

Jay Lenrow:

Welcome to the third podcast of the Johns Hopkins University virtual alumni book club. I am your moderator Jay Lenrow, alumnus of the class of 1973 and an officer of the Hopkins Alumni Council. We are here on a rainy spring day in the Mattin Center on the Homewood Campus in the Digital Media Center. Undergraduate classes ended last Friday and the campus is now in full bloom. Hopkins Senior Zoe Bell is taping this talk today and it's available to you also on the website in transcribed form as. On a personal note, I want to thank Zoe for a fabulous job she has done on the technical side of these podcasts. She will be graduating later this month so we wish her well and also welcome her to the JHU alumni association. It is a particular pleasure to introduce today's faculty host, Professor Frances Ferguson of the English department in the Krieger School of Arts and Sciences. She is here to lead the discussion of this month's selection, *Wild Nights!: Stories about the Last Days of Poe, Dickinson, Twain, James, and Hemingway* by Joyce Carol Oates. With the title borrowed from Emily Dickinson's fiery poem of longing, "Wild Nights! Wild Nights! Were I with thee, Wild nights should be Our luxury!", these stories ingeniously imagine the last documented days or nights of Dickinson and four other writers, Edgar Allan Poe, Mark Twain, Henry James, and Ernest Hemingway. It is said that Oates has in the sense humanized each of her subjects by emphasizing their weaknesses, the same weaknesses that in combination with their particular strengths made these writers the geniuses they were with each of her stories mimicking the writing style of the author being featured. Oates is a prolific writer, who is the author of 56 novels, 32 short story collections, 8 volumes of poetry and countless essays and book reviews. Professor Ferguson holds the Mary Elizabeth Garrett Chair in Arts and Sciences and is Professor and Director of Graduate Studies in English. Her particular areas of interest include: the poetry of William Wordsworth and the novels of Samuel Richardson and Jane Austen. A Professor of humanities and English at Hopkins since 1988, Dr. Ferguson is the author of *Wordsworth: Language as Counter-Spirit; Solitude and the Sublime: Romanticism and the Aesthetics of Individuation;* and *Pornography, The Theory What Utilitarianism Did to Action*. She served as chair of the Hopkins English Department from 2001-2003. Professor, thank you for being with us today. Let me begin the book introduction with this question. This is a fascinating book, why did you choose it for the book club?

Professor Frances Ferguson:

There are two things that particularly impress me about Joyce Carol Oates' *Wild Nights*. First, the fact that this is a collection of short stories and I think that Oates is very clever in her understating of what the short story is and what it can do.

When Edgar Allan Poe wrote the philosophy of composition, he tried to figure out the ideal length for a poem and that's when he started coming up with all kinds of discussion of what should be in his poem, *The Raven*. There should be repetition, discussion of the death of a beautiful woman and so forth, but the main thing he was stressing in that was that the ideal length for a poem was something that could be read in one sitting. And he went on to apply that notion of what could be read in one sitting to a lot of his prose fiction so that you get these tremendously powerful and compact tales that are available to readers in a special way because of their compactness. Joyce Carol Oates really recognizes the extent to which short stories can

give a reader a feeling of much greater intimacy with characters than they're likely to find even in most novels. You notice in these stories, or you will notice as you're reading the book, the way in which there are a very limited number of characters, certainly a limited number of characters who have names. These are not stories like Dickens novels in which you've got hundreds of names to keep track of and lots of movements to trace. And I was also very much impressed by the variousness of these stories. Joyce Carol Oates is completely inside the minds and writing styles of the various authors whom she's enabling to speak in these stories. And the ability to have on the one hand a figure like Edgar Allan Poe and on the other a figure like Mark Twain speak as if in recognizable tones seems to me an extraordinary accomplishment.

Lenrow:

Although I think this is probably a very difficult question to ask, considered the varied nature of this book, could you share two passages that you believe are representative of the author's writing and let our listeners know why you chose them.

Ferguson:

The first passage that I'd like to talk about is really just from the beginning of the Poe selection in the book. And it's something that seems to me one to just start with at the very beginning precisely because it starts giving a great deal of information simply by means of the first person narrative.

“Seven October, 1849, ah waking, my soul filled with hope on this my first on the fabled light house Vina del Mar. I'm thrilled to make my first entry into my diary as agreed upon by my patron Dr. Bertrand Shaw. As regularly as I can keep the diary I will. That is my vow made to Dr. Shaw as to myself though there is no predicting what may happen to a man so entirely alone as I am. One must be clear minded about this. I may become ill or worse. So far I seem to be in very good spirits and eager to begin my light house duties. My soul long depressed by a multitude of factors has miraculously revived in this bracing spring air at latitude 33S, longitude 11W, in the south Pacific ocean, some 200 miles west of the rock bound coast of Chile, north of Val Pariso, at the realization of being at last, after the smotherings of Philadelphia society and the mixed reception given to my lectures on the poetic principle enrichment, thoroughly alone. May it be noted for the record, after the melancholy of these two years since the tragic and unexpected death of my beloved wife, Vee, and the accumulated opprobrium of my enemies, not least an admitted excess of debauched behavior on my part, there has been not the slightest diminution of my rational judgment. None.”

