

Applause May 1992

## **Black Water**

**By Joyce Carol Oates**

**Dutton/William Abrahams. 154 pp.**

If medals were awarded for slaloming the border of history and fiction, Joyce Carol Oates' *Black Water* would take the gold. But, while using the notorious drowning death of Mary Jo Kopechne in a car driven off a bridge by Ted Kennedy, Oates inimitably follows Ezra Pound's sage advice: "Make it new."

As the novel opens, Kelly Kelleher feels safe in The Senator's parental, even regal presence. The rented Toyota is speeding toward the ferry that could take them from the island, and Kelly, 26, feels "privileged to be here and no harm could come to her like a young princess in a fairy tale so recently begun." They couldn't possibly be lost, he assures her, and why shouldn't she trust him? He is "one of the powerful adults of the world, manly man, U.S. senator, a famous face and a tangled history, empowered to not merely endure history but to guide it." How could they be lost, he wonders, "There's only one direction—on an island."

He was both wrong and right. They *were* lost. But, more truly than he is aware, in literature there is only one direction on an island—whether it be *Othello*, *The Tempest* or *Lord of the Flies*. With their isolating promise of no escape, islands dictate that events will move inexorably to their end. On the evening of July 4th on Grayling Island, Maine, as she and the glamorous, inebriated senator leave a party at the summer cottage of her best friend, Buffy St. John, Kelly's end will begin with a skid on a sandy rut and the car plunging over a rickety bridge into a creek, as the car, then her lungs, fill with black water, and she dies.

Let's say for now this is fiction. In fact, let's insist, for despite anything that actually happened in July, 1969 at Chappaquiddick, *Black Water* is the essence of fiction. Its relentless focus on what led a young woman to say yes to this man she'd just met and on what she experiences on this last day of her life make this far more a book of truth than of fact. Still, while the story's exterior trappings are updated into the ninties, the plot's outline encloses a far more than common dose of historic *déjà vu*.

An ingenuous woman slowly healing from a broken heart, Kelly was a summa cum laude graduate in American Studies from Brown University. Active in Democratic politics, she lives in Boston, writes for the political magazine *Citizen's Inquiry* and tutors adult classes in literacy. She is an idealist, if not a flower child, a flower debutante. She is too young to remember Beatles' tunes.

Kelly is devoted to her political heroes. She worked in the 1988 campaign for Dukakis and was crushed "when the votes came in, when the landslide was a fact, and the unthinkable became simply, history, as so much that seems unthinkable becomes, simply,

history, thus thinkable." But her greatest hero, the one she'd written her senior honors thesis on at Brown, was the man who showed up almost unexpectedly on July 4th at Buffy St. John's party.

He is never named. He is, simply, The Senator. He is 55, had been one of the three leading candidates for the 1988 Democratic presidential nomination, and, when the nomination went to Michael Dukakis, The Senator was offered the vice-presidential slot on the ticket. He'd graduated Andover, received his bachelor's and law degrees from Harvard. He cares about inner city poverty and day care centers and free medical care and the arts. His magnetism has a Byronic flavor, anguish in need of comfort, as he's separated from his wife now and feeling his age. He doesn't like the Fourth of July, associating "it with the turning point of summer. Half through, and now moving toward fall." He drinks vodka and tonic, copiously.

So different, this man her father's age, from Kelly's own father, the compassionless conservative, the close friend of a "fascist" Republican congressman who supports abortion not out of any sensitivity to women but because it will help keep minorities from proliferating. She loves her parents, provided they stay safely home in Westchester (*Yes I love you please will you let me alone*), provided they don't expect her to be like them (*I will always love you Mother and Father but I have come to realize I would not live the lives you live for anything*).

When at the party The Senator says Kelly's name, "her heart tripped absurdly, her face went hot." He claims to have read an article she wrote on the shame of capital punishment. He speaks to Kelly without condescension, listens as if she holds opinions worth a senator's regard. He alludes to a possible job for her on his staff. He'd like her to come with him to his hotel room on the mainland. Both feel the aphrodisiac power of power: the political clout and charisma he exudes, the erotic force of Kelly's youth and beauty. It has been too long since Kelly had felt appealing. "When her lover had loved her she'd been beautiful. When she'd been beautiful her lover had loved her." Since her lover left her many months before, she has felt neither desire nor desired.

