



**UNCENSORED:**

**VIEWS & (RE)VIEWS**

*Joyce Carol Oates*

# Uncensored

*Views & Reviews*

江苏工业学院图书馆  
藏书章

**ecco**

*An Imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers*

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FIRST EDITION

*Designed by Lovedog Studio*

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Oates, Joyce Carol, 1938–

Uncensored : views & (re)views / Joyce Carol Oates.—1st ed.

p. cm.

ISBN 0-06-077556-4

I. Title.

PS3565.A8U53 2005

813'.54—dc22

2004053266

05 06 07 08 09 WBC/RRD 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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*For Barbara Epstein*  
*Cherished editor, friend*

# Preface

ESSAYS, REVIEWS, AND UNCLASSIFIABLE “prose pieces” have always seemed to me elliptical forms of storytelling. Despite their evident objectivity, the most eloquently rendered aspire to a kind of curious lyricism. Certainly these difficult-to-define forms require the obvious strategies of art: selection of detail, enhancement or emphasis, tone. Where Cynthia Ozick and John Updike, to name two writer-friends who have speculated on the subject, are inclined to rank their non-fiction prose somewhat lower than their fiction (“essays seem a deviation, a diversion: the region of the trivial,” says Cynthia Ozick in *Art & Ardor*; “writing criticism is to writing fiction and poetry as hugging the shore is to sailing in the open sea,” says John Updike in *Hugging the Shore*), I’ve been inclined to feel that the “voice” of non-fiction, seemingly unmediated, un-invented, is an artful enough variant of fiction’s voice, or voices. In the essay or review, the dynamic of storytelling is hidden but not absent.

For prose is a kind of music: music creates “mood.” What is argued on the surface may be but ripples rising from a deeper, sub-textual urgency.

In virtually none of my prose fiction, with the possible exception of the novel *I’ll Take You There*, and in that novel only intermittently, do I

allow myself to speak in my “own” voice, but in my non-fiction prose, it is always my “own” voice that speaks. For I think of non-fiction as a conversation among equals on impersonal issues; I am an individual with a high regard for literature addressing an (imagined, hoped-for) audience of individuals like-minded enough to wish to read about literature. Often I’m excited by what I’ve read, and want to talk about it with others; nearly always, I’m interested and engaged; years ago I discovered that when I feel most combative, disturbed, irritated and upset by another’s writing, as in the case (long ago, in my early twenties) of D. H. Lawrence, it’s probably a sign that I feel challenged, perhaps threatened, and need to carefully re-read, and re-think. (In the case of Lawrence, years were required.) As a young reviewer it was my practice to review nearly everything offered to me, for the *New York Times Book Review* (what a succession of editors, over the decades!), the *Saturday Review of Literature* (does anyone remember this wonderful, so diligently “literary” publication, with its regular contributors Granville Hicks and John Ciardi?), and the *Detroit News* (one of the few publications for which I wrote, not review-essays, but reviews), but in recent years I decline most offers of books to review. I hope to be as idealistic as a critic as I am, at least to myself, in other regards.

My governing principle as a critic is to call attention solely to books and writers that merit such attention, and to avoid whenever possible reviewing books “negatively” except in those instances in which the “negative” is countered by an admiring consideration of earlier books by the same author. (In assembling this collection, I immediately rejected all “negative” reviews on moral grounds, as unworthy of reprint, as, perhaps, they were unworthy of being written. How small-minded we seem to ourselves in retrospect, chiding others! Much better to have passed over such disappointments in silence. Then, as the pile of rejected pieces grew, I began to feel that I was too-primly censoring myself, and eliminating much that might be of interest despite its critical tone. Of the numerous “censored” reviews I retrieved only three, of short story collections by Patricia Highsmith and Richard Yates and a novella by Anita Brookner, all of which have been sufficiently praised elsewhere, in any case.) As our relations with others are essentially ethical encounters, so our relations with books, and with those individuals who have written them, whom perhaps we will never meet, are ethical encounters. Obviously, a critic who “likes everything” is a very bland personality hardly

to be trusted, but there might be a respectable category of critic who, disliking something, refrains from making public comment on it. In America, do we need to caution anyone against buying a book?