I'd like to pause before reading the next passage and just say a little bit about this one because I am particularly impressed with the way in which Oates begins with the date of Poe's actual death. And we know that she is very much conscious of this because it's something that she flags in her notes at the end of the volume. So it's almost unclear to us whether she is imagining that this is a continuation of Poe's actual life and if he somehow managed to live longer than we thought he did, or he's imagining a pure fantasy. But she captures very effectively the ways in which Poe continually incorporates highly rationalized elements into all of his writing, so that he gives us a sense of the exact location of the lighthouse where he is working alone. And we have as well an indication of the fact that he's keeping a diary, but keeping it not nearly for his own personal expressive uses, but because this is part of the pact that he's made with his patron – a patron who at the outset of the story seems like a benevolent figure, someone who's paid off all

of Poe's debts and made it possible for him to escape from the embarrassments of his life to that point. But very quickly we start realizing that Poe has found himself in the position of being an experimental subject in which he is not actually in control of the terms of the experiment. As the story proceeds, we realize that this Dr. Bertrand has done a great deal of work before hand on other experimental subjects and is seeing their dissolution.

The second passage that I'd like to call attention to is similarly a beginning, the beginning of the story called the Master at St. Bartholomew's Hospital, 1914 – 1916, the Henry James.

“It was to be the crucial test of his life. He will remember arriving at St. Bartholomew's Hospital by taxi and in a haze of apprehension ascending the broad stone steps and entering the foyer that even at this early hour was shockingly crowded. Medical workers, men in military uniform, citizens like himself looking lost. Excuse me, if you could please direct me. But his gentlemanly manner was not forcible enough to make an impression. His cultured voice was too hesitant. Hospital personnel passed him by without a glance. St. Bartholomew's was a great London hospital in a time of national crisis and its atmosphere of urgency and excitement was a rebuke to him, a solitary civilian figure of a certain age. His large deep set blinking eyes took in the dismaying fact, as so often they did in recent years, that he was by far the oldest individual in site. He lacked a uniform of any kind, neither medical nor military. Though surely he knew better, with a kind of a child like vanity, he had half expected that someone might be awaiting him in the foyer – the eagerly obliging friendly chairwoman of the volunteers' committee to whom he'd given his name perhaps. But no one resembling this woman was anywhere to be seen and no one resembling Henry himself was anywhere to be seen. Perplexed on the edge of being alarmed, he saw that the foyer was oval in shape and the corridors led off it like spokes in a wheel. There were signs posted on the walls he must approach to read with his weak eyes. He noted that the floor was made of marble that, very worn and grimy now, must have been impressive at one time. High over head was a vaulted ceiling that gave the foyer the air of a cathedral. Directly above his head was a large dome that yielded a wan sullen light and trapped against the inside of the dome were several small tittering birds. Poor trapped sparrows in such a place.”

Part of what's remarkable about that opening is the way Oates manages to capture the kind of pressure that James puts on apparently absolutely trivial moments. What we're getting here is a description of Henry James as he's about to go into a hospital to do volunteer work of a very routine kind with some of the most badly wounded soldiers of WWI. And instead of thinking this is a job, this is a straightforward job – you can easily walk through the front door and find the people you need to report to – this particular small task is treated as if it is something of epic proportions. This would be the greatest test of his life. That's a kind of Jamesian formulation about dailiness that gives you a sense of the precarious poise that James manages to give to his various characters who are not doing remarkable or particularly grave things, but who are always so much conscious of feeling ill at ease in the world, that these movements through space and through routine task come to have a kind of gravity to them. And one of the other wonderful things about this opening is the way in which James is registered for us as someone who has achieved such eminence at this point in his life and has come to be called the Master because he has such dense and finely wrought prose, that people are constantly paying tribute to him for the ways in which this seems to capture the complexity of consciousness. All of this is something

that he's built up over a lifetime and he suddenly finds himself in a world in which it's as if no one sees that he's got all of these badges of honor on his arm. He's walked into a world in which no one recognizes him, no one calls him even sir, much less Mr. James.

Lenrow:

One of the things that struck me listening to you was in both of these incidents with Poe and James the situations that they find themselves in are far afield from my impressions of both men – Poe being on this isolated island in the lighthouse versus being in a city where I tend to think of him, and in James in this hospital setting versus the types of settings that most characters were in. So it's an interesting twist and I think it seems to run through some of the other pieces as well.

