

Mourning seems to last all day

Joyce Carol Oates can't bury her feelings after losing her husband

A WIDOW'S STORY, by Joyce Carol Oates. Ecco, 432 pp., \$25.99.

BY MARION WINIK
Special to Newsday

One morning in February 2008, Ray Smith, the editor of the Ontario Review, woke feeling so poorly that his wife, Joyce Carol Oates, took him to the hospital. After seeming to improve for a few days, Smith died suddenly of bacterial pneumonia. Called at 12:38 a.m. with words that become a refrain in this book — *Your husband is still alive* — Oates, nonetheless, arrives too late to do anything but collect his “belongings,” the first of many strange tasks, or *death-duties*, that are about to render her life unrecognizable.

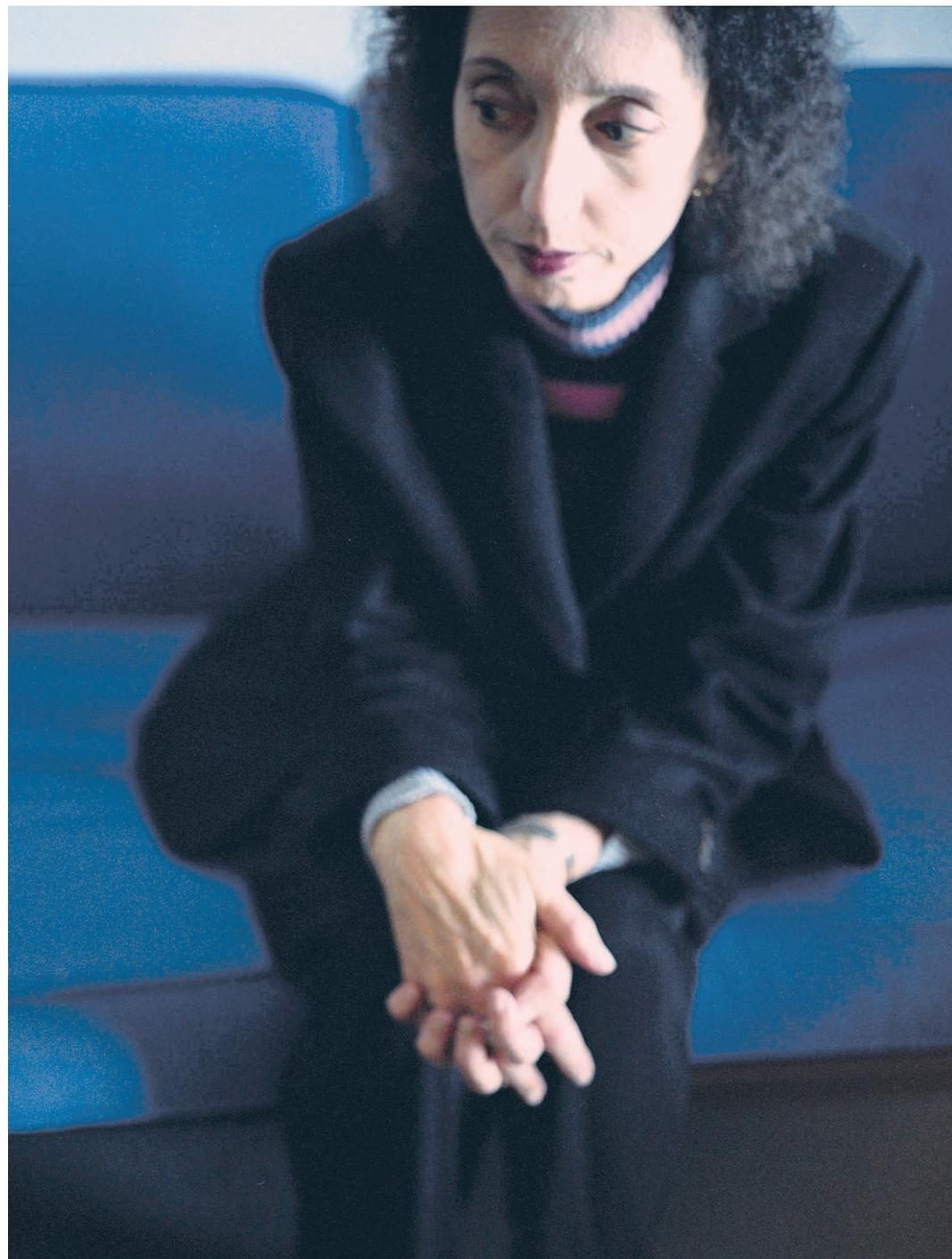
The quotes and italics are hers; they are everywhere in this book, used to convey the disorientation Oates feels when Ray abruptly vanishes. Not just the vocabulary of death — *decendent fiduciary executrix codicil* — seems bizarre to her; even ordinary words detach from their usual sense. She worries about being *addicted*. She finds her house “unfamiliar.” Her waking hours — and most hours are, once the insomnia sets in — become an unending barrage of shocks and affronts, conveyed by exclamation points and em dashes.