Though I've assembled several collections of review-essays over the years, I have never included a single "review" of the kind that most newspapers publish in their cramped "arts" sections. In another lifetime in Detroit, Michigan, 1962 to 1968, I reviewed regularly for the *Detroit News*, countless brief reviews as ephemeral as the newspaper pages on which they were printed, and of these, seemingly lost in time, one review recently surfaced: of Don DeLillo's first novel, *Americana* (1971). I include it here not with pride exactly but with extreme relief that, so long ago, I had a reviewer's good sense to lavishly praise a difficult work of fiction by a writer at that time wholly unknown.

—Joyce Carol Oates



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I.



“Not a  
Nice Person”



# Uncensored Sylvia Plath

*The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*  
Edited by Karen V. Kukil

WHO IN FEBRUARY 1963 COULD HAVE predicted, when a thirty-year-old American poet named Sylvia Plath committed suicide in London, distraught over the breakup of her marriage to the Yorkshire poet Ted Hughes, that Plath would quickly emerge as one of the most celebrated and controversial of postwar poets writing in English; and this in a golden era of poetry distinguished by such figures as Theodore Roethke, Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop, Robert Lowell, Richard Wilbur, Allen Ginsberg, Anne Sexton, John Berryman, May Swenson, Adrienne Rich, as well as W. H. Auden and T. S. Eliot? At the time of Plath's premature death she had published a single volume of poems that had received only moderate attention, *The Colossus* (1960), and a first novel, the Salingeresque *The Bell Jar* (which appeared a month before her death in England, under the pseudonym "Victoria Lucas"), in addition to a number of strikingly bold poems in British and American magazines; her second, stronger volume of poems, *Ariel*, would not appear until 1965, by which time Plath's posthumous fame assured the book widespread attention, superlative reviews, and sales that would eventually make it one of the best-selling volumes of poetry to be published in England and America in the twentieth century. Plath's *Collected Poems* (1982), assembled and edited by Ted Hughes, would win a Pulitzer Prize.

“I am made, crudely, for success,” Plath stated matter-of-factly in her journal in April 1958. Yet Plath could not have foreseen that her success would be almost entirely posthumous, and ironic: for, by killing herself impulsively and dying intestate, she delivered her precious fund of work, as well as her two young children Frieda and Nicholas, into the hands of her estranged husband, Hughes, and his proprietary sister Olywn, whom Plath had perceived as her enemies during the final, despairing weeks of her life. As her literary executor, Hughes had the power to publish what he wished of her work, or to publish it in radically “edited” (that is, expurgated) versions, like *The Journals of Sylvia Plath* (1982); or, if he wished, he might “lose” or even destroy it, as Hughes bluntly acknowledged he had done with two of the journal notebooks written during the last three years of Plath’s life. As the surviving, perennially estranged husband, Hughes excised from Plath’s journals what he called “nasty bits” and “intimacies,” as he had eliminated from *Ariel* “some of the more personally aggressive poems,” with the excuse that he wanted to spare their children further distress. This new, unabridged and unexpurgated edition of the journals assembled by Karen V. Kukil, assistant curator of rare books at Smith College, is “an exact and complete transcript of the twenty-three original manuscripts in the Sylvia Plath Collection,” that suggests that the person Ted Hughes most wanted to spare from distress and exposure was himself.

The *Unabridged Journals* document, in obsessive and exhausting detail, Plath’s undergraduate years at Smith College and her term as a Fulbright fellow at Newnham College, Cambridge; her marriage to Ted Hughes; and two years of teaching and writing in Northampton, Massachusetts, and in Boston. With the exception of appendices and fragments from 1960 to 1962, the most vivid of which describes the birth of Plath’s second child, Nicholas, in January 1962, the *Journals* break off abruptly in November 1959 as Plath and Hughes, their marriage undercut by Plath’s suspicions of Hughes’s infidelity, prepare to return to England to live. The last entry of the 1959 journal is enigmatic as a typical Plath poem: “A bad day. A bad time. State of mind most important for work. A blithe, itchy eager state where the poem itself, the story itself is supreme.”

The most memorable of Sylvia Plath’s incantatory poems, many of them written during the final, turbulent weeks of her life, read as if they’ve been chiseled, with a fine surgical instrument, out of Arctic ice.