Ferguson:

Oates is very alert to certain kinds of fastidiousness in both Poe and James and I think you are entirely right. In Poe the fastidiousness, which is a kind of personal squeamishness in relation to other people, but also a precision of observation that usually gets applied in terms of cities, with things like murders and the morgue and the sense that you can absolutely map actions by walking around a city and figuring out what must of happened exactly when and in exactly what way. But occasionally Poe has things that are settings on islands as in the *Gold Bug*, his greatest cryptography story, where he's deploying all of his powers of observation to make it possible to do a job of translation. So part of what Oates is doing is taking, in the first place, that observational sense and moving it from city to a relatively remote location and then, as you're suggesting, pushing it into an even more remote location than any other that we've encountered in Poe's work itself. So the sense of enclosure that the short story as Poe deploys it starts giving us that thing that he invents in giving us the detective story as a zeroing in on what really happened ends up really seeming as though it's part of the most horrific aspects of his writing, things like *The Pit in the Pendulum*, in which time and space are shown contracting around an individual. As Poe in this particular story is shown as the subject of an experiment rather than a kind of author and controller of the experiment, you realize that his sense of his capacity to be special and be alone without being troubled by the solitude completely falls apart and he is shown in a state of advanced stupor and dissolution. And you're also very much alert to the ways in which Henry James seems like an unlikely person to be going into not just a hospital, but a particularly gory hospital and into one of the goriest wards of this hospital. James is someone whom Joyce Carol Oates has observed in this particular story that there wasn't a single bed pan in all of his fiction. It's a perfect remark because the story is one that really brings out the kind of heightened fastidiousness and susceptibility to all kinds of unpleasant sensations, noise and bad smells and flies and so forth. All of that is being cataloged for us so that we know that this matters to James. But it becomes a heroic act on his part to see that overcoming his own sense of squeamishness is going to be important to him. And as Oates has him portray it, this ends up being a kind of vindication for him of all the moments of shame he had felt about having had an obscure hurt that kept him from serving in the civil war and that left him feeling as though he hadn't been properly manly and heroic in the course of his life.

Lenrow:

What are some issues raised by Joyce Carol Oates that we haven't discussed yet that you think the listeners would find interesting?

Ferguson:

I think that probably the most fascinating thing about these stories as a group is Oates' consciousness of the importance of literary celebrity itself. We all have a tremendous sense of authors from having read their work. If you think about organizations like the Jane Austen Society, it's full of people who quite rightly feel as though they could finish Jane Austen's sentences if she were to start them off. And Oates manages to take first that sense of great attachment and familiarity we have with authors and use that as a way of creating the voices of these various different writers, but then she introduces something else as well, which is that sense of the pressure of literary celebrity as an element in the stories themselves. So there isn't a single one of these authors whose story in this collection isn't strongly influenced by the fact that they have come to have very substantial literary reputations, so that people treat them differently from the way they might otherwise treat them. In the James story, that's marked out for us much more in the omission than in anything else. But the poignancy of the story of Mark Twain and his very unsettling and inappropriate relations with adolescent girls is flagged for us as something that is very much part of a literary cult phenomenon. And one sees both the personal degradation of Mark Twain as he's making a performance out of his own literary celebrity all the time, and also the kind of touching vulnerability of a lot of the people who are a part of his devoted audience and who themselves are put in very compromised and compromising positions. And with the Hemingway, one sees the extent of which his acknowledgement as a great writer, having won the Nobel prize, is very much part of his seeing himself as part of an armed camp against first his mother and then the series of his wives. There is something absolutely chilling about the extent to which Hemingway, throughout the story that Oates has, that's his referring to his widow- to-be over and over again and speaking of her constantly as the woman. In much of Hemingway's prose, one has a sense of the spareness of that kind of description as a very effective thing. Here it's absolutely wrenching because one feels the depth of the hostility that's depriving his wife of anything more than the most generic marker.

Lenrow:

What you were saying about Twain and the inappropriate relationship is jarring for me personally because what I had read about Twain was that he was an early feminist and so this seems particularly inappropriate for someone who saw himself as a champion of women's rights.