The night before the party, however, she'd giggled at her horoscope: "*Too much caution in revealing your impulses and desires to others! . . . Your stars are wildly romantic now, Scorpio, after a period of disappointment—GO FOR IT!*" Now a famous man wants her, and she feels "that familiar wave of anxiety, guilt—I've made you want me, now I can't refuse you." She gets in the car, wrong turns are taken, and she drowns.

The novel has no villain. Though hardly a model of personal virtue, The Senator is merely the product of celebrity and a graced life now staring at his mortality with the clarity middle age brings. He is unwise, ego-prodded, hedonistic, but never—even when pushing desperately against Kelly to escape the sinking car—evil. Oates has written here a compassionate study of victimization, wrong turns and the premature death of dreams and beauty. Kelly has mistaken her public hero to be also a private one. Walking with him through the sand dunes, Kelly feels "something is going to happen that cannot be stopped."

The book is about not only Kelly but about all the young women like her. Its dedication reads "for the Kellys." From its first page we feel her fear, hopes, susceptibility and hero-worship. Her faith that The Senator will come back to save her, her longing as she dies for her mother's arms are hauntingly painful. She trusted our modern fairy tales, the romantic sexuality of Opium perfume ads, the invulnerability of the men who shape nations. She cannot believe she is attractive unless she sees attractiveness reflected in men's eyes, and when rejected in love her self-image is fractured. Since her lover left she's felt "as if the outer layer of her skin had been peeled away . . . and if men looked at her she stiffened . . . and if men did not look at her, if their glances slipped past her as if she were invisible, she felt a yet deeper dread: a conviction of not merely female but human failure."

Oates' craft has seldom been more masterful. Filled as it is with recurring leitmotifs ("You know you're someone's little girl" "You love your life because it's yours) and *idées fixes* ("If I don't do as he asks there won't be any later" "As the black water filled her lungs, and she died"), the composition feels oddly musical. Its constant starting, searching for direction, starting again invites comparison with the *molto vivace* movement of Beethoven's Ninth or with Coltrane. Oates omits commas frequently to speed her pacing and at times employs the feverish syntax of her earlier short stories such as "How I Contemplated the World From the Detroit House of Correction and Began My Life Over Again": "the hose forced down her throat, the thick fat hideous hose that was so long, so long, you would not believe how long and how much pain scraping the back of her mouth."

Oates can be allusive ("She shivered, hearing them. So many. You would not think that God would make so many."), but she never drifts into self-indulgence. Her poetic language is so taut that some chapters contain barely 40 words. Her spareness, in fact, provides a refreshing contrast to the logorrhea of recent offerings from Norman Mailer, Harold Brodkey and Mona Simpson, whose awareness of their brilliance exceeded their willingness to trim abundant fat.

Though one of our boldest experimenters, Oates does this time the kinds of things she does best. Through Kelly Kelleher, she explores the inner experience shaping the outward behavior of a young woman bruised by both events and the constraints of being female in a world that grants easily only certain kinds of power to females. She introduces a force the woman can struggle with but not control, in this case the flesh and blood presence of an idol with "gray-grizzled curly hair, a famous face yet a comfortable face, a sunflower face, a kindly face, an uncle's face—the blue eyes so blue so keenly so intensely blue a blue like washed glass." Once again, Oates sketches the forces that bind us to another even as they point us toward disaster.

We have seen Oates do similar things many times before, from her earliest fiction to her more recent *Marya* and 1990's *Iris Murdoch* of *Because It Is Bitter and Because It Is My Heart*. For that reason, *Black Water* may provide support for those detractors who claim Oates does not evolve or that her tragedies remain merely individual disasters

devoid of any grand scheme or cosmic pattern. *Black Water* provides other evidence as well, however, evidence that Oates is unexcelled at the kind of thing she does.