Her language is taut and original; her strategy elliptical; such poems as “Lesbos,” “The Munich Mannequins,” “Paralytic,” “Daddy” (Plath’s most notorious poem), and “Edge” (Plath’s last poem, written in February 1963), and the prescient “Death & Co.” linger long in the memory, with the power of malevolent nursery rhymes. For Plath, “The blood jet is poetry,” and readers who might know little of the poet’s private life can nonetheless feel the authenticity of Plath’s recurring emotions: hurt, bewilderment, rage, stoic calm, bitter resignation. Like the greatest of her predecessors, Emily Dickinson, Plath understood that poetic truth is best told slantwise, in as few words as possible.

By contrast, the journals are a tumult of words, and present a very mixed aesthetic experience for even the sympathetic reader. As a corrective to Hughes’s “editing,” a wholly unedited version of Plath’s material would seem justified, in theory at least. Uncritical admirers of Plath will find much here that is fascinating. Other readers may find much that is fascinating and repellent in equal measure. Nor is the book easy to read, for its organization is eccentric: following journal entries for 1959, for instance, we revert jarringly back to a fragment for 1951, listed by the editor as Appendix I. It would have been more practical for scattered fragments to have been integrated chronologically with the journals. The *Unabridged Journals* is impossible to read without a reliable biography in tandem, for it lacks a simple chronology of Plath’s life and the editor’s headnotes are scattered and minimal.

A Bildungsroman in memorist fragments, Plath’s journals contain marvels of discovery. As an eighteen-year-old Smith College student in November 1950, Plath records insights that seem, in their succinctness, to predict her entire life, and the dilemma of that life. “‘Character is Fate.’ If I had to hazard three words to sum up my philosophy of life, I’d choose those.” And, in December 1956, “Perhaps when we find ourselves wanting everything it is because we are dangerously near to wanting nothing.” Plath’s self-scrutiny is ceaseless, pitiless, exhausting; a classic over-achiever, Plath drove herself to a nervous collapse after her junior year at Smith, and no amount of precocious success was ever quite enough to sustain her. Manic flights of words lead to a calm resolution to kill herself by an overdose of barbiturates in August 1953: “You saw visions of yourself in a straight (sic) jacket, and a drain on the family, murdering your mother in actuality, killing the edifice of love and respect . . . Fear, big & ugly & sniveling . . . Fear of failing to live up to the



fast & furious prize-winning pace of these last years—and any kind of creative life.” By a fluke, Plath is rescued, only to relive numerous times this demonic self-induced drama. Clearly, the fantasy of self-destruction was Plath’s supreme self-definition; a decade later, though the mother of two children and a poet of high, acknowledged promise, Plath gloats in “Lady Lazarus,” one of the final poems of her life: “Dying / is an art, like everything else. / I do it exceptionally well.”

Plath’s meticulously documented example suggests how precocity is not maturity, and may in fact impede maturity. Psychological “insight” is merely intellectual, bringing with it no apparent practical application: as a girl Plath laments, “. . . I am a victim of introspection”; as a mature woman:

It is as if my life were magically run by two electric currents: joyous positive and despairing negative—which ever is running at the moment dominates my life, floods it. I am now flooded with despair, almost hysteria, as if I were smothering. As if a great muscular owl were sitting on my chest, its talons clenching & constricting my heart.

Amid so much that is despairing, there are moments of ecstatic discovery. In Cambridge, Plath reads D.H. Lawrence and Virginia Woolf with intense excitement; both will influence her prose style, and thereafter the journal’s language is enriched. “. . . I pick up the blessed diary of Virginia Woolf . . . Bless her. I feel my life linked to her, somehow. I love her—” And, “What is my voice? Woolfish, alas, but tough.” It wasn’t easy for the fanatically competitive Plath to be generous about her contemporary rivals, but she found good things to say about May Swenson, Anne Sexton, Stanley Kunitz, Adrienne Rich (“little, round and stumpy with . . . great sparkling black eyes”). She records a brilliant thumbnail sketch of Auden, whom she’d heard read his poetry at Smith, in April 1953: “Auden tossing his big head back with a twist of wide ugly grinning lips . . . the naughty mischievous boy genius.”

Ted Hughes, of course, is the great love/hate of Plath’s life; the “demigod” she’d fantasized in adolescence, made flesh at a drunken party in Cambridge in April 1956: “. . . That big, dark, hunky boy, the only one there huge enough for me . . .” “The one man in the room who was as big as his poems, huge, with hulk and dynamic chunks of words;