Ferguson:

I think that Oates is very shrewd at identifying the differences between the ways in which people see themselves and present themselves to be seen and the sorts of things that they say in the privacy of a Joyce Carol Oates short story or in the privacy of their diaries and journals. Though in the Poe story, Poe is keeping a journal for public purposes. This is going to be like a scientific document that can be looked at by anyone. But Oates is very alert to the ways in which someone like Henry James sees himself as keeping a code even to his journals so that later biographers, who will doubtless come to look over his papers, will have a hard time understanding the code here. And he's very proud of that sense of privacy as if he's going to be able to keep his notations about good days marked in red ink, little crosses done in red ink, and bad days marked with crosses done in black ink, as if he's going to be able to keep that system private and secret

so that no one will figure out what it is. It's a very important thing about Henry James that one feels as though we're seeing the story of a man who's spent most of his emotional life closeted. Whether one wants to say, oh yes, Henry James was deeply gay or not, it was certainly the case that he had a very stunted emotional life in which he found it very hard to forge deep and lasting human relationships. And the poignancy of Oates' depiction of him is that she manages to show what it's like for a man of 72, who's dealing with horribly wounded young men, to experience something like real and powerful erotic affection, precisely because he hasn't imagined that he's going to have to reveal this to the world. It seemed to him like something that is part of his emotional life that can be kept private.

Lenrow:

You haven't spoken much about the Emily Dickinson short story. It struck me reading that here's a woman who I guess after age 20 basically remained in seclusion and now she's downloaded to a robot several centuries later, and probably very much more in the public than she ever was during her life time. What were your thoughts as you were reading that?

Ferguson:

This story seems to me unbelievably brilliant in having come up with the idea of seeing Emily Dickinson as the kind of robot you would decide you were going to buy.

Lenrow:

At a 20% discount...

Ferguson:

The setting of that story is one in which a couple living in suburban New York decide that they want to buy a kind of arts and letters robot and they'd be perfectly happy with a painter. The husband in particular would like a painter. The wife is very keen on a poet. But they end up doing something like background testing on the various possible robots. So they don't like the idea of an artist who's committed suicide. They don't want to take on board anyone who has particular emotional difficulties and they thus end up with Emily Dickinson. But the story of this robot is the story about their feeling as though she is genuinely a robot because she's so withholding. The husband finds her poems to be not poems of the sort that the wife is tremendously moved by, but riddles and he's tremendously impatient of riddles. The entire culmination of the story involves this man's deciding that he needs to attack the Emily Dickinson robot. And so there's a kind of quasi rape scene that is basically foiled because EDickinsonReplilux, as she's called by the company that manufactures her, is not anatomically correct. And so she's not going to be an appropriate victim of rape. But the sense of the man's possessiveness, as if he had been able to buy her simply as a commodity, and then his sense of betrayal at not having achieved the kind of response that he had expected from this is, I think, a kind of searing indictment of the sorts of things that one can start deciding one wants from great authors.

Lenrow:

Are there any other things that you think the readers would be interested in knowing about the book? One of the things that struck me is trying to determine why and how she sequenced the

five short stories. And what questions might our listeners be asking themselves or each other as they read this book?

Ferguson:

Your point about the sequencing of the stories is a very interesting one. Because even though the subtitle of the book leads us to focus on the last days of these five authors, it's a peculiarity of the book that the first two stories, the one about Poe and the one about Emily Dickinson, take place in a world that does not actually coincide with their actual last days. And I think that part of what Joyce Carol Oates is trying to do in getting us to think about these issues is to begin by thinking about authors who can no longer actually be affected by the responses they're receiving from their audiences and the people who read them and admire them. And then moving on to a sense of how a figure like James may actually find his greatest fulfillment in not being recognized for the kind of work that's defined him. One of the things that is especially searing about the accounts of both Mark Twain and Ernest Hemingway is the extent to which they spend enormous amounts of time not writing in these last stages of their lives and the beauty of the Henry James story involves his never worrying for a moment about what he's writing and about it's being his writing. For some years before he took on this volunteer work, he was dictating his writing to a secretary who was writing out his every word for him and he was having a lot of problems with what we would think of as carpal tunnel syndrome. But the story that Oates gives us presents him as someone who starts writing out letters for the young men when he hasn't written anything in his own hand for years. And he becomes a kind of scribe or amanuensis who then kind of carefully takes their hands and enables them to sign their letters. It's a very interesting collection for giving us this sense of what it means for people to spend their lives as writers and to be tormented by their self conception as people who need to keep writing and also to have their lives complicated by the people whom they encounter by means of their writing.

Lenrow:

It's interesting that you mention James and writing. I always found it interesting that reading about Joyce Carol Oates, I understand to this day she writes out all her manuscripts in longhand and doesn't type or use a word processor. So that's something to think about. We understand that you will be posting six questions on our website for our listeners for an online discussion during the month of June. I want to thank you very much for being here today and I will note that, for people who are interested, Joyce Carol Oates gave a wonderful interview about this book on NPR's Weekend Edition on April 27, 2008, and that is available both in transcribed form and as well as a podcast at NPR.org. So professor, thank you very much and we will back with a future selection.