As the author of more than 50 novels and many volumes

of short stories, poetry and nonfiction, Oates has written in myriad voices, of myriad circumstances, and even under a few different pen names. In this memoir, she speaks as the widow Joyce Smith, a person who cannot answer her sympathy mail, much less write fiction, but who does manage to document her own condition with meticulous thoroughness.

“Is there a perspective,” she writes, “from which the widow’s grief is but a kind of pathological pastime, or hobby — a predilection of the kind diagnosed as OCD — “obsessive-compulsive disorder” — not unlike washing one’s hands for hours every day, or hoarding every sort of worthless junk; on hands and knees ‘waxing’ hardwood floors with paper towels and furniture polish, or vacuuming late in the night rugs that are already spotless. . . . *If only someone would publicly ridicule the widow, give the widow a good solid kick, slap the widow’s face or laugh in her face — the spell might be broken.*”

Personally, I’d rather slap her editor. Though there is much to admire here, the book is about 200 pages too long. At first, it is intriguing to read her e-mails to Gloria Vanderbilt and Edmund White, chilling to watch her agonize over doses of Ambien and Lunesta, harrowing to share her obsessive thoughts of suicide, blackly funny to watch her pitch out the baskets from Harry and David. For Oates, grief is a form of temporary insanity, and writ-



GETTY IMAGES PHOTO, 2003

ing is her way of clawing out of it. But when you read, on page 324, “Somehow it has come to be April — nearly two months since Ray died,” you will be crestfallen. Surely it has been two years.

“I am no longer convinced that there is any inherent value in grief,” she writes, “or, if there is, if wisdom springs

from the experience of terrible loss, it’s a wisdom one might do without.” This thought and many others parallel those expressed in Joan Didion’s 2005 book, “The Year of Magical Thinking.” While Didion’s having written of a similar experience does not preclude Oates from doing so, it’s impossible not to compare them.

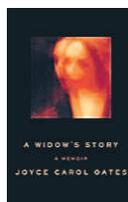
Many encountered Didion’s story first as an excerpt in The New York Times Magazine; Oates’ was in The New Yorker. Both magazine stories, meant as previews of the forthcoming books, seem in retrospect all that needed to be said. In Didion’s case, the book wasn’t much longer than the article. In Oates’, unfortunately, fatigue sets in.

Each author’s life story took a dramatic turn right after the period covered by her memoir.

Horribly, Didion’s daughter Quintana died shortly after “Magical Thinking” was written. And Oates was remarried a year after Ray’s death. This is alluded to obliquely on the last page of “A Widow’s Story,” when a stranger, a Princeton neuroscientist, comes to sit beside her at a dinner party. Google tells us what the book doesn’t: She married this guy in March 2009.

Having once been in this situation myself — widowed, devastated, in love again — I know it is both lifesaving and a little awkward. Once you’ve convinced everyone the earth is scorched beyond imagination, how do you explain the tender green shoot? While it is a memoirist’s right to close the curtain when she sees fit, I wish Oates acknowledged this part of the story.

“A WIDOW’S STORY”
Read
an excerpt
from Joyce
Carol Oates’
memoir



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