was "he" or "she." I thought that was pretty unique.

I've heard that Joyce Carol Oates is an absolute master at short stories, and this book definitely bears that out. I don't know that I'd be willing to read more short stories in general, but I definitely want to read more of hers.

Recommended.

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### **Sarah Pierce says**

This author can do no wrong in my eyes. I bought this in a secondhand book store in Cleveland. It's a collection of very short stories, all dealing with the drama of a "normal" life. The woman is a master.

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### **Karen says**

I didn't love every story, but her writing is undeniable. When she misses the mark, the language carries it. And when she doesn't, she nails it.

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### **Suzanne says**

This is much more a collection of fragments than actual stories. Definitely not one of Oates better works. Many fragments seem almost like they are just pieces of random writing prompts that were never really fleshed out.

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### **Hannah says**

This book seems to read like that game you play when you make up stories about random strangers you see when people watching, Brief glimpses into the lives of rather anonymous people. I enjoyed it enough to get through it but some of the stories were a little too morbid for my tastes. All in all, I intend to continue reading her.

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### **Breña says**

Eher Fragmente als Kurzgeschichten, die sich zwischen menschlichen Abgründen und Nichtigkeiten bewegen. Anscheinend möchte hier jemand seine Leser unbedingt schockieren, was jedoch auch mangels Intensität nicht funktioniert. Einen Zugang habe ich nicht gefunden, erst recht nicht zu den Protagonisten.

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### **Pamela Scott says**

I have wishy-washy feelings about the stories in The Assignment. JCO knows how to write with brutal honesty that can be uncomfortable at times. One of the things that makes me a huge admirer of her work is her ability to write fiction that makes me feel like someone has sliced off the top of my head and is prodding my brain matter. This is a good thing. JCO constantly surprises, stuns and shocks me in equal measures. Except she never really does this in The Assignment. I just didn't feel the love vibe with most of these very short stories. The main theme of this collection is love in its darker guise, a theme she uses repeatedly and



usually in a way that blows my mind. It felt a bit flat this time around. I'm finding it hard to convey just what didn't work. Maybe I'm just not a fan of short, short fiction. Some stories work really well such as One Flesh, The Boy, Sharpshooting, Mule, A Touch of the Flu and In Traction. These were excellent stories. The vast majority of the others were just okay. I've read stories a lot worse but I've also read much better, many of these by JCO. The Assignment isn't one of her best collections. I'd recommend it for fans of short, short fiction of JCO completists.

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