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BECAUSE IT IS BITTER, AND BECAUSE IT IS MY HEART

By Joyce Carol Oates

E.P. Dutton/William Abrahams. 373 pp.

Joyce Carol Oates explains her recent fascination with boxing as prompted, in part, by her identifying with prize fighters. Like a fighter, the writer performs alone before the judgment of the crowd. Like a fighter, the writer pursues in solitude a lifelong goal.

And like a fighter, Ms. Oates has taken a number of public beatings at the hands of critics.

To balance those who consider her among the preëminent writers of our age, there have long been others charging her with sentimentality, carelessness, gratuitous violence, and, most of all, excessive output. Take a long vacation, they advise, then come back fresh.

Yet, with her 1986 *Marya: A Life*, her 1987 *You Must Remember This* and now *Because It is Bitter, and Because It is My Heart* Joyce Carol Oates is writing better novels than she did two decades ago when her *them* won the National Book Award. After her genre experiments of the early eighties, she has returned with ripened insight to the magnified realism of her earlier work, exploring again what it means to grow up female in a world that abuses and devalues women, how inner experience is more intense and authentic than outer behavior.

Like the under-read Elizabeth Spencer, Oates studies passions lying deeper than conscious awareness, the elemental drives that provide the crucial moments and ruling themes of our lives and bind us beyond our understanding to another person. She is, foremost, a spellbinding storyteller writing with febrile compulsion, as if, at the moment she sat down to begin, an entire world had formed in her mind and floods onto the page.

Covering the decade from 1953 to 1963, her new novel shows white Iris Courtney and black Jinx Fairchild growing up in Hammond, New York 60 miles south of Lake Ontario, "a place of Ice Age terrain, saw-notched ridges, hills steep as attic steps." Hammond seethes with racial hostility. Black men are humiliated by police for having a white woman in their car and beaten to death in the street merely for looking suspicious.

Out alone one spring night in 1956, Iris, 14, hears the vulgar taunts of the demented white teenager "Little Red" Garlock who begins stalking her. She runs to a local hang-out where basketball star Jinx, 16, who barely knows her, agrees to see her safely home. Garlock assaults Jinx with a chunk of concrete on a deserted street. Jinx does what he must to stay alive. The next morning the police fish Garlock's body out of the Cassadaga River. They never discover who killed him.

Fear and gratitude forge a secret bond between Iris and Jinx that becomes a focus of the novel. "No one is so close to me as you," she tells Jinx, "No one is so close to us as we are to each other."

Meanwhile, their families deteriorate. Each comes from a lower middle-class family on the verge of disintegration. The guileless Jinx, son of a hard-working mother and ineffectual father, will have all his athletic aspirations threatened when his older brother "Sugar Baby" falls in with gamblers. Iris's parents, Duke and Persia, initially seem glamorous, but soon Duke's financial "speculating" runs them aground and he leaves. Persia and Iris move from shabby home to shabbier home, and Persia moves from man to man and bottle to bottle. As Persia drinks herself nearer to death, Iris and she shift roles. On her deathbed, Persia advises Iris not to follow her example, not to turn away from "goodness" out of passion for a man.

Iris is not likely to. The man to whom she feels passionately linked is forbidden by the mores of their community. More deeply, Iris has evolved into that frequent Oates heroine, the emotionally detached adolescent. She fears her mother's assessment of Duke—"chunk of ice where his heart should be"—is true of her as well.

Unlike Jinx, she finds a way out of bleak Hammond, a scholarship to Syracuse University. There she becomes protégé to art professor Byron Savage and his wife. When she sees their mansion filled with treasures, Iris warms to its affirmation of the American dream and security like Sarty Snopes first seeing Major de Spain's plantation. Her life is changed. As one dinner guest phrases it, "There *is* such beauty in the world, isn't there! I always feel, coming here to the Savages, that it compensates for the *other*." Iris thinks, "How easy, if you're a Savage, to believe in God! Seeing that, obviously, God believes in you." Conveniently, the Savages have a bachelor son on the verge of a distinctive career. He may not be the man she loves, but he promises a world offering greater sanctuary than she has ever known.

Among the ironies of Oates is that her characters often seek safety while she herself dares any risk. The writer likeliest to produce a successful book is the one not afraid to produce an unsuccessful book, and in the vast Oates *œuvre* there are some. Here too she risks charges of excessive violence, melodrama, prolix style. Still fascinated with how some people inexplicably draw brutality to themselves, she could justly be accused of not moving forward, still focusing on torrid individual worlds without unveiling any larger pattern behind them. Yet, that is the kind of novel Oates can write superbly, and she succeeds at it here.

If Oates' style seems rushed, it is the pull of urgency not of carelessness, for her prose is finely honed. Joyce Carol Oates does provide more pages to turn than any other literary writer around, but that seems due to her inexplicable facility for shaping experience into artistic form. Now at the height of her literary career, she has in this latest novel provided pages well worth the turning.